

This eBook is published by

Fictionwise Publications
www.fictionwise.com

Excellence in eBooks

Visit www.fictionwise.com to find more titles by this and other top authors in Science Fiction, Fantasy, Horror, Mystery, and other genres.

Amber Quill Press, LLC
www.amberquill.com

Copyright ©2004 by Margaret L. Carter and Leslie Roy Carter

NOTICE: This work is copyrighted. It is licensed only for use by the original purchaser. Making copies of this work or distributing it to any unauthorized person by any means, including without limit email, floppy disk, file transfer, paper print out, or any other method constitutes a violation of International copyright law and subjects the violator to severe fines or imprisonment.

WILD SORCERESS

by

MARGARET L. CARTER
& LESLIE ROY CARTER

* * * *

ISBN 1-59279-201-4
Amber Quill Press, LLC
www.amberquill.com

Also By Margaret L. Carter

Child Of Twilight
Crimson Dreams
Dark Changeling
From The Dark Places
Heart's Desires And Dark Embraces
Sealed In Blood
Shadow Of The Beast
Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien

DEDICATION

Dedicated to the memory of LCDR Leonard James Carter, Jr., United States Navy.

CHAPTER 1

Primed and ready to cast the most magnificent spell of her career, Aetria strode confidently to the crest of the hill overlooking the battle that raged below. To her right the 23rd Kelrossian Lancers cantered, preparing to charge. On her left were the elite Royal Guard, ready to supply the crushing blow to the Hermanian front lines. In front of her was the bespelled squadron of cavalry she had previously conjured for this most grand diversion of hers. She turned and looked behind her at the small group of black-robed Magi watching her from a not too distant hill.

Raising her arms, she summoned the Power and cast the spell, pouring every ounce of energy she could into the illusion. She felt the surge go through her as the Power shot out and the spell blossomed into being. In horror, she watched the glamour fall from the bespelled squadron as it became the herd of cows that it was. The glory and grandeur disappeared from the assembled armies, and the power of truth exposed all for what it was. She looked down at her body and saw a sad, frightened little girl clutching a stuffed toy dragon, and she began to cry.

The Hermanian army sent up a wild cheer and attacked. The Kelrossian Lancers wheeled in anger and ran. Their leader charged directly for her, his lance pointed at her heart. She hugged the dragon to her and begged him, "Save me, Rajii, save me." The thunder of the horse was upon her, the gleaming silver of the lance point at her heart, and...

* * * *

Aetria sat up in bed, the nightmare dissipating back to whatever dark corner of her mind it had come from. Her night robe was soaked, and she pulled it off over her head and threw it down on the floor. She walked over to the washbasin and picked up the towel she had placed there earlier for the very purpose of wiping off the sweat. She was tired of these nightly visits and longed for a decent night's sleep. For the past week she had relived, in one strange form or another, her loss of control at the battle fought four years ago. The dreams were never too near the reality, but not absurdly far away either.

She spoke a calming spell to slow her hammering heart. She began a litany that helped to slow her mind down and bring her back to normalcy while she dressed in her student robe and prepared for this important day in her life, her rejoining the Sorcerer Corps of the Delmathian army.

"I am not a child, but a woman," she said to herself. "I am not a helpless waif, but a magic user of the Sorceress rank, one step away from Adept, and two steps away from Mage. I am a skilled artisan in the use of illusion spells, one of the best in the sorcerers' training lodge of Inhestia. I am not a child, but a woman..."

* * * *

Aetria glimpsed a figure dressed in the deep-purple robes of an Adept entering the Weapons Training Hall main door. She called her recruit company to attention. Their less-than-precise response to her command was embarrassing enough, but when she recognized the Adept Commander striding swiftly towards her, she braced herself mentally and physically for the acidic remarks she knew were coming.

By the Power, why, of all the officers that could have been sent from the Corps to accept this company, did its commander, "Crusher" Pleates, have to come himself?

The very tall Adept's arrival directly in front of her placed her in the position where her rigidly locked-forward eyes were staring at his prominent Adam's apple. Many a subordinate had watched in fascination and horror as the Adept's slow swallow before delivering a reprimand caused the large lump

in his throat to rise slowly, then move downward sharply as he tore into his victim. The similarity between this movement and that of a smith's hammer stroke to an anvil had created the nickname "Crusher."

"It seems your period of 'retraining' here at Inhestia has taken the edge off your military skills, Aetria. This company bears little resemblance to any you and I have ever served with."

The utter lack of any warmth of recognition or welcome in his first words to her in four years matched the chill of the cold night air trapped within the confines of the stone walls of the training hall. A colder line of nervous sweat slid down her spine, leaving her thoroughly numb, inside and out.

"Begging the commander's pardon, Sir, but this company has only been in existence for one week. It does not mean to dishonor you, or our Order, by its lack of military training. I fully accept that dishonor for my role as its commander."

"Apology accepted, and the discrepancy noted. I am sure in your future role as sub-commander of this company that you will make up for your errors and have it well trained by the time we reach my regiment's encampment. You only have two weeks, Sub-Commander Aetria."

"Two weeks, Sir? At most, the army is a week away by transport. Will you be remaining here at Inhestia for a week? That would certainly be convenient for conducting the Novices' training."

"We depart tomorrow after the morning meal, Sub-Commander. We will start out from Inhestia heading due west towards the Hermanian border, instead of northwest to the army. I have promised the general a survey of the borderlands to the west. He is worried about their security and was going to dispatch a cavalry squadron to make the survey. We can do that simple job for him, and it will only add a week to our transit. Be thankful for the time, Sorceress Aetria. From the looks of these Novices you have thrown together, you will need it. Why are there so many Provisioners? I need Aggressors, not more commissaries."

The arrival of Headmaster Kelristo saved Aetria from having to answer Pleates' question. The elderly man, dressed in the flowing black robes of a Mage sorcerer, had been visiting with his Healer students among the recruit company while awaiting the arrival of the Sorcerer Corps officer. He reached up to touch Crusher's shoulder with a long, thin hand speckled with age spots.

"Commander, welcome to Inhestia! What a pleasure it is you have come to accept this year's company into your regiment. Let me introduce you to my students."

Pleates was ever mindful of his station in life and respectfully held back the retort he normally would have made to someone interfering with his business. "I am very pleased to be able to make this journey back to Inhestia, where I received the training and skills with which I have humbly served the Order and the army. I would be most honored, Mage Kelristo, to meet such a promising company."

The headmaster guided the commander towards the awaiting students, glancing briefly at Aetria as they passed, his eyes filled with sympathy and understanding. She made no move to follow.

Aetria watched Crusher moving amongst her charges as they eagerly awaited their introduction to the commanding officer of the famous General Mythrian's First Sorcerer Regiment. The war had aged him noticeably since she had seen him last. He was only thirty years old when he led Inhestia's first volunteers into Delmathia's army.

Now, at thirty-five, a perfectionist who believed only he could do anything right, the stress of command

had lined his face, and a frown of disapproval seemed etched into it. As he approached the Novices, he made the effort to put a slight smile to his lips. At least this time her Novices would be spared his acid tongue. The next time would be entirely different, as she knew only too well. They would have to adjust, even as she was making that adjustment now.

The company of twenty-four novice sorcerers did not even begin to fill the main training arena of Maknos Hall. The hall was among the first buildings raised by the Mage sorcerers when they started the training facility over two centuries ago and was named for Delmathia's most famous warrior sorcerer. Maknos never had to fear attack from non-sorcerers because of his reputation as a master of weaponry, but few sorcerers had ever achieved his skills. Relying on one's skill with magic alone had proven through the centuries to result in a short life.

Inhestia's founding Mage sorcerers had made it a requirement that students be proficient with some form of self-defense before they graduated and left the training lodge. The choice of weapon was left to the individual. For Aetria, it had been an easy one. Adoptive daughter of a Tierian merchant, from her earliest memories she had been trained in what the Delmathian people called the "Tierian Thief" skills. She mused over the hundreds of hours she had practiced those skills here at Inhestia, endless hours sweating through flexing exercises and throwing countless numbers of daggers into the targets that were now stored away in the equipment rooms at the back of the hall.

She had chosen the hall for the swearing in ceremony because, of all the training facilities at Inhestia, it had the closest tie to anything military. The hall's stark interior with weapon racks lining bare walls, a sand-covered stone floor, and the faint, but noticeable odor of exercised bodies reminded her most of life in an army camp. She would have liked battle flags adorning the rafters, but the Sorcerer Corps was so new that the only ones in existence remained within the regiments.

Aetria scanned the faces of her week-old command. The soon-to-be sworn in officers were all well known to her: some had been students of hers; most had shared housekeeping chores of one sort or the other with her; a few she had shared sleeping quarters with. While not properly attired in the uniform of the service they were about to be accepted into, they were dressed alike in the soft white robes worn by all student sorcerers. Their newly achieved status of Novice sorcerer, awarded only last week after years of training and study, was proudly worn by each as a pale blue sash running from shoulder to hip.

The twenty-four men and women represented over half of the graduating Novices of the Order's oldest training lodge. This was double what Aetria's, the first class to enter the army, had put into the service five years prior. The war had just started then. It had not been expected to last very long, but it still raged on, calling for even more recruits to swell the ranks of the king's armies.

The Novices had separated into groups by discipline. The Healers were slightly apart from the Provisioners; the Provisioners apart from the Illusionists, her own field; the Aggressors haughtily off by themselves. It was not something the Order had taught them, but rather the gathering of like minds and similar personalities. It was so, even before the students arrived at Inhestia to begin their training. Like all children of Delmathia, they were tested for magic skills at the age when their bodies had stopped changing rapidly from child to adult, but their minds were still pliant and innocent. The local sorcerer culled out those whose minds proved capable of controlling the Power, the magical force that energized their spells, and offered them the chance to become sorcerers. Only five out of a hundred children passed the tests. No child had ever turned down the opportunity.

Upon their arrival at Inhestia, the students were quartered with other new students of like minds because their future fields of sorcerer expertise were very closely matched to their personalities. Aetria smiled at the adage that flashed into her mind. *I am, therefore I spell.*

The two leaders moved swiftly through the ten novice Provisioners, making warm but short conversation with each. The Novices responded with sincere smiles to the two and excitedly talked amongst themselves as Crusher and the headmaster moved on to the Healers.

There were only four Healers this year, fewer than any other year. Perhaps the low number spoke of a lack of candidates amongst the common people from which Inhestia drew its students. The war caused the shortage of Healers to be even more strongly felt. Mage Kelristo, being a Healer, clearly wanted to linger amongst his favorite students, but Crusher's polite impatience moved them on. He would have gone directly to the Aggressors, but her Illusionists were in the way.

The six Illusionists received polite nods and painted smiles from the commander. They were about as far from the Aggressor's way of thinking as one could get. They were schemers, dreamers, humorists, fanciers, far-seeing, playful tricksters. As Crusher and Kelristo moved on, Aetria wondered who was most relieved, Crusher or the Illusionists.

The four Aggressors were more than happy to see the famous Adept Pleates. He was, in their eyes, a hero who had been held up to them as the standard all novices were to try and emulate. They were like him—sullen, angry, hot-tempered, brooders, planners, capable of killing, and willing to do so. For the Aggressors, their killing instincts were tempered by extensive training, infused with the strongest possible belief in justice and right. They became the enforcers of the law, upholders of the righteous. At one time, nobody dared cross an Aggressor, for they could kill with Power. Now, crossing one invoked the law as well as the Power. Crusher was one of them; he remained in their presence, enjoying their company.

"The man's an ass."

Aetria started at the woman's voice harshly whispered in her right ear. She turned to the source of the rude comment and found herself looking at the top of a closely cropped head of black hair. Moving downward, her eyes locked with the bluest eyes she had ever seen, piercing and hard. The woman's face was middle-aged, tanned, with no trace of the plumpness common in women of that age. Squint lines were etched into the corners of her eyes. It was a face that had seen too much of weather and harsh conditions. A warrior's face. Breaking lock with those extraordinary eyes, Aetria quickly looked over the rest of the woman and had her first impression confirmed. The shorter woman's torso was covered with fine chain mail, a short sword hung from her narrow waist. Small breasts barely made the chain mail rise from the chest; the bare arms were muscled and lean. Well-worn cavalryman's boots protected the feet and calves. Her insignia told it all.

"For a sergeant in the king's own Cavalry Regiment you certainly have a way with words," Aetria retorted.

"Don't have to mince words like an officer, Ma'am. I don't like that strutting cockatrice and am not afraid to say so. My officer is of a different opinion."

"And who might that be, Sergeant?"

The hardened soldier's eyes stopped following the purple-robed Sorcerer and looked full into Aetria's.

"General Alenso Mythrian. I am one of his horse holders. Sonja Borlock's my name."

Horse holders are normally officers, Aetria thought, remembering the common soldier's name for an aide-de-camp. How unusual. "I take it you are not part of Adept Pleates' entourage."

"Just traveled down with them. I stay as far away from that womanizer as I can. I'm delivering a message to the headmaster from the general. As soon as I can, I'm heading north away from this place. You sorcerers give me the chills."

For someone who objected to sorcerers so much, the sergeant certainly looked relaxed, Aetria thought. "Perhaps someday I can make you feel more comfortable with us, Sergeant. I will be joining the general's army soon."

"Perhaps, Ma'am. If you are traveling with him, watch your back. Goodnight, Ma'am."

As the sergeant slipped by her to the door, Aetria saw Mage Kelristo was guiding Pleates back to where she stood. The Mage finally had to nudge him physically along with a guiding hand. The students, noting the movement of their seniors, stopped their conversations and turned their attention back to the front of the room.

"My fellow sorcerers," the headmaster began, "now you have had a chance to meet your new commander, I know you share with me the confidence I have in his experience and knowledge. You will be serving in the finest regiment of the Sorcerer Corps. We, the Magi of Delmathia, acting through the Council of Magi, now entrust your welfare, training, and development to Adept Pleates, a responsibility that he is more than qualified to take on. We expect from you, our graduates, superior service to your Order, and to your country, by continuing your performance to the highest standards you have learned here at Inhestia, the birthplace of your new life in sorcery."

Pleates politely thanked the headmaster for his kind words and turned to face the company. "I will now accept your commissioning oath. Fingers to your brow." Pleates waited until all had raised their hands to their heads. "Repeat after me, I, say your name, do hereby swear by the Power that gives me strength and purpose—"

Although still a member of the Corps, Aetria repeated the words she so vividly remembered from years ago. "—to obey the rules and regulations of the officers appointed over me, both sorcerer and non-sorcerer, and to pledge my loyalty to the Order, to my regiment, and to my sovereign King. I will—"

Aetria found she still hesitated at the loyalty line, wondering why she should be loyal first to her Order instead of to her king and country. "—endeavor always to bring honor to my regiment, and to my training lodge. So let it be."

As she dropped her hands, she was startled to see Crusher watching her, as if he could sense the questions in her mind. "You are now members of the First Sorcerer Regiment. Sorceress Aetria, take command of the company until we depart tomorrow morning."

"Yes, Sir. Company, attention!"

The Commander Adept turned to leave, stepping quickly over to the aged headmaster and offering his arm in assistance. Aetria waited until they passed through the door of the weapons training hall before addressing the company.

"Company, stand easy for now. Tomorrow your military training begins in earnest and must be complete by the time we reach the regiment. Here are your assignments for tonight. All officers will proceed to the main hall and use the central Power source to get fully energized before retiring. You will be turning in your training sources along with your student apparel. You should each have an issue of gray novice

robes awaiting you in your rooms."

The change she observed in her recruits was phenomenal. They were actually listening to her. "Provisioners, before going to the main hall, check with Adept Pleates' provisioner to ensure all is ready for the march out. Assist in any way possible.

"Healers, Adept Pleates has submitted a list of herbal medicines and needed potions to the Healing Mentor Mage. Since he has not brought a Healer with him, I am commissioning Novice Verdilan to take charge of the novice Healers and ensure that list is filled.

"Illusionists, think creative thoughts and stay out of trouble. Aggressors, take care to get a full night's rest and no nightmares. Being fully charged, the spells you throw will be deadly, so I don't want any novices killed in the night. Any question?" Her attempt at humor worked for all but the Aggressors who looked chagrined she should think such a thing possible. A whispered, "She should talk," drifted past her ears. She ignored it.

"One last thing. I am no longer a teacher, a sister, or a roommate. I am your superior officer. When I give an order, I expect it to be obeyed instantly. Do you understand?"

The bobbing of heads and a few yeas brought a rigor to her spine and a firm, loud response of her own. "The proper reply is 'Yes, Ma'am.' Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"All at once, and louder!"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

* * * *

Kelristo looked at Pleates, as they stood just outside the door of the Weapons Training Hall, where the Commander Adept had halted them moments before. "I assure you, Adept Pleates, that Magess Trelana has fully certified Sorceress Aetria for continued duties in the Corps. She has shown no ill effects from her grid burnout four years ago. She is a very gifted Illusionist and a very powerful one also. You look like you still have doubts."

Pleates shook his head as the chorus of responses from the Company reached his ears. "Perhaps not, Mage Kelristo, perhaps not. Before her incident, Aetria was my most promising officer. I was afraid she might have lost her interest in the army after her return here. I think her interest is now awaking again. But rest assured, I will be watching her."

* * * *

The cool dawn air brought the smell of blossoming flowers into Aetria's room, and she paused to draw a deep breath. Spring was her favorite season at Inhestia, and she would miss the sweet, fragrant mountain air, so unlike the heavy, moist air of the plains upon which the armies presently fought. She finished folding her student's robe and laid it down on the corner of the bed, where a first year student would collect it for cleaning in a few hours. She removed her dark red Sorceress rank sash from its peg on the wall, and as she walked over to her small storage trunk to put it away, the tears began again. She let herself collapse down onto the trunk and felt the hot droplets stream down her face.

Now why am I crying? I had all of last night to get this out of my system. I am not a failure! I just have to prove I have control of myself one more time.

The soft knock at her door startled her and she hastily wiped her eyes with the sash, showing it quickly into the trunk. "Enter."

Felora gently opened the door and stuck her head in. "Magess Trelana wants to see you right away, Aetria."

Aetria waved her fellow instructor away with a stifled groan. She did not want to visit her mentor with reddened eyes and anger, or maybe it was sadness, in her heart. Felora retreated from sight. Aetria picked up her new dark red uniform robe of a Sorceress and donned it quickly. She ran her fingers through her newly cropped hair, and without looking at the mirror on the wall, walked quickly out of the student women's quarters to the house of Magess Trelana.

* * * *

Trelana stood looking out her study window, watching for the arrival of her senior student. She spotted Aetria immediately when she left the students' quarters, her red uniform robe standing out from the other students as they moved upon the commons. Aetria had taken on the persona of a military officer, and she was now unconsciously marching instead of walking with her normal, pensive stroll. The set look in her face hinted at emotions the young woman was trying to hold at bay. Trelana's student page immediately answered Aetria's knock at the front door and left the two women alone.

"How striking you are in uniform, Aetria. And so very proud. So proud you were going to leave without one last good-bye?"

"No, Mentor, I was putting off our last farewell, not avoiding it. I didn't want to leave with my eyes as red as my robe, but I can't seem to stop the tears."

Trelana folded her oldest student into her arms and silently held her as the younger woman's tears flowed again. She spoke no words of comfort; words were not what Aetria needed now. The Magess knew Aetria had spent the night characteristically pacing her room, arguing with herself. She had heard all the words she could stand. Only time and confidence would heal the mental wounds Aetria had foolishly inflicted upon herself when Trelana had told her she was not ready for candidacy to Adept. Aetria insisted she had failed her mentor and was unworthy. Trelana had tried to convince her that returning to the army would increase her experience, build confidence, and restore her reputation. To no avail.

"Pleates told the Mage Council that the war was going to end very soon. General Mythrian was getting ready to execute his latest campaign, and Pleates had complete confidence he would succeed. You will be returning at a most exciting time, Little One!"

"Returning to what, Mentor? Do you really believe the army is going to entrust me with any duties beyond the most mundane?"

Trelana gently pushed Aetria away to arm's length so she could look into the young woman's eyes. "I have certified to the Mage Council that you are fully qualified to do Sorceress level work. I also made the case that, until you are subjected to the same pressures that caused your loss of control, we will never know if you are fully recovered. You know I have tested you far beyond what is normal for a Sorceress and I have not been able to break your control once."

"I'll grant you that, Magess Trelana. You've certainly put me under a lot of pressure," she said with a wry smile.

"It was for your own good that I did. You know the stigma that suffering a grid burnout puts on the victim. For those who don't die from it, it may cause insanity. That is why you have been so carefully monitored to see if you exhibit the least change in your spell-casting abilities. The Sorcerer War taught us the bitter lesson that, left unabated, sorcerers who break the bounds of their abilities by practicing wild magic will cause great suffering and pain.

"The Council's main reason for existence is to guarantee to the world that our sorcerers stay within the bounds of their training. Know that Adept Pleates will be watching and reporting your progress. He has assured me of that. I am not sure if his reason for doing so is more to find a way of embarrassing me before the Council than it is the efficient operation of his command."

"The commander's delight in causing me unhappiness is not something he would do for duty. He is ruthless when it comes to executing a plan, counting no one's cost except his own."

Trelana let Aetria go and walked to the study's window, looking out but not seeing anything, debating telling Aetria what she had learned last night. Since Aetria was the sub-commander, if only for the journey back to the encamped army, she had the right to know.

"Adept Pleates pressured Headmaster Kelristo into letting him recruit more Aggressor Novices. He has coerced three more into joining the company. I fear they did not volunteer, although they said they did. You are going to find members of your recruit company less willing to be soldiers than you had thought."

Aetria did not appear to be shocked at what Trelana had told her. "Then the pressure begins immediately, Mentor. Willing or not, once they face the enemy, they will fight or die. I will miss you, Trelana. May the Power keep you well until we meet again."

Trelana gave her favorite student one last, long hug, and then let her go. "May the Power return you to me very soon, my Aetria, alive and whole."

* * * *

Aetria left Trelana's cottage feeling a lot better than when she had arrived. She had dreaded the final farewell only so much as it represented a turning point past which she was committed to this new path in her life. Now that this journey had begun, her internal drive was in place to move her past her fears of the uncertain future.

The morning sun had burned the chill of the night away, and its warmth penetrated her body, providing a lift to her spirits. As she retraced her path to her room, the lodge's students were making their way towards the main hall where the morning meal awaited them with smells of honeyed bread. Aetria did not feel hungry; her energy was focused towards departing. As the company was scheduled to leave after the morning meal, she hurried her pace to reach her room and pick up her campaign kit.

She deliberately forced herself not to make one last check of the room; she had checked it too many times the night before—each time interrupted by memories of her past four years living here. She felt a little foolish whispering goodbye as she closed the door, but that act cleared away any returning heartache. With purposeful stride, she set out for the lodge's main entrance.

Pleates' escort had set up his encampment outside the walls of the lodge. The tents that had been erected were now broken down and stowed in their transporting wagons. The Novice Provisioners had taken to heart their new duties in the army, and under the supervision of Pleates' Provisioner, Sorcerer Meloses, were finishing up the last minute details as she approached the caravan. She noticed a work party of Sorcerer Guards carrying bundles of what looked like spears to the back of the command

wagon. Crusher stood outside directing their storage.

Curious, she thought.

She walked to the vanguard of the column. The mounts belonging to the Sorcerer Guards, Crusher, and herself were tethered at a picket line. Two transport wagons led the caravan, and each Novice's personal baggage was loaded onto four carts that would follow. The requested healer's supplies and provisions for the march occupied five more carts. Crusher's command wagon brought the total of wheeled vehicles to twelve.

Aetria shook her head in wonder, knowing that a full company of one hundred infantry soldiers traveled with half that number. An equivalent squadron of cavalry used even less. Only the engineers and sorcerers somehow managed to carry more baggage than the real fighting corps. It was no wonder the common soldiers sneered in disdain at their own support troops.

Aetria secured the one extra bag she allowed herself in a baggage cart and tied her saddlebags onto her horse. She stood for a moment stroking and talking with the horse, an idea forming in her mind. She looked up and scanned all of the sky she could see.

Not a cloud in sight, a warm spring sun above, just the perfect weather for a stroll. Best take advantage of the clear weather; spring showers will soon be upon us.

She made a decision, untied her horse, led her to the rear of the first transport and secured her in trail. Having accomplished that, she set out to find Crusher.

She found the commander eating in his covered wagon. His curt wave of a hand to enter was as warm a greeting as she had learned to expect from him. She began to brief him on her plans for training the company, but he cut her off before she had gotten very far.

"Sorceress Aetria, I don't care how you plan to accomplish the task, I am only interested in results. If I come to believe you will fail, then I will relieve you and do it myself. I warn you that I have provided for more interesting endeavors to occupy my time, and I will not take being distracted from them lightly. The only interference you can expect from me is my intention to use the Aggressor Novices in my latest project. This will take up their evenings, and they will not be available for any other duties."

"That will create an air of favoritism in the command and hurt morale, Sir."

An angry frown flashed onto Crusher's face, and he slammed his eating utensils down sharply on the table. Aetria had already braced herself for the expected tongue lashing, and was quite surprised when he sat back in his chair, rubbing his face for a moment before answering,

"I have no objections to you using them for normal camp duties, including guard detail. I want them free from the end of the evening meal until final formation. I, of course, don't want the morale of my sorcerers to be anything but high. One last thing, Aetria. I will have daily riders coming from the regiment and Inhestia. Alert your sentries to their expected arrival and departure. I do not want them delayed in any way. You will see to that."

"Yes, Sir."

"And Sub-commander, I will ride in my command wagon during the day. Have my horse tethered behind."

"Yes, Sir. Anything else, Sir?"

Crusher waved a hand in dismissal. Aetria turned and exited the command wagon via the short flight of steps at the back. A small and unexpected victory, but a victory all the same. The Novices would learn soon enough that, in Crusher's regiment, the Aggressors had always enjoyed the better of any situation. And Crusher was surely going to remind her. He would justify it by saying the Aggressor sorcerers paid a high price for their privileges. The fact that their lives were shorter due to the way he used them was not one she would ever point out to him. Others had tried, and they no longer had any influence in the regiment.

The Novices had gathered near the transport wagons, having said their last good-byes to friends and teachers among those of Inhestia who had gathered to see them off. When they saw Aetria coming out the back of the command wagon, the Novices arranged themselves in the formation they had been in the previous evening and stood at attention. Aetria ordered the Sorcerer Guards to mount and assume their escort positions. While they were doing this, she ordered the wagon drivers into their seats. Finally, she marched to the front of the company and addressed them.

"We will begin our journey on foot. When you have learned to route march properly, then we will see about riding in wagons. Company, left turn. March."

* * * *

The sun was settling on the horizon as Aetria watched, through the door flap of her tent, the company assembling for the last formation of the day. The fledgling officers looked completely worn out with the ten-mile hike she had just put them through. Aetria herself was exhausted, but she swallowed the last sip of wine from her dinner cup and got wearily to her feet. After a deep cleansing breath, she squared her shoulders and walked purposefully out of her tent to the awaiting officers.

"Good evening, Novices!"

"Good evening, Ma'am."

"Starting tonight, you will participate in the traditional ritual of the evening light salute. This tradition started six years ago when sorcerers first joined the army. It was noted then that not everyone was ensuring they had energized their grids prior to turning in, as ordered. The practice of trading time before the Power source for sleep is not new. Everyone hold out their right hand." Aetria demonstrated by raising hers. "Now produce a candle size flame above your palm."

Since every sorcerer knew the spell, teaching it to the Novices was not necessary. Predictably the Aggressors' flames were torch size, all but blinding in the growing darkness. "I said, for those hard of hearing, a candle flame!"

Smugly, the Aggressors damped down their lights to the proper size. "Now, without increasing the size of the flame, make it more intense."

A few grew slightly. The Aggressors looked frustrated. "At the conclusion of each and every evening's Power meditation, all junior sorcerers are required to seek out their superior and present their light. There is purpose to this ritual. Despite the fact that presenting a light is a very simple spell, the intensity of the flame is directly related to your personal energy level and your training."

Aetria intensified her light, which flared out like a tiny star in her hand. The gasps from the Novices were

satisfying, as was the shielding of their eyes from the glare. She dampened her light. "As some of you can't see, the return of the salute by a superior is usually given at the lowest level. Your light, until you reach such a status, is to be at full strength. This tells your superior without words that you are both energized as expected, and doing the meditations necessary to increase the strength of your grids."

Novice Recanlin blurted out, "That is not allowed! Only Initiates to higher training are taught those meditations."

Aetria smiled at his confusion. "At Inhestia, your statement would be correct, Novice. But this is the army. The Council has allowed the army to stretch some of the rules. One of the benefits of putting your life in danger is that we teach you skills useful in keeping yourself alive. It is in our best interest that sorcerers strive to increase the strength of their spells as quickly as possible. Tomorrow I will begin to teach you those skills."

Aetria could feel the excitement her words generated amidst the young officers, tired as they were. She remembered so well the thrill of the prospect of gaining forbidden knowledge, without the drudgery of formal training.

Holendal, one of the Provisioner Novices, called out, "A question for the Sub-commander!"

"Yes, Novice Holendal."

"I am very glad to be able to increase my grid strength, but why can't we stay under constant Power charge, like we did as students?"

"A fair question, but one that shows you are not yet thinking in terms of military strategy, as I have been endeavoring to teach you all during our stroll today. As a student, you wore an exposed source all the time. That relatively weak source was given to you for two reasons; it provided you with a continuous energy source for you to keep your magic grids energized, and it made it easy for instructors and mentors to keep track of your presence." Aetria looked at her students.

"But the army sorcerer can't do this. You do not want to give away the presence of your sorcerers to the enemy until you have to. Once your sorcerers are encamped and properly protected by support troops, they can use exposed sources. This will still pinpoint their presence to the enemy, but by then they are not as vulnerable to attack when surrounded by friendly troops. By avoiding the use of individual Power sources and drawing our energy from one or two larger sources, the enemy can only guess at the number of sorcerers present. Any further questions?"

There being none, she dismissed them with a reminder to seek her out after meditation. She returned to her tent and collapsed into her chair. A polite knock on her front tent pole brought her back from the sleep that was closing her eyes, and she called for the visitor to enter. It was Novice Healer Verdilan. He looked very worried.

"Pardon the intrusion, Sorceress, but I am very concerned about teaching meditations to increase grid Power. I—"

Aetria stopped him. "Let me remind you we have been given special authorization to conduct this training by the Mage Council. I am fully qualified to do this instruction. Is any of that an issue?"

The Novice Healer looked even more distressed. "Oh, no, Ma'am. I have the highest regards for your teaching ability. It is just, well—dangerous."

"I share your concern, Novice. In ten days, I want you to be prepared to give us all a lecture on the dangers of expanding one's Power grid—specifically, grid burnout."

Verdilan sputtered, "You demand too much, Sorceress! I am far and away not an expert on grid burnout. Perhaps someone with more experience—"

Staring directly into his eyes, Aetria said, "Are you implying I should be the one to talk about grid burnout?"

Almost fainting, the Novice clearly wanted to flee this unpleasantness. "No, I'm so sorry. I know you have had problems with it, but—"

"Relax, Verdilan. I will gladly help you with the lecture. These people need to feel they are hearing from the Healer community what they consider is accepted knowledge, and you are the Healer here. I am the victim and can give that point of view. We will do this as a team. Fair enough?"

"Yes, Ma'am!"

"Excellent, now get on with your own meditations. See you in a few hours." The Healer fled into the night.

CHAPTER 2

Dropping off quickly into sleep was never a problem for Aetria, even under the less trying conditions back at Inhestia. Combined with the past seven days' foot marches and her constant lecturing on the army's culture, rules, and regulations, arms training in the evenings, and the mind-numbing myriad of attention-to-details that she found herself subjected to, she had fallen asleep the moment she had lain down on the sleeping pad. The dreamless sleep that had claimed her was abruptly ended with a rough hand on her shoulder, shaking her awake.

The low, gravelly voice of the Sorcerer Guard commander repeated her name for the third time. "Sorceress Aetria!"

"I'm awake, Lieutenant Nemos. Give me a moment to collect my mind. What hour is it?"

"Start of the second watch, Ma'am."

Aetria got up and splashed water onto her face from the basin on the camp table. Her senses began to feed information to her numbed brain and she slowly became aware of her surroundings. Rain pattered intermittently on the tent roof and a subdued rumble of thunder to the east warned of an approaching storm.

"I've been asleep for a whole hour? I must be getting soft, Lieutenant."

"Not to listen to your charges, Ma'am."

"I didn't know the Novices were talking to the guard. Isn't it against your orders for guards to converse with sorcerers except in the line of duty?"

"That's always true, Sorceress. But they are also trained to observe and listen. Young sorcerers often forget we are present and talk amongst themselves, sometimes quite animatedly. You are a favorite subject."

The lieutenant was difficult to see in the dim light of her night lamp. Dressed in a uniform of black leather armor, under linens, and socks, the guards were virtually invisible at night. To keep light from reflecting off their skin, they donned a face scarf at night and wore black gloves. Invisibility and stealth were the hallmark of the guard. Their ability to move noiselessly equaled a cat's, rivaling her own thief skills.

"I must be doing my job then."

"Well enough, Ma'am. Permission to make my report."

"Of course, Lieutenant."

"Novice Recanlin is missing from his post."

"Missing? Meaning he is not standing his duty. Did you check the berthing tent to ensure he is not asleep, or the latrines? Perhaps he is still studying with Adept Pleates. Or do you mean he is gone?"

The lieutenant's eyes displayed no emotions; the rest of his face she couldn't see. "Would not have bothered you if I wasn't convinced he is gone, Ma'am. He is supposed to be on guard duty by the horses. Novice Fernonia, the sorceress he relieved, said she had turned over the watch to him on time. She said he was alert and prepared to stand his duty. Since there is no sign of a struggle in the area of his post, I assume he took off."

Aetria decided to take a chance with the guard commander. "I know this is not your concern, but what do you think has happened?"

Lieutenant Nemos looked casually around, checking to ensure they were not being observed or overheard. "Commander Pleates has been very strict with Novice Recanlin. As you know, the young Aggressor was not one of the original volunteers, and to the guards, it was obvious his heart was not in his studies. I think the Novice has quit the Sorcerer Corps. Where he thinks he can go and not suffer the consequences is beyond me. If he really has deserted, then I will have to go after him. At that point, it becomes my concern, Sorceress."

"Thank you for your candor, Lieutenant. Before you make a report to the commander, I think I will take a stroll around to see if I can locate him."

Nemos tilted his head questionably. "You know something about scouting I don't, Ma'am? Perhaps a spell?"

"Perhaps. If I am not back by the start of the morning watch, report this to Adept Pleates."

"Yes, Ma'am."

* * * *

Aetria made a quick tour of the other Novice guard posts noting, with some pleasure, the alertness of her charges despite the misery of the damp, windy night. Each challenged her correctly with a sincere attempt at professionalism. She did not query anyone about Recanlin, not wanting to get their curiosity or concern aroused. After checking the last post, she made her way to Recanlin's abandoned post. The full moon's

light made navigation easy, but the gathering rain clouds blocked the light more often than not. She did not bother to scout the area, knowing her tracking skills were far beneath the guard's. Nemos was experienced enough with Sorcerers to know many of their spells, but he didn't know everything, so she had room for doubt to make him believe she was using magic to find Recanlin.

She knew she could find the Novice, not because of a spell, but because she could sense his Power essence. This ability of hers to sense stored magical energy was unique, a result of the grid burnout she had suffered earlier in her career. When she had returned to Inhestia after the incident, she had mentioned it to Trelana. Her mentor thought it was a temporary effect that it would fade with time. Aetria was so frightened by the prospect of the Council stripping her of her rights to practice magic she did not tell Trelana, or anyone else, that it was permanent.

To sense stored energy, she had to expend her own stored energy first. She powered down carefully, trying not to expend energy too quickly or chance being noticed by a camp full of sorcerers. All sorcerers could sense energy once released since that was how they acquired it from the sources. She expended her energy in creating an elaborate illusion of an infantry platoon guarding the horses. She saved enough energy to give herself the glamor of a hunting dog and then “loped” off into the dark, away from the camp.

Aetria stopped several hundred feet away from the horses and dropped into a light trance, returning to her normal appearance. Ignoring the multiple sources of stored Power generated by the company of sorcerers in the camp behind her, she scanned the surrounding area and was rewarded with a fairly strong Power source directly north of the camp. As the company had been moving steadily west for the past five days, the source was not heading back to Inhestia, located to the south. Perhaps Recanlin was smart enough to know not to flee the army by running straight home. She dropped out of her trance and looked around, vainly hoping that if Nemos had decided to follow her, she would be able to spot him. Sensing nothing with her normal senses, she strode off quickly in the direction of the Power source.

She spotted Recanlin within an hour of starting out. During a period of clear sky and bright moon, she saw him ahead of her about fifty feet out. It certainly didn't look as if he was really interested in putting any significant distance between himself and the camp, as he was plodding slowly along, completely unaware of his surroundings, deep in thought.

"Novice Recanlin."

The young man leapt away from her voice and stifled a scream. His eyes flew wide open, and from the panicked look on his face, Aetria regretted for a moment not knocking him down first. Recanlin was an Aggressor who could blast her with a fireball. She put up her left hand in a warding pose. “Easy, lad, I am not going to hurt you.”

"By the Power, Sorceress, you scared the life out of me."

The Novice's hands were shaking, but he did not make any threatening motions towards her. He didn't look as if he was going to flee either, so Aetria lowered her left hand, palming the unseen dagger in her right hand behind her back and returning it to its throwing sheath along her forearm.

"Do you have an explanation for leaving your guard post, Novice Recanlin?"

He looked around as if to explain that he had not, then realized he was not where he thought he was. “Why, I—I am obviously not where I should be. Where am I?"

Astonished by his total lack of awareness, Aetria struggled to keep her face stern and expressionless. "About two hours due north of camp, Novice. Don't you have an idea of the trouble you're in? Desertion from the army in a time of war is punishable by death."

Recanlin's legs collapsed under him, and he sat down onto the wet ground with a heavy squishing sound. "Desertion? By the Power, I wasn't deserting! You have to believe that."

Aetria felt a strong desire to shake the confused youth, but crossed her arms across her chest instead. "Lucky for you that I was the one who found you. At least I bothered to talk to you first. If I were a Sorcerer Guard, you would be a corpse draped across my horse right now. Adept Pleates wouldn't even bother to ask me why I killed you, since I was sent out after a very dangerous Aggressor sorcerer who had been declared a deserter. Finding you hours away from camp heading north certainly wouldn't appear innocent. Now, why would anyone have reason to believe you?"

Recanlin's distress was genuine; he looked like a trapped rabbit. "Umm, because I didn't kill you?"

Heaving a sigh of exasperation, Aetria raised her voice another notch, "Novice, you were not even aware that I had found you." With a flick of her right wrist, the dagger appeared in her hand. Recanlin's eyes locked onto the deadly little knife, and he caught his breath. "And I certainly would not have given you a chance to try casting a spell."

"Recanlin, you are no longer safe in the shelter of Inhestia. You are about to find yourself face to face with people whose entire purpose for existence is to end yours. Haven't you been listening to me at all the past week? I have been telling you what to expect when you go into battle. You can't just wander off the front lines whenever you feel like it. You'd be dead or captured by enemy skirmishers within minutes. I believe you weren't trying to desert, but then why are you out here?"

Standing uneasily, the young man brushed ineffectively at the wet dirt on his bottom and walked over to a fallen tree to sit before he fell down again. "I started out doing the new meditation, then I began thinking about the mess I've gotten myself into, and I, well, I tend to wander when I think."

Aetria could identify with that since she had a habit of pacing when she was doing serious thinking. "What mess?"

"You know I wasn't one of your original company, Sorceress. I was quite happy to let my fellow Aggressors go off to war because I had bigger plans with my best friend, Belanar. We had quite successfully avoided our fellow Aggressors' pressure to join the Recruit Company. Ever since we were first introduced at Inhestia, we had the intention to go into the mining trade. We spent many happy hours discussing mining with his father, Engineer Aristes. The engineer was very supportive of our plans. Along with sponsoring his son to the Mine Guild, he offered to sponsor me when I graduated."

Walking over to the fallen tree, Aetria sat down next to her confused Novice. "Mining is a much needed skill, Recanlin. It even exempts you from military service. Why did you change your mind?"

A wry smile tugged at Recanlin's lips. "I didn't. It was changed for me. Adept Pleates presented a very persuasive argument, and when I wouldn't change my mind, he convinced Engineer Aristes the army needed my services more than the miners did. Engineer Aristes came to me and told me my services were needed elsewhere. I found myself out of sponsorship which really upset my plans. Engineer Aristes felt sorry for me and promised to sponsor me when I returned. He told me I had a rare chance to improve myself since he had taught Adept Pleates a lot of the mining lore, and I could benefit from his tutelage. I would be helping the Order and myself at the same time."

"Therefore, you volunteered. And so did Novices Belanar and Elina. Belanar changed his mind because—"

The smile on Recanlin's face broadened. "His father did not twist his arm as much as he did mine, but Belanar decided if I had to go, so would he. He insisted he wanted to have the same experiences to talk about at night over wine. That way he could stop me from bragging about my accomplishments and hoarding the conversation."

"Is Belanar having any problems?" From her point of view, she had not seen any problems with the non-volunteers to date, except for this incident with Recanlin.

Shaking his head, Recanlin said, "None that I know of."

"What about Elina? She seems moderately shy for an Aggressor. I remember her only for her dance performances during festival time."

Recanlin had started a little when Aetria spoke Elina's name. She guessed he was romantically attached to the young woman. This was surprising as one of the Aggressor women who volunteered for the Company, Fernonia, was, without question, the most beautiful of all the women at Inhestia. Perhaps he had already gone through the rejection cycle with Fernonia, whose sights were fixed on a much higher level of Aggressor. Elina was pretty in a winsome waif kind of way.

And much more approachable, she thought.

"Oh, she was going to take a position with Lord Hestiron, eventually replacing her aunt as Dominion Protector. Adept Pleates convinced her army service would do her reputation a lot of good and provide more credibility to her position as a Protector. When she heard Belanar and I had 'volunteered,' she decided to do so also. She is doing just fine, although the marching makes her feet hurt and interferes with her dancing."

Aetria had seen Elina practicing her dance during the evening exercise sessions. Her defense weapon was the staff. She incorporated it into her dance; not only were her movements graceful, but Aetria would not want to be the recipient of the flying end of the staff.

"You spoke about being in a mess? What problem do you have?"

Recanlin took a moment before replying. He had been looking at Aetria, but his eyes shifted off to her left.

"I am having a hard time adjusting to Adept Pleates. He is not interested in teaching me anything about mining. He is only interested in making us learn the fine art of killing people. My reluctance to use the Power to kill has put me in the position where I'm the focus of his displeasure. The other Aggressor novices are beginning to follow his lead in making my life miserable—and these were my best friends a few weeks ago! I don't know what to do. Everything I've tried seems to get me in more trouble with the Adept. I just can't make my projector weapon work, and—"

"Projector weapon? What is that?"

A startled look of fear sprang back into Recanlin's face. "Forget I said that, Sorceress! No one is supposed to know anything about it. Please, Sorceress, don't ask me any more questions about it."

His pleas heightened Aetria's curiosity, but she could see the young man was terribly frightened of what he had revealed. The bright moon's light was fading as a heavy cloud passed in front of it, moving rapidly from the increasing winds. A gust of wind brought a splash of rain with it, and Aetria stood, pulling Recanlin to his feet. She adjusted her rain cloak around her, wishing that she did not have several hours before she could sleep once again.

"Calm down, Novice Recanlin, your secret is safe with me. If it eases your mind, no one I know gets along well with Adept Pleates. Now it is time for us to get back to the camp before we get totally soaked. In the morning, pull your fellow Aggressors aside and confide in them that I told you it will be only a matter of time before they all feel his displeasure, and the surest way to survive is to stick together.

"Do your best to please the Adept, but don't let him think you will fold under the pressure. He needs every Aggressor he has and will back off if you stand up to him a little. He respects strength when he finds it. But don't misunderstand me, Novice! Don't ever defy him. He will crush you if you do. Now, you do have your rain cloak with you, don't you, Novice?"

* * * *

Aetria stood in front of the Novice formation, breathing in the fresh air scented with wild flowers from the surrounding trees alongside the road. The air also smelled of rain and was pregnant with the promise of a wet trip ahead of them. She made a detailed visual inspection of the Novices in their now-precise and correct ranks, a process she had instituted after the first day of their journey.

In one week her charges had changed remarkably. They were properly attired for the day's march, their robes adjusted for maximum cooling and minimum interference with the light packs they had learned to carry. In their packs were water bottles, travel rations, and rain protection. The latter they would need shortly for the storm that had passed over them the night before had left a remnant of rain-swollen clouds behind it.

Their self-defense weapons of choice were available for instant use, but comfortably slung for the long day's hike ahead. The likelihood of their using them was remote with the Sorcerer Guard there to protect them, and they were still well in Delmathia. But Aetria made them carry the weapons because they would have to do so once they reached the army. They were learning to take care of themselves and their equipment.

More importantly, she heard friendly banter between teammates instead of the whining and complaining she had heard for three days straight. It was hard to judge accurately, but there was a spring in their movements. They didn't seem as exhausted and tired as she had seen them. Perhaps the conditioning was taking effect.

"Good morning, Novices!"

"Good morning, Ma'am," chorused the response.

"Today we are changing our routine. We are now on the border with Hermania, and will be turning north at this point. You will be glad to hear that this morning we will be riding in the transport wagons instead of marching."

The cheers that greeted her announcement were loud and long. She let them carry on for a few more moments, and then raised her arm in the silence gesture used by the reconnaissance troops that she had taught them. They quickly quieted.

"You will not want to hear that, with no notice, we will make foot marches day or night."

The groans were equally as heartfelt as the cheers, but of shorter duration.

"The army moves with little or no notice, so you must learn to be ready at all times. You have demonstrated your ability to route march, and it appears I have not damaged you physically by the exercise." The laughter was new; perhaps she was being too easy on them.

"We have been making better time on foot than we would have in transport wagons, and are slightly ahead of schedule. For this reason, I believe we can make better use of the time we have by conducting classes in the transport as we move forward. I don't want you all to think I am feeling sorry for you and am afraid you will melt in a little rain!

"To ensure your time is fully occupied, I will be rotating between the two wagons. Sorcerer Meloses and Novice Verdilan will alternate lectures in the transport I have vacated. We have a lot of material to cover, so pay attention. This is not the time to relax and let your mind wander."

Aetria looked directly at Novice Recanlin. He blushed and looked down, avoiding her eyes. She didn't want to embarrass the young man, but she felt she had to make a point.

"Last night, Novice Recanlin wandered off his post. It is his wont to move around when meditating. That may be acceptable back at Inhestia, but no longer. There are two very serious things wrong with his behavior last night. The first is that it could, and would, lead to his death.

"The second and worst is that it could lead to the destruction of his fellow sorcerers and the army troops they are supporting. If you think the guard duty you are doing now has no value, you are wrong. If it does nothing else, it should impress upon you the realization that actions you are expressly responsible for can directly impact your fellow sorcerers, the Order, and the people you have been trained to serve with your sorcerer talents.

"Your attention must be on what you are doing on watch and not on anything else. It is not the time to review your life or do meditations. Speaking of meditations, find a physical expression that works in the environment you find yourself in. Obviously, Novice Recanlin will have to learn a new meditation exercise, one that saves him getting his throat cut."

Someone shoved Recanlin from behind, and he stumbled out of formation. Numerous barbed comments were made, but Aetria sensed the others were trying to be supportive and understanding of their wayward fellow Novice. After a moment, his Aggressor mates pulled him back into their ranks as if forgiving him his transgressions. The Novices' attention returned to Aetria.

"Novice Recanlin is being held accountable for his mistake. This is part of good discipline and order the army must have. His punishment will be to stand double duty from now until we reach the regiment."

A moan of sympathy whispered from within the company, but Aetria continued. "You haven't heard the worst yet. Because we are near the enemy, effective immediately, we are doubling up on the manning of our watches. You will now stand your post with another sorcerer. Furthermore, no one will exit the camp unless accompanied by another sorcerer and with my express permission to do so."

Judging from the angry expressions on their faces, Aetria knew she had gotten their attention.

"Get used to it, Novices. That is the way of life on the front lines. You may be loved in your villages, but on the battlefield everyone fears you. You are a target to all, friend and foe alike. Your existence depends on your knowledge, skills, and the friend covering your back.

"Save your questions for now. They will be answered during the day's rolling classrooms, so listen up and pay attention. Aggressors and Illusionists load into the forward wagon, Healers and Provisioners in the wagon behind. We are leaving in one hour. Dismissed."

* * * *

Working her way forward through the maze of Novice legs, Aetria found her Illusionists all seated on the right side bench and the Aggressors seated on the left side bench. The benches were built into the side of the wagon, so the two different branches of sorcerers sat looking at each other.

She doubted they would ever mingle like Provisioners and Healers. It wasn't that they disliked each other having lived together for four or five years at Inhestia, but because their philosophies of life were so different. So it had always been.

Illusionists' magic was disguise, camouflage, and mirage creation. Coming into its own in this long war, their magic was in great demand. In the centuries before, during a time when peace had been the norm, their numbers had been small. They were artists, providers of show and display, or hiding and understating. If a lord wanted a ceremony or festival to be impressive, he hired an Illusionist. If he wanted to be left alone in seclusion, he hired one also. Merchants hired them to improve their wares, while the village leaders hired them to expose the merchants' wiles. Although bound by rules of the Order, Illusionists were not rigidly bound to obey the king's laws.

Aetria had entered Inhestia intending to be what her merchant father had wanted, an enhancer of his trade. She soon discovered her interest lay in the true arts and wanted to be a renowned artist. But war was all she had known so far.

Aggressors' magic was fire, lightning, exploding flame, poisons, thunder, and crushing forces. Before the Sorcerer War, their skills had been much in demand by feuding nobles. When the Aggressors tired of working for ambitious warmongers and realized they had the strength to take on that mission themselves, a new era had begun. Aggressors were the primary cause of the Sorcerer War two centuries earlier.

During the recovery of the world from the aftermath of that war, it came to be understood Aggressor sorcerers were not going to disappear and neither were any of the sorcerers who had used magic Power to advance themselves. A new use for their skills would have to be found.

Aetria sat on the front seat behind the driver and signaled Lieutenant Nemos to start the caravan moving forward. The wagon's covers were up to protect them from the threatening rain, but they would also block any cooling breeze. Drowsiness was going to be a problem. The wagon jerked forward and she saved herself from tumbling back into the sea of legs.

Turning her attention to the Novices, she asked, "What is the First Law of Spell Warfare?"

Holding onto the sides, the Novices chorused, with a decided lilt of boredom, "Don't use the Power to kill."

"Wrong!" Aetria's rebuke shocked the Novices. Several protested.

"I did not ask for the First Law of Power Use, which you answered correctly, albeit with no enthusiasm

I might add, but I'll excuse you since you are no longer students. What is the First Law of Spell Warfare?"

Jalista, one of the Illusionists, spoke out quickly. "The use of spells in war has been forbidden for the past two hundred years since the Sorcerer War. We were not allowed to even talk about it, Sorceress. You yourself told me that once in class."

"You are correct. The horrors inflicted upon sorcerer and non-sorcerer alike by the War were deliberately suppressed by our Order. That included any reference to the use of spells. Our teaching was focused on our code of honor, the rules we live by, and a determination not to repeat the mistakes of the past.

"Unfortunately, this narrow focus has caused us to have to rediscover the lessons learned by the sorcerers of that period. We don't know a lot about these sorcerers, but we know they usually acted alone, or in very close family groups. There was no willingness to share the spells learned by the individual sorcerer as it meant they could be used against you.

"The very powerful magi who ruled the world were essentially alone. They had no governing Council, common training, or code of honor. Their spells often died with them since there was no sharing, no writing down of the lore, no training of the young until just before death of the elder."

"How could anyone live in a world without trust?" Jalista asked.

Aetria gave her a tight smile. "They couldn't live in the world trusting anyone, except for their own family, and they had better watch them closely. The magi removed themselves from the non-sorcerers, setting their clans apart in the physical sense, and creating levels of status in the world with the non-sorcerer being the lowest.

"They married within their own families, fearful of the common people. Distrust turned to hatred. Hatred caused fighting between sorcerer and non-sorcerer which led to more hatred and distrust in a vicious cycle. That is why the Order insists on drawing its people from the common people. The people are the Order. It is not an adversarial relationship anymore. You can hate and kill people who consider themselves above you and believe you are to be used to serve them. It is hard to hate a father, brother, sister, or mother who also serves the Order and the people."

Novice Tracilus, one of the two male Illusionists, had a penchant for putting everything into neat little packages. "In other words, Sorceress, what we know about those who came before us is the opposite of what we know about ourselves."

"You are correct, Novice Tracilus. Where the forefathers once hungered after wealth, control, and ultimately power, now the Order avoids influencing the world, accepts only enough money in payment for our services to meet the needs of the Order, and exercises control only over ourselves. Up until now.

"Now we are dealing with a world that has forced our Order to do what our first Law forbids us—to kill with Power. Which leads us back to my original question. Novice Recanlin, would you like to share what Commander Pleates has taught you about spell warfare?"

Recanlin looked side-to-side amongst his peers and then sheepishly back at her. "The Adept has not taught us anything about spell warfare. Umm, he said you could be trusted to teach us that. He has been busy teaching, well, how to do other things."

Determined not to show her annoyance, Aetria said calmly, "I am honored he has entrusted that portion of your training to me. I was afraid this would be repetition for you all. Fine, Novice Fernonia, as an Aggressor, how would you fight a battle using your skills?"

The young woman in question was the most beautiful of the dozen women Novices in the Company, probably in all of Inhestia for that matter. Even Aetria felt a twinge of jealousy towards her. Fernonia was used to being the center of attention, and very forward.

If she wasn't such a bitch, thought Aetria, she would be the heart breaker of Delmathia. Then again, she wouldn't be much of an Aggressor either.

"That's a simple question, Ma'am, easy to answer. I would gather my friends here together, we would walk up to the enemy troops, bury them under an avalanche of fireballs, and send in our troops to clean up the remains."

Her "friends" hooted a round of cheers for Fernonia's answer.

Aetria gave her a smile of her own, albeit a little tight-lipped. "Very interesting, Fernonia. You have just described the first battle sorcerers fought between Delmathia and Hermania. The Hermanians were the first to use sorcerers. They hired several dozen Aggressors, waited until the two armies were about to engage, and moved their sorcerers forward through the front lines into the face of our troops. They proceeded as you described. The carnage was horrible.

"Our troops broke and ran, having lost hundreds in the first few moments of the battle. We lost nearly a thousand men by the day's end, a quarter of our southern lands, and the morale of our army was in a shambles."

She was not surprised the Novices knew so little of the war. She realized her description of the losses to their army had shaken both sets of Novices. The news of how the war was progressing came only in battles lost or won. Very few veterans had returned from the war to tell what they had seen. Most of the ones she knew, like her, did not want to talk about it. She continued.

"Our forces fell back to the fortified town of Kramornon. A panicked call went out to our Lodges to send sorcerers, but help was too long in coming. The local Lodge managed to bring five Aggressors inside the walls before the Hermanian army arrived outside.

"The Hermanians marched their Aggressors forward. They were now being used for the purpose of invoking fear, and the Delmathians in the town watched as the Hermanians sent a group of six sorcerers to cut off the southern entrance to the town. The remaining twenty or so marched to the northern entrance and advanced on the town. They stopped outside of bow range and commenced a fierce fireball attack on the barricades. Here they learned the basis of the Third Law of Spell Warfare, 'Use of spells against fortifications is of limited value.'"

"What happened to the first two laws?" Fernonia asked.

"I'm coming to that. The Delmathians took casualties, but not unlike what they had experienced under siege tactics. The Delmathian army, seeing their troops were holding, sent a squadron of the Kelrossian Lancers out the back gate and into the forest to the east. The Hermanian sorcerers at the back gate began to take them under fire. Our sorcerers rushed out and engaged them in return. The fight was rapid and over very quickly. Each side annihilated the other. They had just learned the Second Law of Spell Warfare, 'Engaging like spells is costly.'

"While the non-sorcerers cheered the efforts of their sorcerers, the loser was the Order. The army may think it is an acceptable tactic, but the Order does not. Fighting it out, face to face, against similar sorcerers costs lives."

The rain that had been threatening chose this moment to fall in a heavy shower. The driver reached behind him and dropped the front curtain. Out the rear of the wagon, Aetria saw the following wagon rig their curtain as well. Their driver cocooned himself in his rain cloak and stoically stared back at her through the pouring rain. She continued her narration.

"While the two sorcerer groups were killing each other, the Delmathians sent a company of infantry pouring out the northern gate at the Hermanian main sorcerer group. How they managed to get them to do that remains a mystery since none of them survived. The Hermanians calmly blasted them out of existence and learned the Fourth Law of Spell Warfare, 'There is a limit to the Power that can be expended.' When the Kelrossian Lancers charged out of the trees into the Hermanian sorcerers, the Aggressors were not able to mount much of an attack, as they were depleted of energy. They died to a man, learning the First Law of Spell Warfare, 'Never, ever, leave your sorcerers unprotected.' You will never find a Hermanian Sorcerer unit that isn't heavily protected, to this day."

Tracilus said, "I think you are trying to tell us that Spell Warfare has evolved over the bodies of our people, and that it is to be taken seriously."

"Excellent summation, Novice Tracilus. Both sides learned very quickly from their mistakes. The Delmathian army could not take advantage of their defeat of the Hermanian Sorcerers, as our troops were still decimated by the previous battle. Both sides withdrew from each other, but the Hermanians still held our southern lands."

Jalista waved for attention and Aetria nodded at her. "Why did Hermania attack us in the first place? I know they are relatively poor, and they have stricter beliefs than we do, but is that a reason for war?"

"Just why they wanted to conquer us, nobody I know has come up with a sensible reason. Gold, maybe?" Aetria said. "Until the war broke out, I always felt the Hermanians were a very reasonable people to deal with. My father is a merchant and said they were very fair in their businesses. They are very strict in their laws."

"Whatever the reason, their attack created a far greater problem than ever experienced before because they abandoned the First Law of Spell Use. Whatever prohibitions the Hermanian non-sorcerers had had against the use of sorcerers in warfare since the Sorcerer War seemed to be overturned by their desire to conquer Delmathia."

"Soon every army began to recruit sorcerers as fast as they could. The Order had to make some very hard decisions very fast. Without sorcerer help, the Delmathians would be defeated in very rapid order. The Order would then fall under Hermanian rule, and our Orders do not agree on many things. They decided to support the war and join the army. The Council met with the king and made the offer of support—with certain restrictions."

Novice Fernonia looked puzzled and chimed in with a question. "It didn't look like we had much of a choice in joining, so why did the Order think we could set up any kind of restrictions?"

"While the use of sorcerers was not new to the army, the use of Aggressor spells was. For many years, the Council had approved the hiring of Healers and Provisioners to accompany regimental units whose

commanders were willing to pay the hiring fee. The army at that time was made up of regimental units raised by towns, noble families, or merchants wanting to move up in society by purchasing favor from the king. Some regimental commanders wisely took advantage of the gold available to them to purchase the services of sorcerers rather than expend it on fancy uniforms or expensive weaponry.

"The sorcerers worked for the commander of the unit, so their loyalty to him was foremost. Depending on who hired you, you could be well taken care of or badly overworked. This created a problem for the new army when it came to distributing the available sorcerers amongst the army units. All needed support, but sorcerers would not serve with certain units.

"Furthermore, based on the lessons learned at Kramornon, our sorcerers could be expended like so many arrows by the whim of a commander who did not care for his sorcerers. The Council set up a restriction that sorcerers would only be under the command of sorcerers. Of course, the generals did not agree."

"I don't understand why not; they have engineers in engineer companies. Why would they object to sorcerers with their own units?" Recanlin asked.

Aetria looked over her shoulder at the road ahead, looking for a place to stop the caravan for their noon meal. None was in sight. The constant talking was making her throat dry, and she took a drink from her water container. The Novices followed her lead.

"Valid point, Novice Recanlin, but keep in mind that the engineers are support troops. The Aggressors and Illusionists are viewed as a major offensive weapon like a squadron of heavy cavalry."

Novice Fernonia burst out laughing. She stifled her guffaws when she received a hard glare from Aetria. "Sorry, Sorceress, but I don't see Illusionists as a major offensive weapon."

Jalista yelled angrily at Fernonia, "Perhaps after I slap that stupid smile off your face, Fernonia, you will think this Illusionist offensive." She jumped up to follow through with her threat, Fernonia rising to meet her.

A melee between the two sorceresses was barely averted by their respective fellow Novices pulling them back into their seats. Aetria suppressed a smile, wishing she had said that. The interminable arrogance of Aggressors had forever created problems in the Corps.

"I am not surprised you don't see us as a major offensive weapon because you have not served in the army long enough to have experienced what we can do," Aetria sternly rebuked Fernonia. "Imagination is a much flaunted ability of an Illusionist, but exercise yours and think about charging a cavalry squadron over a bridge across a ravine, only to find there isn't a bridge.

"Or believing that infantry units in front of you are outnumbered by your own, and after you engage them, you find the reverse to be true. I am sure any of the Novice Illusionists would be only too happy to provide other examples, but let these suffice for the moment."

Turning to look back and forth at the Aggressors and Illusionists, Aetria spoke in a cold, command voice. "I will not tolerate fighting amongst the disciplines. We all serve the king; our country needs us all. We must be united before the non-sorcerer and not bring dishonor upon our Lodge or the Order. Questions on this?"

Fernonia's eyes showed defiance, but she said nothing. The rest would not meet their instructor's glare.

Aetria decided she would have to have a private talk with Fernonia, and soon.

"Very well. Back to major offensive weapons. The generals feared they would not have control of these weapons. The Council feared the generals would misuse the weapons, citing Kramornon as proof of their concerns. The Council also brought up the specter of the Sorcerer War. They made an issue of our well-known prohibitions against taking life which are respected by the non-sorcerer. Also, the Council wanted to control the limits to which sorcerers would be asked to go.

"A non-sorcerer would not understand the way we operate, and given the limited time we had before rejoining the battle with the Hermanians, the cost of learning would be too high. Despite our efforts to develop a more open relationship with the people, we are still a very closed society to them. They truly don't know how we do the things we do; maybe they don't want to know and prefer to believe we do it with 'magic.'

"The results of the Council's arguments were the king's permission to create the Sorcerer Corps to be commanded by our own officers. Our commanders would serve on generals' staffs as chief advisors on spell warfare which was something neither the non-sorcerer nor sorcerer knew how to do, but the sorcerers were not going to admit that and lose control. Kramornon had made us experts overnight.

"Unfortunately, we still had a lot to learn."

Looking forward again, Aetria still saw no likely stopping spot, so she signaled Lieutenant Nemos to have his troops eat in the saddle, passing the orders back to the other wagons. The Novices dug into their packs for the rations they had learned to keep there, and within moments, all were busy eating.

Between bites of food and sips of water, Aetria continued her lesson.

"Adept Pleates and I were among the first company to leave Inhestia to join the war. When we first arrived in the army, we wore uniform robes that displayed our discipline by color. Healers wore white, Provisioners green, Illusionists blue, and Aggressors black. Our ranks were displayed the same as they were at Inhestia with colored sashes. Back then, as it still is today, all sorcerers were considered to hold officer rank in the army, but the likelihood of any of us ever giving orders to non-sorcerer troops is remote. We set up our bivouac in the midst of the army, well-protected by their infantry, and settled in while our commanders met with the generals.

"The next six months were very interesting but trying times for us. We discovered that the Hermanians had also learned their lessons from Kramornon, and surprisingly or not, depending on your point of view, had organized very much like ourselves. Battles between massed Aggressors almost never occurred. Whenever they appeared on the field, opposing Aggressors were rushed to meet them, and both sides frequently ended up in a stand-off."

Jalista, casting a quick glance at Fernonia, asked, "How were the Illusionists used early in the war?"

"A quick answer is—poorly," Aetria replied with a grimace, remembering vividly the wasted time and energy she had put into her work. "But we were also having to learn how to be effective. We were first used to try to spread fear and terror among the troops. Every monster story you had ever heard in your childhood became a source of illusions sent into the Hermanian camps, usually at night, to harass the sentries and keep the troops awake.

"The Hermanians returned our horrors with their own, and we spent considerable Power casting counter spells. The troops called them 'believe' and 'not believe' battles. We had ignored the Second Law of Spell Warfare, 'Engaging like spells is costly,' and kept relearning it.

"The trick in illusion warfare is to keep the illusion within the range of belief of the observer. Of course, you can fool some of the people all of the..."

"So the armies sat around and watched the sorcerers make fools of each other?" Fernonia cut in.

"No, war marches on, Novice Fernonia. Bloody battles were still fought, and soldiers were wounded and died. The Healers and Provisioners were kept very busy. The sight of the Healers in their white robes moving among the wounded and dying after a skirmish was all too familiar.

"We had managed to return the conduct of warfare to where it had been before the introduction of Spell Warfare; that is the attrition of the enemy's forces by sword and arrow. The winner of a battle was the one who lost fewest troops. Generals did this by exploiting mistakes, by maneuvering for position, and by surprise. One such surprise caused a major change in conduct of the war and has severely affected the way sorcerers are viewed by both armies ever since."

"You must be referring to the Dishonor at Roland Pass," Novice Belanar's bass voice interjected. He had been a leader in the choir at Inhestia, his distinctively strong, clear voice frequently taking the male lead in their song plays. He was the calmest Aggressor Aetria had ever met. He did not fit the mold for Aggressor behavior, but had successfully completed the training. Like Recanlin, he also wanted to work in the mine trade, and similarly, was one of the three non-volunteers. "My uncle was killed there. It was, indeed, a sad day for sorcerers."

"Perhaps you would like to relate what happened there, Novice Belanar?" Aetria asked.

The quiet Aggressor shook his head. "No, Ma'am. I only know he died in the battle there, and that it was called that name. The news of battle greatly disturbed my mother and father. Please tell us what happened."

Aetria noticed how keenly the other Novices were watching Belanar. They were now more interested in the story because one of their own had been directly influenced by it.

"There had been a fierce attack by the Hermanians against the troops guarding the pass, which was located on our army's western flank. It provided an excellent road down which they could strike deeply into our supply lines. They broke off the attack several hours before dusk to allow Healers to find the wounded and remove them from the field before darkness.

"The Delmathian commander became suspicious when he saw a much larger than normal number of Healers attending the casualties. He signaled his skirmishers, skilled archers sent ahead of the front lines to warn of advancing enemy units and to take out targets of opportunity, to watch the Healers closely. He alerted his troops to stand by to repel an attack and waited."

Jalista cut in. "Aren't Healers covered by a truce when they are tending injured soldiers?"

"Not formally, no. It has always been accepted they were not targets of battle. You do not kill life-saving support troops of any kind. The Delmathian commander was watching them carefully. About one hour before dark, over half of the Healers turned toward our lines and commenced a bombardment of fireballs.

"The skirmishers managed to shoot down a number of the Aggressors before being killed. Several squadrons of heavy cavalry burst through the Hermanian lines and charged into our troops. Had the

soldiers not been alerted, they would have broken and run, with the Hermanians raiding our supply lines shortly thereafter.

"As it was, the Delmathians barely held on, keeping the cavalry at bay while taking heavy spell fire from the Aggressors. Our reserve troops, already hurrying to the scene at the request of the commander at Roland Pass, arrived in time to repulse the Hermanians. When word of the deception got out, the troops reacted angrily.

"Try to understand these troops had been under continuous spell attack for months, subjected to continual deception. An Aggressor can kill with no visible weapon. Now Aggressors were deceitfully wearing the uniforms of sorcerers covered by a code of honor. What next—wearing the uniforms of our own sorcerers?

"A belief sprang up overnight that the only safe sorcerer was a dead one. It was the Hermanians who started the deception, but the backlash fell on all sorcerers."

"I now understand your comment this morning about us being targets to all, friend and foe alike." Recanlin groaned, recalling the knife in Aetria's hand the night before.

"It was also the reason the Council got permission to create the Sorcerer Guards. Before they arrived on the scene, our guards were regular army units that performed their guard duties somewhat lackadaisically.

"The generals viewed our protection as a form of soft duty for troops coming off the front lines, and our protectors changed almost every day. We did not bother to develop any kind of relationship with the units and they didn't either. Not knowing how each other operated set us up for suspicion and the resulting friction between the units.

"Combined with the results of the Hermanians' deception, we found ourselves treated like prisoners of war instead of a valued support unit. The Council proposed to the king and his generals that we bring in our own protective forces from the Lodges. They sold the idea by pointing out that our guards were familiar with sorcerers and their operations, knew most of us on sight, and would relieve badly needed infantry units of a task they now found odious. The king agreed."

"Why didn't the Hermanians do something similar?" Tracilus asked.

Aetria felt a burst of genuine liking for the young Aggressor. He was the only one who had shown interest in the past of the Corps so far.

"In one way, they did, Novice Tracilus. They shifted to their dark gray uniforms. They continued using regular troops for protection, but shifted their Assassin forces into their sorcerer units. The Assassins provide the same protective functions as our Guard, but they still carry on their normal nefarious fieldwork for their army. Our Guard does not support other army units unless directly attacked."

Tracilus broke in with one of his summations. "So, the Hermanian sorcerers achieved their isolation from their troops by being considered the 'dirty works' gang, and we do it by being protected by our own Guards."

"Essentially correct, Novice, but we like to believe we are more accepted by our army than their sorcerers are. But perhaps we are more isolated from our army than we should be. It is why I am devoting badly needed training time to make you Novices understand the concerns our troops have about us." Aetria signaled a halt of the caravan for a stretch break and to allow people to relieve

themselves.

When all had been given the opportunity to take care of nature's business, she climbed aboard the wagon with the Healers and Provisioners to repeat her lectures of the morning.

Provisioners tended to be people of strong parenting skills, nurturers, outgoing givers. Their magic produced food, water, wine—all forms of sustaining magic. The local lords and those few wealthy leaders of Guild towns hired them to run the wineries, supervise food and water production, serve as commissaries to the trade caravans and now to the army.

Healers were empathic, loving listeners, gentle, and most of all caring. Their magic consisted of curing, soothing, tending, and healing. The oldest of the disciplines, their services were under constant demand from all Delmathia's societies and guilds. Every village wanted a resident Healer, but were lucky if they could share one among a dozen other villages and towns.

Not surprisingly, Aetria found less contentiousness among nurturers and caregivers. She welcomed the chance to relax while it lasted.

* * * *

After another day cooped up in a steamy wagon with rain dogging the caravan for most of the morning and early afternoon, Aetria was glad for sun that finally broke through the clouds and began to dry the wet foliage of the forest lining the road north.

Keeping the Novices' attention in the rocking wagons with the heat building because of so many bodies in close quarters had been difficult at best. Frequent stops to stretch had only gotten the young people wetter as the day progressed. But, with the sun now out, everyone's spirits improved, and by the time she halted the caravan for the evening, their pent up energy was making the company restless. The evening's exercise session was well attended.

Aetria preferred to exercise alone but had to set the example for her Novices. At Inhestia she had devoted a minimum of an hour a day to her flexing and stretching routines, followed by an hour of target practice with knife and dart. Now, she was barely able to do more than half an hour a night. Between the utter fatigue of the day's travel and the camp routines she had to supervise, she only managed this time because she had scheduled it and had ordered all to participate. Pleates even allowed his Aggressors to attend, excepting himself, of course.

The encampment was on the crest of a small hill set off the road as always with the tents under the trees and the cooking fires in a small clearing. Not far from where the horses were picketed was another clearing where Aetria chose to have the company assemble and hold the scheduled pre-dusk self-defense training. Here, the ground was relatively firm; the day's rains had drained rapidly off the hill. It was covered with the tough grass of the foothills, shortened nearly to the dirt by grazing pack animals and the horses of countless travelers who used this site to rest overnight.

None of the Novices were trained in Tierian skills, so Aetria was able to train unencumbered by a sparring partner. Several of the female Novices had asked about her stretching routines, and she had taught them the basics. They complained later of the soreness in the muscles, and she explained that flexibility was not something one acquired in a short period of time. Aetria smiled to herself as she saw several still trying to emulate her. Whether they were really interested or enjoyed the men's eyes on them instead of her was debatable.

As she released from a split maneuver and twisted erect, Aetria was startled to find Lieutenant Nemos

beside her.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" she asked.

"You have a grace and fluidity I find very interesting, Sorceress. I would be honored if you would show me that particular movement."

His eyes did shine with interest, Aetria noted, and not the usual sexual one. She wondered if he could ever bring himself to share union with a sorceress. The Guards' devotion to the protection of her Order was extreme, but they had lived close enough to sorcerers that they could not possibly believe the legends of what happened to a non-sorcerer man who made love to a sorceress. Aetria was not looking for lovemaking; the Power knew she didn't have the time or the energy.

"Show me how much of it you can do before I try to ask you to do too much. This is not a beginning movement."

Nemos launched himself into a lunging movement, similar to the extension made by a swordsman's straightforward thrust. He then slowly slid the non-extended leg outward, until he settled to the ground in the splits. His flexibility was extremely good; she had seen other men injure themselves before completing the split.

"Very good, Lieutenant! A bit lacking in the grace and fluidity you praised, but essentially correct. The movement is designed to allow you to drop quickly to the floor..." Aetria seemingly fell into the split, her sandals barely whispering as they shifted her weight outward. She had executed her split so her body faced his only a few feet away.

"Thus dodging a swung or thrust weapon attack at the upper body, or the swinging lever arm of scythe trap. Of course, to dodge that, you have to make yourself very small, so it completes the protective portion of the move when you lower your torso flat to the ground." Turning her head, she looked upward at him with her right eye, her left ear to ground.

"To recover, execute the beginning of a hand stand, but keep your feet below the horizontal plane as you bend upward. Twist erect, sweeping one leg out for spin control before dropping it back into a bounce crouch." A moment later she stood before him again.

He grinned and flattened himself on the ground. With a shove of his arms he sprang upward, but his feet went above the horizontal and he ended up pushing himself erect, his feet coming down away from his center of gravity, and he toppled over backwards. The chorus of laughs that came from the Novices caught Aetria unawares, and she turned on them angrily.

"This is an advanced movement and very hard to learn. It is disrespectful to laugh at someone's effort."

An even heartier laugh exploded from behind her, and she wheeled to find Nemos lying on his back, laughing the loudest of all. He heaved himself up.

"Disrespectful maybe, Ma'am, but funny anyway. I will practice this by myself to save distracting your Novices. Thank you for the instruction. May I talk with you in private, please?"

Aetria nodded. "Shall we go to my tent?"

They left the Novices behind, walking past the picketed horses. Almost unconsciously, the two officers

took a moment to check the horses, their feed, and the guards posted nearby. They then proceeded to the billeting area and to Aetria's tent set off slightly to one side. She entered the tent first, pulling a folding chair clear from her field table, and sat down. She pointed to a companion chair in the corner.

"Have a seat, Lieutenant."

Nemos politely refused. "I prefer to stand, Sorceress. This will only take a moment. The other night, when Novice Recanlin wandered off, I was making my rounds of the guards when I saw you set up that impressive illusion around the horses. I must say, if I was an enemy infiltrator and had penetrated the camp to steal our horses, I would have had no desire to accomplish my mission against those sentries."

Nemos was piling on praise for a reason, Aetria thought. She doubted if anything would have stopped him from getting the job done. "Thank you, Lieutenant, it is always nice to have your work appreciated. I thank you for allowing me to rescue one of my lost sheep."

"It's my job, Ma'am. I was a little surprised when you turned into a hunting dog and ran out of camp. I know sorcerers don't actually turn into the things they conjure up, but I'm curious to know if you can use the senses of the animals you put on the glamour of. You sure made a direct line towards Novice Recanlin, just like a scent dog on the trail."

Aetria picked up a towel from the table and mopped the sweat from her face, hiding the shock brought on by his question. Nemos had been spying on her! She had not headed toward Recanlin until she had gotten out of sight of the camp. Her fears of him following her were well founded.

What was he after anyway?

"There are sorcerers who can sense what animals can, but they are very rare. The simple explanation is that all of us can sense the use of the Power. Novice Recanlin was practicing the skills Commander Pleates had been teaching the Aggressors, and I sensed it. Who else would be doing so near our camp? No tricks, Lieutenant, really."

Nemos' deadpan stare was hard to read. He smiled a ghost of a smile and said, "Why, of course, Ma'am. That explains it. I guess I was hoping you had some new skills I could use to more effectively guard the camp. I'll just have to do it the old-fashioned way, Sorceress. Thank you for your time."

Aetria watched him disappear out of her tent and mentally added another worry to her list.

Did he suspect? Would he tell?

CHAPTER 3

Turning the "floor" over to Novice Verdilan, Aetria resumed her seat at the front of the first wagon. The cloudless skies and bright sun that had greeted the Novices this morning made it easy for Aetria to order the covers removed from the wagons. The company now rode in comparative comfort, the cool spring breeze supplemented by the movement of the wagons down the road. The caravan was still heading north, parallel to the border with Hermania.

With less than two weeks left to go before they reached the army's encampment, Aetria was beginning to feel reasonably good about the progress of the Novices' training. If only she did not have to bring up the next topic of her training lectures. It was going to put a strain back into her relationship with her small

company to discuss the subject of grid burnouts, but their safety required it.

Verdilan had taken a seat on the Illusionists' side of the wagon, as close to the front as he could get. He cleared his throat and began. "There is a danger directly associated with increasing one's Power grid. It is called grid burnout. Now, I know we have all learned during our Novice training at Inhestia of the effects of grid burnout, and I don't intend to retell the horror stories of what happened to those unfortunates who experienced it and died. We have a rare opportunity to talk with one of the few who suffered grid burnout and lived."

He glanced at Aetria, and all eyes followed his.

And so it begins, she thought.

"Before Novice Verdilan gets too far into the medical explanation of grid burnout, let me share some facts with you. Having lived through a burnout, I have been the focus of a lot of attention over the last few years and have learned a lot about the problem.

"At the end of the Sorcerer War, our Mage Council instilled discipline and order into our Lodges, and very tight controls were imposed on the training of sorcerers. Since that time, there have been thirty-four recorded cases of grid burnout in the last two hundred years: twenty-one Aggressors, ten Illusionists, two Healers, and one Provisioner. Novice Tracilus, based on these first few facts, what assumptions can you make already?"

Caught by surprise, Tracilus took a moment before answering. "Thirty-four cases in two hundred years are not many, so I would say the Council's plan appears to be working. If I were an Aggressor, I would be bothered by the high percentage of cases in that specialty, and I am curious why Provisioners are so low."

"Novice Verdilan will explain why in a few moments. Up until the start of our war with Hermania, there had only been ten cases of grid burnout. The other twenty-four have happened in the last six years. Of the original ten, five were Aggressors. They all died. Most of those were scholars above the Novice level who pushed the bounds of their training and lost. Only one practitioner has died in all that time.

"Two of the ten were Sorcerer level Illusionists. One left the Lodge and gave up the Power forever; the other returned to her Tierian people and practiced only minor spells until the end of her days.

"Of the remaining three cases that happened before the war, two were Adept Healers. Their remarkable case took place over forty years ago; again in a scholarly environment—an experiment gone wrong. One of them went insane and was confined. The other is now a Mage. The last one you have all heard of, Provisioner Adept Trilistes, who died of wine abuse."

"The Lush of Inhestia was a burnout victim?" Jalista asked.

Aetria nodded. She looked at Fernonia. "You Aggressors have a cause for concern. In the last six years, sixteen have died; fourteen of them were Novices, the other two were Sorcerers. In that same period of time, eight Illusionists have suffered grid burnout. Six were Novices who died, not from the burnout like Aggressors, but from losing consciousness in a battle and not being rescued. One Sorceress quit the Order and went into seclusion. And one Novice is now a Sorceress, presently the Sub-Commander of a Recruit Company headed for the army. What conclusions can you make now, Novice Tracilus?"

Licking his lips, he said in a shaky voice, "Twenty-four cases since the start of the war, the majority of which have happened to Novices, implies that something we are doing is causing the grid burnouts. That points towards the meditation techniques you will be teaching us. Perhaps it is not a good idea to learn them."

"Not your choice or mine, Novice Tracilus." Aetria looked carefully into the faces of her Novices. "You will learn these techniques. It is not the techniques that cause the burnouts. These are the same techniques that have been taught in our Training Lodges for centuries, and you have learned there have been almost no cases of grid burnout in normal use."

"The Council has weighed the advantages and disadvantages, and has decided to take the risk of teaching them. What I am trying to accomplish today is to reinforce in each one of you the awareness that what you do, and what we all do, with Power is very risky all the time—and even more so in time of war. Now, Novice Verdilan, continue your lecture."

Verdilan's uneasiness in discussing the topic was abundantly apparent in his posture. "The engineers take great delight in saying our work is done by smoke and mirrors, that there is no discipline to our use of Power. They are uncomfortably close to the truth when they say we don't know 'how we do what we do.' We don't know, for instance, where we store the Power. We believe it is within the sorcerer and not in some strange plane of another existence. If the plane theory were true, then why would we need a source to energize ourselves? We would just open a tap to that energy whenever we needed to."

Aetria mentally supported the Novice Healer's point strongly because, with her strange ability to sense stored Power, she knew it was in the sorcerer. What she was not able to pinpoint was where in the sorcerer it existed. It was just there. She wondered if she could find out by somehow training her sense to detect stored Power with better resolution than she currently had. Intriguing idea, but probably a waste of time. It was not as if she could work with a Mage Healer and ask for advice! If the Council found out about her "abnormal ability," she could end up cashiered. She brought her wandering mind back to Verdilan's lecture.

"Where it exists within the sorcerer is unknown. In the early days before the Sorcerer War, a non-sorcerer king, I believe his name was King Sepnotes, actually cut apart sorcerers a piece at a time to try to find out where they hid the Power. Cost quite a few sorcerer lives in the process. Removing any body part usually means death, particularly when you cut out vital parts, like the heart or brain."

"Grisly as these experiments were, they provided some proof that the Power is not stored in any specific organs within the body, unless you believe like the common folks do, that it was stored in the brain. They also did not find any unique or special organs within the butchered sorcerers that might explain why sorcerers can store Power and non-sorcerers can't."

Aetria watched the expressions on the Novices' faces during Verdilan's dissection story. It was clear they had not heard it before. Perhaps in today's rush to produce more sorcerers to support the war, they were not being taught all that she had been. Her Novice training had taken six years; theirs was four or even less. What else had they not been told?

"We also don't know how the Power is stored. Our training has us envision it being stored in a lattice structure, a grid. We do this for ease of focus. Using our training models, and artist conceptions developed over the years, we are provided with something familiar to help us visualize a non-visible concept."

Breaking in rudely, Fernonia said, "Who cares about that? We sorcerers know we can sense the Power;

we know we can capture it and store it someplace. We know we can blast into cinders the engineers who doubt our professionalism."

Aetria rescued Verdilan, who was starting to sputter with indignation over the nasty remark of the haughty Aggressor Novice. "Show proper respect for a lecturer, Novice Fernonia! Novice Verdilan's point is that if we knew more about how we stored Power, we would be able to increase our abilities and decrease our Aggressor death rate—something I'm sure you are interested in."

Fernonia gave Aetria a "respectful" frown and sat down, looking unhappy. Aetria stared at her to ensure she was properly put into her place, and then turned to Verdilan. Something in his eyes made her look back at Fernonia. She really was beautiful, even when pouting. Perhaps Verdilan's response to Fernonia was not indignation, but unrequited love.

Interesting, the play between our Novices, Aetria thought.

"Thank you, Sorceress. As long as I am making myself look bad, I might as well add to the list of 'we don't know' by saying that we do not know the capacity of one's grid. The Healers have a measure of that capacity, which Sorceress Aetria demonstrated for you last night. I didn't know the army had another use for our Healer diagnostic technique, but that technique may help me explain to you a principle of Power use.

"Think back to last night. For the most part, our Novice flames' intensity were about the same. That is true because Novices are generally trained to the same level of Power use. Let us say for the sake of discussion that the amount of Novice Power is—oh, say a bucket's worth."

A rude comment from a male voice came out the rear of the wagon, surprisingly on the Illusionist side, about the size of Verdilan's bucket. It caused a general outburst of laughter, but it also eased the tension a little. Aetria let that one pass without retort.

"Given you have accepted my measure, which some of you haven't, then let us say a Sorcerer is two buckets' worth, an Adept is three buckets, and a Mage is four or more."

"Can you have half-buckets?" the same male voice asked. Aetria identified it now as Welendor, the other male Illusionist Novice. "Sorceress Aetria's flame was more than two buckets' worth."

"Novice Welendor, flattering your Sub-Commander may gain you favors from her, but loses favor with your peers," Aetria said to the guilty Illusionist.

"I beg the pardon of my fellow Novices if it looks like I am doing so, Sorceress. I just thought your flame was a lot more intense than the suggested level."

Aetria thought about her response for a moment, deciding truth held more value than putting junior officers into their place. "I have trained to the Adept level, Novice Welendor. When my mentor has decided I have shown proper control, she may advance me for candidacy. Grid burnout, as we will learn today, is an issue of control. Continue, Novice Verdilan."

The tall Healer had been watching Aetria, obviously wondering himself what her answer would be. She was a very powerful Sorceress.

"Yes, Ma'am. Now it is a known fact that it takes all levels of sorcerers about the same amount of time to charge their grids. This is a very interesting fact. It has led some Healers to the conclusion that the

higher levels of sorcerer have bigger grids. Tracilus, you have something to add?"

"Or, if everyone has the same size grid structure, higher levels can put higher amounts of Power into their grid," Tracilus offered.

Jalista waved her hand in confusion and said, "I can see bigger grid capacity for different levels, but I don't see pouring more water into a bucket than you can put a bucket's worth into."

Verdilan smiled, the first Aetria had seen on the serious young man in a long time. "In essence, yours is the very argument used for decades. But that begs several questions to be answered. If the Power resides in our bodies somewhere, does the size of the body affect the amount of stored Power? That would imply Magi should be physically bigger than Novices, but we know that is not true.

"Maybe the size of the Power bucket is fixed, and we Novices just don't fill our bucket full with our skill level, where a Mage can. However, if the bucket size is fixed, then at some point the Mage could not store any more Power. That point has never been reached. During the Sorcerer War, there were some abnormally powerful Magi. Their buckets must have been overflowing. Admittedly many of those Magi died violently. We believe the cause to be grid burnout, but can't prove it. So the concept of 'buckets' of Power has serious flaws."

"I have a feeling you are going to say Tracilus' supposition is correct," Jalista said. "Now if he could explain it better, maybe I could begin to see how you put more than a bucket of water into a bucket."

Tracilus joined in with the other Novices' laughter. When the commotion had died down to where he could be heard, he said, "Which weighs more, Jalista, a bucket of steam or a bucket of water?"

Jalista gave him a puzzled frown, "A bucket of water. I don't see your point."

"Isn't steam just water turned into a vapor?"

"Yes, according to our engineer 'friends.'"

"Well, suppose Novices fill their buckets with Power 'steam,' and Magi fill theirs with Power 'water.'"

The simplicity of the explanation stunned everyone. Even Aetria was impressed with the idea. Verdilan was impressed most of all. "Very clever, Tracilus. I must pass that on to Mage Kelristo. It works very well with what we think may be the cause of grid burnout."

"Well, fine, Verdi—now explain it to us!" Jalista said in exasperation.

"Sorry, you're right, I have not done well in providing an explanation. Remember I said it was very interesting that a Mage and a Novice, using the same source, take about the same amount of time to fully charge their grids. If we use the flawed bucket theory for a moment, a Novice puts in a bucket in a day; the Mage puts in four buckets in a day. Therefore, the Mage stores more Power in the same amount of time, so the Mage has a higher speed of transferring Power into the grid. Now there seems to be a very strong correlation between how fast you can put Power into the grid with how fast you can take it out.

"Think about our hand flames—the intensity of the flame, not the size. Sorceress Aetria's flame at the level she displayed was very intense, because she could draw a lot more Power out of her grid in the same amount of time as we do. She can also make her flame the same intensity as ours, so she can control the speed at which she pulls Power from the grid. That is a major difference between our skills as

Novices and the skills of our seniors."

"That and they can do a lot more spells than we can!" Recanlin said.

Aetria followed Recanlin's point with one of her own. "Novice Verdilan is right, my illuminated Novices. We all know that simple spells are simple because they are easy to conjure from Power. Complex spells are hard because they require you to control a lot more Power to make them work. If you can't control Power quickly, the spell fails or gets away from you. The meditation technique you will learn will increase your speed of transferring your Power into, and out of, your grids—therefore, a brighter flame. It will not allow you to do spells you couldn't do before, having not learned how to control them. You can only do spells you already know, just more intensely. In that lies the danger." Glancing at the Novice Healer, she said, "Now I see why you like Tracilus' example, Novice Verdilan. Please continue."

"Yes, please, Novice Verdilan," said Fernonia with a simper, but her eyes expressed the sarcasm almost missing from her voice.

Looking at Fernonia, Aetria certainly did not miss the Aggressor beauty's real intent. Fernonia always wanted to be the center of attention, and by placing Verdilan in that position, the sorceress had put him in conflict with Fernonia. Verdilan looked as if he wanted to drop off the back of the wagon and run away, but he continued.

"I think Sorceress Aetria's point is this. Taking Power 'steam' out of the grid occurs at the same speed as putting it in. If I take Power 'water' out, turning it into Power 'steam' in the process, then I can run into a serious problem. We all know even a very small amount of water makes a lot of steam. The speed at which water changes into water vapor is very slow under the condition we normally see it, like the dew on flower petals, or the water level in a cup slowly dropping. If you heat it up, it becomes steam. If you throw water into boiling hot oil, it still turns into steam, but quite violently. The difference is in the speed of transformation. If we can't control the transformation because it happens too fast, then you set yourself up for a grid burnout."

Looking around, Verdilan could see his fellow Novices understood the concept, but some were frowning. He continued, "All of us will be able to move Power in and out faster after using the techniques Sorceress Aetria will teach us. These are sound techniques. But the technique opens us to increased hazards, both in taking in Power and using it. There exists a danger of taking in Power too quickly. We call it source sickness. A source supplies Power constantly. We all know if we stand too close to a source, it affects our minds; it makes us act strangely.

"The cause is that the source can deliver Power to us at too high a speed if we stand too close, greater than we can accept. Now, Magi can stand a lot closer to a source than Novices can. By training we have been taught to know where our distance should be. We rarely get source sickness anymore. Our training should also protect us from delivering power too quickly. It appears to work that way at the training lodges.

"But the environment is different away from the lodges. Most of the cases of grid burnout that have occurred in the last few years are amongst Novice sorcerers who, although they have learned to control the level of their spells, may not have necessarily learned to control the intensity of them."

"That explains why the majority of the cases are within the Novice skill level, Verdilan, but not why Aggressors die," Belanar said to Verdilan. "You have my undivided attention on this question."

"And mine," Fernonia added. A chorus of affirmative noises arose from the left bench full of Aggressors.

"This area is not my strongest subject. Here is how I try to understand it," offered Verdilan. "We are not sure how we conjure spells exactly. We know we use our minds to envision the spell we want, then turn that vision into reality by infusing Power. What kind of path we follow from our minds to the grid is not defined at all.

"But think about someone sleeping and having a dream. That dream is real to the person asleep. What is interesting is that the person's senses are still sending information to the brain. A smell, or a noise, a change in temperature get into the dream, guiding it sometimes, changing it. The pathway the brain uses to communicate with the body's senses is always there, never asleep. Here's where my illustration gets a little murky."

"Murkier," Jalista chided him.

"As we build the spell in our minds, we are refining it by not only our imagination, but by our senses. Illusionists do this more than any other. They put in sound, color, and smell—they make the illusion come alive. This constant adjustment of the spell until it is cast, and during its release, has an unconscious part we don't really control.

"Since a path exists, and information is being exchanged, then as the spell is cast, Power comes back along that path. Under controlled conditions, we don't even sense it, except as a feeling of release. But if the spell is not under control, a too-rapid release of the spell sends a surge of Power back down the path, creating a Power backlash. Here is where the intensity of the spell comes into play."

Welendor broke in. "We were having better luck with buckets, Healer. I know my senses play into my spells. But I control that input."

"Yes and no, Welendor. In my example, the sleeping brain may be directing the dream, but the dream still responds to the real senses. Your dreaming brain has to change the dream to account for the sensing. If you are exposed to a cold draft, your skin feels that and tells your brain you are cold. The dream may not be of a cold environment, but your brain changes it so the cold makes sense. Am I making sense?"

"Not to me, but don't let me hold Tracilus back. He obviously has something intelligent to add," Welendor said, looking at his bench partner waving his hand to get Verdilan's attention.

"Not just the intensity, Verdilan, but also the speed of the intensity. How fast you are trying to change the speed of the Power transformation. Aggressors must change the Power to the most pure form of energy—fire and lightning, for example. They have to pull Power out quickly, and change it very quickly into a destructive spell. Illusionists must also change the speed of intensity to give maximum reality to their illusions; like having trees sway in a breeze instead of sitting there without moving, therefore making their existence not very believable in a storm. Provisioners and Healers don't need to change the speed of intensity that much, theirs is a slower process." Tracilus sat back, a smile of understanding on his face. His seatmates' expressions did not exactly mirror his, but some did appear to understand what he had just said.

"Very well stated, Tracilus," the Novice Healer said. "This is why we believe Aggressors and Illusionists have been the most affected. The backlash of Power down the unconscious path takes the form of the spell. For Aggressors, the results usually take the form of being hit by their own fireball or lightning bolt. For Illusionists, the effect seems to be an overriding of their mind's control and they pass out. Sometimes they go insane upon waking."

The Novices all looked at Aetria. She smiled. "I passed out. Fortunately for me, my spell caused the enemy to break and run, allowing our Guard to rescue me. As for insanity, you can be the judge of that."

Perhaps surprisingly, no Novice took the opportunity to direct a jibe at her. "Grid burnout is even more complicated than we have heard," Aetria continued. "One characteristic of burnout is the total draining of Power from the sorcerer. It is as if the Power were sucked out too rapidly. The spell generated is of much greater strength than possible under normal conditions. This leads us to conclude that the sorcerer lost control of the process. Would anyone besides Tracilus like to hazard a guess why control is lost?"

"Fear," Belanar's bass voice said. The suddenness of the response caused most of the hearers to jerk with reaction.

A few protests started, but died when Aetria said, "Correct. And anger, and despair, and elation, and any strong emotion you choose to say. We are trained in an environment that stresses the need for control, to evoke calmness, to center our minds on the spell. Our meditations are done to bring peace to our minds, to void ourselves of confusion and distraction. In battle, you have every form of distraction we are trying to avoid, both from the outside world and from within. When the war cries sound, your heart beats faster in response. You are intensely filled with whatever emotion is in you at the time. It could be excitement; it could be panic. You want to charge, or to flee.

"It is under these conditions you have to control a spell and make it work. Remember our saying, 'I am, therefore I spell.' Which are the calmest, most serene of our specialties? Jalista."

The young sorceress jumped once again at her name. Her answer was automatic. "Healers. Followed by Provisioners."

"And the most volatile, Fernonia?" Aetria cut in, looking at the beautiful Aggressor who wore a fierce smile on her face.

"Aggressors, of course," she said hotly, "and proud of it."

"My point is made." Aetria waved off Verdilan, who started to say something. "Control, control, control. You will be casting spells under conditions that try the strongest of warriors, and you have to get them right. As you strive to increase your intensity, know that your very existence works against you. Your emotions have much greater effect with your spell use on the battlefield than you could ever have possibly guessed. You will be under great stress, both physically and mentally. Aggressors and Illusionists are very susceptible because of the Power they have to quickly mold and wield. Be very careful, my Novices and think control, control, control."

Glancing around at the somber faces, she decided to stop the wagon for a rest break and give her people a chance to think about what they had just heard. She caught Lieutenant Nemos' attention with an arm wave and signaled the rest stop. As the wagons braked to a stop, the Novices quickly offloaded and stood around stretching, waiting while the Guard checked the immediate area for lurking enemies, before heading into the trees to take care of nature's call.

Aetria returned to the wagon train and walked to the second transport, thinking about having to face one more group of Novices. One more public exposure of her past failure to deal with. She would be facing a much more sympathetic crowd, and one not so attuned to the dangers of grid burnout, but putting her lack of control on display made her uncomfortable no matter who the audience was. As if to increase her own discomfiture, she began to worry about what would happen when the Recruit Company reached the army encampment.

"One thing at a time, Sorceress," she whispered.

* * * *

Listening to Verdilan's explanation a second time was difficult, as her mind tended to drift off the conversation and back onto her own problems. The other Healers, Kendor, Carleena, and Dolma, had joined in the lecture and made it more of a group discussion. She had made her point early and pulled back, but the Healers wanted to hear all of the details of her case. She distracted them by asking if they knew the particulars of the two Adept Healers who had suffered grid burnout.

Carleena said she had some knowledge of the case, as the mind was her area of healing interest. Aetria encouraged her to continue.

"The Adept Healer who continued on to become a Mage was our Mentor, Mage Kelristo. He and his associate, Adept Ulana, had just been advanced to Adept and they were both eager to widen their study of the 'unconscious paths' we have talked about. To do so, they set about trying to deliberately start a grid burnout, but get control of the backlash before it caused a total Power release. They believed that if they could do so, they would finally understand what it was and determine a way to prevent it.

"It was decided Ulana would induce the grid burnout, while Kelristo monitored her and traced the beginning backlash. Their rapport was particularly good because they were also lovers and were intensely into sharing. They were starting to make serious progress in their study. Alas, one day, Ulana was unable to induce a start, and growing impatient, tried too hard. She suffered a full grid burnout, knocking herself unconscious. Kelristo experienced the same backlash and was also knocked unconscious."

"Mage Kelristo is well known to us all," Novice Holendal said. "I would never have thought he had experienced a grid burnout. He is not in any way mentally deficient. In fact, after forty years, and as old as that would make him now, he is still the brightest star in all of Inhestia. Yet Sorceress Aetria said Ulana went insane. Why didn't he also go insane? And what happened to Adept Ulana, Sorceress?"

"I don't know why he didn't go insane, Holendal. Maybe Novice Carleena does?" Aetria looked at the young Healer.

Carleena glanced at her fellow Healers. Aetria had the impression Carleena was requesting, with her eyes, their permission to speak. Verdilan's slight nod confirmed her suspicion.

"We know Mage Kelristo did not release his Power, a true sign of a full grid burnout. If he had, Ulana and he would probably have been killed by his backlash—hers having knocked them both out and leaving their minds brutally open. Perhaps, in his monitoring trance, he only received a portion of the backlash and was spared the full effect that Ulana got.

"To answer your last question, Adept Ulana was locked away at Inhestia for several years. Mage Kelristo tried to help restore her mind, and she seemed to be healing, but somehow she started to blame Kelristo for the accident, and her love turned to hate. She became a different person. Mage Kelristo did not know just how different until she escaped her confinement. While locked away, Ulana befriended a young sorceress Aggressor trainee who was attending her, and through her, learned several spells a Healer would never attempt—killing spells, fire and lightning. When Ulana was ready to escape, she put the trainee into a healing trance and fled. The Guard was sent after her, and Ulana killed a dozen of them with fireballs when they caught up with her. By the time the survivors got back for help and set off again in pursuit, Ulana had escaped into the Hermanian mountains bordering our Lodge. She was never seen

again."

Aetria watched the faces of her Novices during the telling of Ulana's fate. The shock and horror brought back the memory of her own reaction when she had heard the story from Mage Kelristo. He had related it to her during their first therapy session upon her return to Inhestia after her grid burnout incident. She had already told her mentor, Trelana, about being able to sense stored Power and had been severely taken to task for what could be viewed as aberrant Power behavior. Aetria had convinced Trelana that the effect was fading with time, but she had lied, for fear she would be dismissed from the ranks of sorcerers. She was very careful not to let Mage Kelristo know. Having heard the story from his own lips, a participant in the tale, she now understood why the Council was so sensitive to changes in behavior of sufferers from grid burnout, and why she was being watched so carefully.

These thoughts always made her uneasy, but now there was an edge to that feeling. With a shock, she realized she was sensing a Power source. Aetria dropped into a light trance and concentrated on the presence of the source. It was faint, off to the west of the caravan. Opening her eyes, she glanced quickly at the Novices, trying to find any indication of their awareness of the source.

Seeing none, she whispered to Verdilan to continue on with the discussion without her and walked carefully to the back of the wagon. She timed her leap from the moving wagon so she kept her footing when she landed and waited for the command wagon to catch up to her. Climbing aboard, she announced her presence to Crusher and entered the cabin.

CHAPTER 4

"Are you certain, Sorceress? I sense nothing."

Aetria put as much confidence into her voice as she could. "Yes, Sir! There is an exposed source off to the west of the caravan, at least a day's march away."

The disbelief in Crusher's eyes sparked anger in Aetria's. She clenched her teeth with frustration as Pleates turned toward the west, closing his eyes to help his concentration. Aetria wanted to shake him as hard she could and scream at him for not believing her. Instead, she stood quietly in front of him with her arms crossed over her chest, and breathed deeply, letting her breath out slowly, making no sound to disturb Crusher's sensing. When his eyes snapped open, she made an involuntary jump, just stifling the squeak that tried to escape through her lips.

"I still sense nothing. But I respect your abilities, Sorceress. Order a turn to the west."

"Not to be disrespectful, Commander, but why head for trouble? We are less than five days from the army's bivouac. We don't know what the source represents, but if it is Hermanian, then we could be asking for trouble."

"Thank you for your counsel. Turn the caravan to the west."

"Yes, Sir."

* * * *

Riding just ahead of the command wagon, Aetria felt her anxiety grow by the minute as the caravan inched its way westward through the hilly, heavily brush-covered terrain. The dispersed copses of trees that had been their constant companion since leaving Inhestia were joining together into dense patches of

impenetrable woods. It felt as if the trees were beginning to close in on them, and she started worrying about the presence of enemy troops in the forest. To her magical senses, the source had gone from a faint trace of Power to an increasingly strong signal. Ever present in her mind was the fact they had now closed the source by several miles more than necessary if Crusher had respected her skills. Every minute was less distance between them and the source.

She restrained herself from turning in her saddle to look once again at her commander riding up front with the driver. She had looked back so many times in the last hour that all she got for her efforts was a scowl from Crusher. When he finally spoke, the rush of relief almost made her faint.

"Stop the caravan, Sorceress. Start preparations to encamp for the night, then report back here with Verdilan and Meloses. Ask the Guard Commander to come see me immediately."

Aetria turned to acknowledge his order and found herself staring at his driver, who glanced backward into the command wagon and tilted his head in that direction. She wheeled about and rode to the van of the column where Lieutenant Nemos sat waiting for her orders. When she had finished giving them to him, he galloped back to the command wagon, dismounted, and knocked loudly at the entrance door. He disappeared inside a moment later.

The Novices had been watching this encounter with interest from their transports. As she rode up to them, they clamored to know what was going on.

Aetria dismounted and tied her horse to the lead transport wagon's tailgate. "Another lesson of war, Novices. You'll be told what you need to know when you need to know it. Until then, we are setting up camp early today. Novice Verdilan, Sorcerer Meloses, come with me to the command wagon."

She started back toward the command wagon, repeating her instructions to the rearmost transport.

Sergeant Dramos, the senior Guard member remaining, rode over to get her orders for the Guard detachment. When preparations for camping were complete, Aetria continued towards the command wagon. Meloses began to ask her what was going on. She cut him off with a hand motion and said in a low voice, "Commander Pleates will explain his orders to us in just a few minutes. Let's not second guess him." They proceeded into the wagon and joined Lieutenant Nemos already there.

"Find a seat where you can. I plan to send Lieutenant Nemos to scout the source and report back. This will take about three days. My range of detection for a normal Sorcerer Corps issue source has historically been about a day and a half march. As the Guard can make faster time than a wagon train, they will need at most a day to reach the source, a day to reconnoiter around it, and a day to get back."

Crusher was very animated, in high spirits. He obviously was enjoying the prospect of some kind of action.

That thought greatly disturbed Aetria. "Sir, this close to our army, isn't it likely that the source is one of ours?"

"No, Sorceress, it is not. I did not order the movement of any of our Sorcerer Corps units before I left, and mine is the only Recruit Company reporting to the army for the next month. This is not one of our sources."

"If it isn't one of ours, Commander, then it is probably Hermanian," Aetria said, with a much stronger edge of concern in her voice than she wanted to project. "Exposing a source during the day usually indicates it is in an established encampment, protected by regular fighting men who are always alert to attack by enemy forces. I have all the respect in the world for Lieutenant Nemos' ability to scout an

enemy camp, but if he is discovered, it might evoke a return sortie against us. We are not an effective sorcerer unit possessing fighting skills yet, and with the exception of the Sorcerer Guard and the three of us, have no combat experience!"

Pleates just stared at her. She stared back, thinking how foolish of him it was to think they could defend themselves against an enemy force.

"I agree with your assessment that the company has no combat experience, Sorceress Aetria, but I disagree that we are without skill. Since departing Inhestia, I have been training the Aggressors with a new technique I have developed, and I think it will provide the force we need to protect ourselves. But it is not my intention to defend our company from attack. It is my intention to use our force to take that source!"

Crusher's voice projected the power of his position. Meloses and Verdilan looked thoroughly intimidated. Aetria found that she was not. She was angry. Perhaps the danger to her Novices was bringing out the fight in her.

"Sir! You can't really mean that. These are just kids. They need to be taken in by experienced sorcerers and slowly introduced to combat, not thrust into it before their training has been completed. The risk of grid burnout to the Aggressors alone is too great to allow this."

"I will be the judge of that risk, Sub-Commander. They are my Aggressors, as are the rest of the sorcerers, be they Illusionists, Healers, or Provisioners. They are mine to command now, and they will continue to be mine when they join the rest of the army. If they are untrained, you need only to look to yourself for that lack!"

"Commander, I know who is in charge here and am not contesting that. I also know the Novices' state of training, for which I am responsible. Knowing that state, I am going on record that I don't think they are ready to go into battle. That is your decision to make, Sir. I am only offering you my best estimate of their readiness. What I don't know is this new technique you have talked about. We are basing a lot of lives on something we have no knowledge of!"

Pleates smiled, a gesture all too out of place with what was occurring. "As you said, Aetria, you know who is in command. I have knowledge of the weapon, and I make the decisions. I also hear your concerns about my Novices' training and I tell you I think they are unwarranted. Any questions on my judgment?"

I have always questioned your judgment, you supercilious ass. Swallowing the bitterness of her sudden, intense hatred of the man, she answered. "No, Sir. However, I am concerned, Commander, that we are placing ourselves in danger for minimal gain. I think our best course of action is to proceed on to the army, report the source, and let them handle it."

"I acknowledge that recommendation, Aetria. And will go ahead with my projected plan. I don't think the Hermanians expect an attack from anyone, because if they did, why would they be so foolish as to expose a source at all in an area where they think they might be attacked? That is our advantage over them. They won't expect us."

Aetria bit her lip in frustration. "Why not let the army handle it, Sir?"

Crusher looked in exasperation at Lieutenant Nemos. "By the time we get to the army and they return, the source will be long gone. We are in a position to do something about it now. I will grant you this,

Sorceress, if the source is protected as you fear, and too strong for us, then we will do as you recommend. The only way to determine that is to go there and look."

She knew from experience that any further discussion with Crusher would prove futile. She only nodded her head in response.

"Good, then while we wait for Lieutenant Nemos' return, I have a list of preparations that need to be made. Please see to them, Sub-Commander."

He handed a list over to her and turned his back on them. She and the others had been dismissed without an explanation of how fifteen Sorcerer Guards, eight Aggressors, seven Illusionists, four Healers, and eleven Provisioners were going to attack a probable Hermanian sorcerers' encampment. She had to admit she was intrigued by how he was going to do that. As they filed silently out, Aetria turned to make one last request.

"I request permission to go with the lieutenant. I can find the source for them faster, and can judge their sorcerers' strength better. Sorcerer Meloses can supervise the preparations."

He turned back to look at her, his lips pursed with displeasure for a moment, and then he smiled at her, waving her off. "Permission denied. You would only hold back the scouts. Their mission is to reconnoiter the surrounding area, not spy on the encampment. They would feel bound to protect you while you were 'spying,' thus leaving them undermanned to do their real job. No, Aetria, carry out your assigned tasks and let me fight the battle."

* * * *

Aetria watched with concern as the Guard Commander and two of his men galloped off to the west in the direction of the unknown source. Their departure left her with a dozen Guards to protect the camp. If Nemos' probe brought a force down on them, she would need as much reaction time as she could get.

This was going to force her to position the Guard out as pickets and leave the Novices to guard the camp. To make matters worse, Crusher had ordered that all Aggressors be removed from the guard duty roster. He intended to increase their mysterious training. This left her with a Novice guard force having no offensive capability other than personal weapons.

She could have made up for that loss with Illusionist spells, but Crusher had denied her that also. He was concerned the expenditure of Power would be sensed, and if they tried to replenish the Power expended, that surely would be sensed. She had almost retorted that would not have been the case if they had stopped when she had sensed the source, but knew that would only make Crusher angry and spiteful.

She continued on her rounds in supervising the set-up of the camp.

She made her way over to the Provisioners' tents. Sorcerer Meloses saw her coming and snatched up a sample of the gray robes they had been working on at Pleates' request. He hurried over to her, moving with surprising speed for a man as overweight as he was.

"We have had to use dyes to darken the normal Novice gray to the Hermanian color. It would have been easier to spell new robes, but you know the Adept's orders. I am concerned we won't have all fifteen done by tomorrow. This is pure hands-on work, and I don't have enough hands! You know, Aetria, if you could spare me several of my Provisioners, I can ensure the robes will be done on time."

"Meloses, I have a total of eighteen Novices available to guard the camp, with half of them on watch at any time. Your Provisioners make up over half of my guard force. I can't spare them!"

The Sorcerer Provisioner looked crestfallen. "Commander Pleates is not going to be pleased when I tell him I'll need more time. The most I can hope for is that the Lieutenant and his men take longer than expected."

"Look, I can't release any more Provisioners, but I'll have Novice Verdilan assign several Healers to you. They have herbal skills and should be able to assist in the production of your dye baths. That should speed things up for you."

A look of pure relief flooded Meloses' ample face, and he impulsively hugged Aetria. "Oh, thank you Aetria, you have saved me!"

She bore his enthusiastic hug with a tired smile, then moved off, telling him she was going to arrange his Healer help now. He hurried back to his workers, exhorting them to higher efforts.

Aetria found the Novice Healers in their tent, holding a worried meeting. Upon her entrance, they all jumped to their feet, Verdilan moving forward to meet her.

"Sorceress Aetria, we were just going to come over to see you. Can we talk with you now?"

"Certainly, please be seated. I came to tell you to send two Healers over to Sorcerer Meloses to help with the dyeing of the robes. They can assist in gathering the berries he uses to make his dye. That can wait until we finish our conversation. What troubles you?"

When she had entered, the Healers had been sitting in a circle, heads together. Now, three of them had positioned themselves behind Verdilan, moving their chairs so one remained opposite the Novice Healer leader. It looked as if they were afraid she was going to take out her anger on them after they had told her their problem. She was really curious now to know what would elicit this behavior.

"We, umm, we were coming to talk with you because we..." Verdilan's hesitation to state what he wanted to so badly was cut through by Novice Carleena.

"Ma'am, we don't think we can take on the responsibility for any wounded people resulting from the fight that is about to occur."

Verdilan cast an angry scowl at Carleena, but that look was tinged with relief for getting the problem out. "I know that sounds wrong," he said to Aetria, "but what we are trying to say is we do not have the skills needed to heal severely wounded soldiers. Our training allows us to mend simple broken bones, cuts, fevers, and the like. We can attend to all manner of typical farm life health needs, including husbandry on most animals. Birthing babies we can do. Massive trauma is beyond us. Our role as Novices is to assist the Sorcerer and Adept healers, and to learn to do those intense healing spells.

"This ... this is beyond our skills."

The hurt in all of their eyes was, in itself, evidence enough that they felt deeply what Verdilan had painfully revealed. She was tempted to reflect her sympathy for their concern, but to do so might give them cause not to try. They were expecting a reprimand; giving them one would only justify their fears.

"You are the only Healers we have. You have no choice but to prepare yourself for the coming battle and do the best you can for the injured or dying. No more can be asked of you, but not caring for the wounded is also not expected of you. You can ease their pain, provide enough healing to keep them alive until we can get more highly trained help, and train others to assist you in these endeavors. The

responsibility for their care rests with all of us, not just you Healers.

"I can guarantee you will not be hauled before a Healer Tribunal because of a wrong healing decision on your part. But I can also guarantee you will face a trial by an army court for dereliction of duty if you don't try. Your choice, Novices."

"Sorceress, you misunderstood us," Novice Dolma stammered. "We could no more not care for ailing people than we could stop breathing. We are just afraid we will not meet the expectations of our soldiers and our friends."

"You can do what you can do. Any other problems I can solve for you?"

"One, and I don't know how, Sorceress," Verdilan said. "I know you told the Commander of the danger of grid burnout to Novices. But there couldn't be a worse time to put any of our people under pressure to perform. Please find a way to lessen this threat."

"We are not committed to a battle yet, Novice Verdilan. Perhaps your worries are for naught, but if a battle does come about, plans must be made, and I will do everything in my power to make sure the risks are minimized. Now, assign two healers to Sorcerer Meloses and continue your preparations. See you all at evening formation." Aetria left the four unhappy Healers and headed in the direction of her tent. As she approached it, she saw Recanlin standing by the door, waiting for her. He also was not a happy soldier.

Now what?

"I am reporting my availability for guard duty, Sub-Commander."

"The commander has exempted all Aggressors from guard duty. I have not been told otherwise."

Looking thoroughly rejected, Recanlin said in a morose voice, "The commander told me to report to you. My services are no longer required by him."

Aetria entered her tent, beckoning the young man to follow. She sat down by her table and pointed to the only other chair in the tent. He sat down on the edge of the chair, his back rigid, hands folded in his lap.

"Do you want to tell me what is going on, Novice Recanlin?"

"Commander Pleates ordered all of the Aggressors to meet him at the command wagon. When I reported in with the rest, he told us we were going to ride by horseback several hours back down our trail and continue our training in matters I am not allowed to relate."

"I assume that means he intends to use Power, hopefully at very low levels. So what happened?"

"He released us to get ready, and as I started to leave, he called me back and told me to report to you. I asked why, and he told me it was none of my business, just do what I was ordered."

Aetria felt sad for the young man. This was so typical of the abruptness that made Crusher such a poor leader. His penchant for secrecy in everything he did made working with, and for, him impossible. Being rejected was hard enough to bear, but not knowing why made it worse.

"I am sure his reasons for not needing you are sound, and he knows I need help in guarding the camp. Having an Aggressor available to provide an offensive punch is sorely needed. I will assign you to the

evening shift. You will be up all night, so you better get what rest you can now. You are excused from evening formation."

Being needed was a cure for being not wanted, but Recanlin's face did not mirror a change from his dejection. She made the decision to bring this up with Crusher, even though she would probably get the same answer he gave to Recanlin. "It's none of your business."

"Anything more, Novice?"

"No, Ma'am," he said, standing up to leave.

"Then get some rest. You are dismissed."

She watched him slump out of the tent, his head drooping, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"Yes, he is one unhappy soldier," Aetria said to herself.

* * * *

The expectation that the Guard commander and his men would be gone at least three days turned out to be correct. On the evening of their third day of absence, Aetria was notified the westernmost sentries had spotted Lieutenant Nemos and Sergeant Maneles riding hard for the camp. She signaled to the sentries to wave them into camp, and as she made her way to the command wagon, she had to step quickly out of the way as Lieutenant Nemos rode by at a gallop. Hauling back on the reins, he jumped from his horse after a dramatic, sliding stop behind the command wagon's back entrance. He bounded up the steps and disappeared through the door being held open by an impatient Adept Pleates.

Moments later she joined them inside. Nemos was just saying, "—enemy encampment, all right. From the number of supply and transport wagons, and by counting the number of tents, there are probably two companies of regular army infantry, no more than ten sorcerers. Highest ranking one I saw was a woman Aggressor, Sorcerer level. It's hard to tell since all Hermanian sorcerers wear dark gray robes, but her sash insignia wasn't gaudy enough to be anything higher than that. The rest of the sorcerers looked like Novice rank. In fact, I believe they are a recruit company like us. They are more heavily guarded, but that's only because Hermanians don't have a Sorcerer Guard force like we do."

Aetria felt Crusher's eyes on her as Lieutenant Nemos made his report. She made a strong effort not to display any emotion about what she had just heard.

"Not entirely correct, Lieutenant," Crusher said, shifting his eyes back to the lieutenant. "They have Assassin units normally assigned to them. What of them?"

"Sergeant Maneles and I left Trooper Garles behind to watch the camp as we scouted the surrounding area for several hours' ride away from the encampment. We did not find any other Hermanian troops, Assassin or otherwise. If they are using the sorcerers as bait for a trap, then they have sacrificed their bait since there are no support troops close enough to mount a counterattack."

"Excellent! Don't you agree, Sub-Commander?"

Careful, Aetria told herself. "Two companies of regular infantry is a pretty heavy escort force, Sir. They are more than a match for a dozen Sorcerer Guard."

Slapping the sweating lieutenant on the back, Crusher laughed. "Normally I would agree with you,

Aetria—not taking anything away from the lieutenant here. However, I think we have the edge with my weapon. Why, I think we could even handle more troops, if they have them."

Folding her arms across her chest, Aetria looked Crusher in the eyes, and spoke slowly, emphasizing each word. "At Kramornon, twenty Hermanian Sorcerer Aggressors wiped out a company of Delmathian infantry, then died under the lances of a squadron of cavalry. You would have six Novice Aggressors armed with untried weapons do better than the Hermanians?"

Crusher folded his tall body into his padded chair and put his hands behind his head, a smile spreading across his face. "Those untried weapons make six Novices look like five times that many Sorcerers, and they don't run out of Power as fast. This is the perfect opportunity to test my weapon. The source is there for the taking, and the honor and glory in doing so belongs to us."

"Sir, if your weapon fails for any reason, you will have lost whoever those fifteen robes are being made for, as well as the Sorcerer Guards. Even if your weapon works perfectly, it is more likely than not that those six Novices will fail. These are also untried kids. The Power only knows how many will die from grid burnout!" Looking down at Crusher, with that smirk on his face, Aetria wanted to throttle him—assuming Nemos didn't get to her before she could.

Using the same tone on her that she had on him, Crusher said, "I know these Novices, Sub-Commander. I have been training them for over a week. The amount of Power needed to initiate the weapon is hardly more than the Power required for the hand torches the Novices make for you every night. There is no risk here, Sorceress."

Aetria remained unconvinced. Her expression or posture must have relayed that to Crusher, as he stopped trying to change her mind. "Look, Aetria, I appreciate your concern for our welfare, but we are in the army, and the army takes advantage of every chance it can to take that fight to the enemy."

Crusher reached out his hand, beckoning for the map Nemos held. He unrolled it on the table in front of him, weighing down the corners with eating implements. Nemos used his knife as a pointer as he explained.

"This is a map of the encampment and the terrain around it. They are here in a clearing among dense brush. To their northeast and southeast are these hills. Not very tall, maybe fifty feet, but you can see their encampment very clearly from both of them. The brush is everywhere, really thick, but at most chest high, except on the tops of the hills where there are small clearings. Here to the east is where the brush ends and the forest takes over."

Drawing a line with his finger from the trees to the hills, Crusher asked, "How far is this?"

Nemos closed his eyes, the better to remember the scene he had scouted a day before. Opening them, he said, "The distance from the trees to the hills is maybe a hundred yards. From the hills to the edge of the encampment clearing, maybe twenty yards. The camp sits in a square open field about a hundred and fifty yards on a side. Must have been a small farm once. Remains of a house, here, on the western side of the square. A creek runs north and south behind the house. The road they were traveling up is on the other side of the creek from the house. They have left their wagons on the road.

"It appears they had been there for a week or more before we showed up, and it doesn't look like they are moving any time soon. They may be waiting for another caravan to join up with them. They have sentries up the road to the north at two to three times the normal distance of their other sentries."

"And the source—where is it?" Crusher asked, staring at the map.

"I think in the house. That is where the sorcerers go every evening. They covered the roof with a tent, so I could not see into the house. These tents here next to the house are the sorcerers. The troop tents are these to the north, east, and south of the house."

"What is your assessment of their security force?" Crusher asked the Lieutenant, still staring at the map.
"Alert or not? Veteran or recruits?"

"They have no cavalry; only the officers are mounted. From the foot patrol activity we saw, they look professional but relaxed. Their sentries are alert and are frequently changed to keep them from becoming bored. The soldiers spend a lot of their time taking care of their equipment and resting. About half of them have uniforms and weapons that look very new, so overall I'd say they are fresh troops run by veterans. Having that many new people makes me think these are two infantry companies that have been in a battle recently, were beat up, and have been refitted and rewarded with this guard detail."

Aetria had seen Crusher stare intensely at a map before. It wasn't a fascination with the map; he was making a plan in his mind. He was definitely going to make an attack on that encampment.

Crusher looked up at Nemos. "So, if we take out the leaders, the troops might break and run if we hit them hard enough. Do we agree, Lieutenant?"

"That is a possibility, Sir."

Crusher pointed at the northernmost hill with his finger. "I will position three Aggressor Novices and myself here. On this southern hill, the three other Aggressors will be with Lieutenant Nemos. We will attack the camp with fireballs, going after the officers first. Sorceress Aetria will position herself and the Illusionists here on the eastern edge of the clearing, between the two hills. Novice Recanlin will go with them and attack the eastern tents with fireballs.

"The Illusionists will magnify the effects of his fireballs and also magically increase the apparent numbers of the mounted Guard Platoon led by Sergeant Maneles as they charge in from Aetria's position."

Crusher pointed to the house. "Your guard's objective, Lieutenant, is to get to the house, take the source, and come back out the way they entered. We will cover you. As they try to form up, we will continue to take out their leaders. Eventually they will lose heart and run. Simple, but effective. What do you think, Aetria?"

She studied the map for a moment, pretending to be thinking over the plan, but really to keep from saying what a bad idea it all was. It was a simple plan, but executing it was going to be difficult because Crusher had placed his leadership all wrong. If she couldn't stop it, she could at least make it executable.

"As I have said, the Aggressor Novices need all the leadership they can take. Splitting them up leaves half without sorcerer supervision. I suggest you keep all but two of them on the northern hill. This serves two purposes; the first is that you can more closely watch them and prevent burnouts, and the second is you can direct their fire more effectively.

"If Lieutenant Nemos and you are directing fire from separate hills, you risk attacking the same targets. Also, Lieutenant Nemos needs to be with his men as they charge. Once they reach the tent line, they will be out of our sight. If the plan goes awry, Lieutenant Nemos can salvage something out of it if he is there to evaluate the situation. Recanlin, plus another Aggressor, the Illusionists, and I will take the southern hill.

With two Illusionists working with the Aggressors, they can throw minimal fireballs at a higher rate of fire and still look like an impressive force.

"Our fireballs will be mixed in with yours, so it will be hard not to believe they're the real things. The remaining Illusionists will spell support Lieutenant Nemos and his men. From the hill, they will be able to support the Guard all the way in because they will be able to see them the whole time."

The expression on Nemos' face showed how much he preferred her plan to Crusher's. He did not want to be left out of the fight. Crusher's expression was not so positive, but he was nodding ever so slowly.

"I agree, except you may only have Recanlin. Your point about directing fire is well taken and obviates splitting the firepower. Now, we will take our transport as far as we can go before going afoot. Lieutenant, about how far will we have to march to get there?"

"The forest line on our side starts about four hours from here. To get through the trees will take another six. When do we make our attack, Sir?"

"That depends on how well you can guide us through the trees. Can you do that at night?"

Aetria knew that answer before Nemos said it.

"The Sorcerer Guard live for the night, Sir," the lieutenant proudly stated.

"Then we attack at dawn. Our return path will be the same as our entry. We must be very quick to leave the scene once we have the source. The sorcerers will be on foot, so the mounted Guard must delay any pursuit, then follow on horseback. We will break camp at dawn tomorrow. I will hold a briefing before we start our march in. If you think of any other details, I will be here firming up the plan. Good night."

The lieutenant quickly marched out the door. Aetria remained standing in front of Crusher. He looked up at her. "Something else on your mind, Sorceress?"

"I know this is none of my business, but why was Novice Recanlin rejected from your new weapon's training? The young man is thoroughly discouraged and unhappy."

Looking back down at the map, Crusher started making notes on the margin. Aetria wondered how long she would have to stand there before he answered. Without looking up, Crusher said, "You are right, it is none of your business. But since he is now assigned to you, you inherit the problem. The young man is unmotivated, passive, and unreliable. His attention span is short, and he lacks the killing spirit. I cannot have such a person controlling my weapon. When we reach the regiment, he will be assigned to special training to get him motivated to follow his profession. Until then, he is yours to do with as you see fit. You are dismissed."

Aetria walked stiffly through the door, thinking he had been unusually civil with her, and she should be happy. She wasn't.

CHAPTER 5

Walking stooped over, Aetria used the cover of the chest-high brush to move her squad of Novices up the small hill. She was unconcerned about discovery by Hermanian guards, as Lieutenant Nemos and his men had already taken them out. She had been very impressed with the speed and skill she had seen

displayed by their Guard, moving through the Hermanian guard pickets with fluid ease, leaving death in their wake.

Nearing the crest of the hill, she hitched up both sets of robes she was wearing—the dark gray Hermanian robe over her red Sorceress robe—and dropped to her knees, crawling out of the brush toward the summit, keeping as low as she could. She was soon able to see over the hill and spotted the Hermanian camp ahead and off to her right. Crusher and his Aggressors should be in position on the small hill to her immediate right. She could see the hill, but not them. Assuming they were there, Crusher's plan was now in place. Their two Sorcerer groups now flanked the Hermanian camp. The Guard assault force, mounted on horses in the trees behind and to her right, was poised for a frontal assault.

Aetria did a quick visual check of the camp below her. The sun was still down behind the trees to her back but was reflecting its light into the camp, making the clearing visible. Troops were moving about slowly, most gathering around the kitchen tents to get their ration of the morning meal. The ground beneath her was cold from the chill of the night, and she looked down at the plethora of tiny wild flowers that covered the hill.

What a shame! Here I am in such a beautiful spot on a gorgeous day to kill people I don't even know or understand why.

Her stomach growled a little from the fragrant smells wafting from the Hermanian cook-fires. She turned and motioned Recanlin to join her.

After he had crawled up beside her, she spoke to him in a low voice. "Now, remember, keep your fireballs small and spell them at about one per thirty seconds. We are a diversion, not the main assault. Jalista and I will duplicate you to make us look like a larger force, but this will only work initially because of its shock value. After a few moments, the Hermanians will notice all the Aggressors in our group move and spell together. We will also enhance your fireball's effects, but unfortunately, we can only make it look worse than it actually is."

The excitement in his eyes was evident. Recanlin was keyed up, ready for his first fight. "Mere puffs of flame. I understand, Sorceress."

"Fine, now take some slow, deep breaths and calm down. You must exercise a lot of control, Novice. Don't lose control and burn out. It is fatal for Aggressors!"

"Yes, Ma'am. Please stop fretting, Sub-Commander. I won't let the company down."

"Fretting? I am speaking from experience, Recanlin. You may be well taught, but I am sure your teachers have never stood on the battle line and faced the rush of emotions you are about to feel. You know how to control—just don't forget it in the heat of battle."

Movement on the hill to her right drew her attention away from Recanlin. Crusher and his Aggressors, also dressed in Hermanian robes, had stood up. He raised his staff in the signal for attack. Aetria sprang to her feet and ordered the Illusionist to her side. Recanlin stood slowly, dropping into concentration in preparation for casting.

"It begins now, Novices. For the Order and the king!"

* * * *

The guard silently rode out of the trees and moved as quickly as they could force their horses through the

brush toward the camp. Tracilus and the other three Illusionists supporting them doubled their numbers. When the Guard's line broke out of the brush, they spurred their horses into a charge, raising a chilling war cry. The Hermanian troops sitting around the morning cook fires jumped up, dropped their plates, and rushed to grab their spears stacked nearby.

Crusher pointed his staff at the milling mass of soldiers, and the Aggressors followed his direction. The fireballs that shot forth from their staffs slammed into the men and dozens fell screaming to the ground, their bodies aflame from the intense heat of the fireballs.

Aetria was shocked by the destruction. She now knew why Recanlin was so horrified by the mysterious staffs. The Hermanian troops wavered, many falling back in fear. Recanlin's first fireball shot forth toward their right flank, and Aetria lost track of the battle for a few moments as she directed an enhancement spell. His fireball exploded amongst the panicking men, killing no one but adding greatly to the confusion of the battle. The Hermanian officers frantically urged their troops into formation, and it cost the officers their lives when Crusher's fireball fell upon them. Lieutenant Nemos' platoon was halfway across the clearing when the second company of Hermanians rushed onto the scene. With their fellow troopers at their backs, the first company gained courage and surged back toward the oncoming Guards.

Aetria ordered Recanlin to slow down his firing rate. He was sweating profusely, and his eyes were shockingly wide open. Whether it was from fear or horror of his actions, or excitement she didn't know. She returned her attention to the battle. In her direct vision she saw a platoon of Hermanians, apparently part of their rear reserve troops, rush towards their hill.

"That's it," she yelled to her troops. She ordered Tracilus and his Illusionists to cast their final spell—creating an imaginary Guard platoon that stood up from the brush at the base of their hill and charged at the oncoming reserve. When they had done so, she told him to retreat down the hill and withdraw to the assembly area.

Aetria looked back at the real Guard as they closed on the Hermanians, and from the corner of her eyes, she caught the brilliant flash of an explosion amongst the Aggressors. Three more explosions quickly followed, and the Aggressors holding the exploding staffs were vaporized. In a blink of an eye, four Aggressor Novices had died horribly. The remaining two were slowly picking themselves up, badly shaken by the nearby blasts. Crusher hand waved them to retreat behind him. He signaled to his bugler to sound recall, ordering Lieutenant Nemos to break off the attack.

The Hermanians sensed victory. They mounted a countercharge after the retreating guard. Crusher spelled a huge fireball, nearly depleting his Adept level Power. It met the main body of the Hermanians and they gave up pursuit, no longer sure of what they were facing.

Appalled by the turn of events, Aetria suddenly became conscious of Novice Recanlin's warning shout. She turned quickly to find the Hermanian reserve, encouraged by the reversals of the battle, charging up the hill towards them. The imaginary Guard had had no effect on them at all. She shouted for him to flee and started a thick smoke spell in her mind to cover their retreat. Before she could deliver it, a huge fireball exploded amongst the reserve, halting their charge. She lost her spell thought and turned in horror to look at the source of the blast—Recanlin, now lying flat on his back.

Aetria rushed over to Recanlin, her heart sinking with the image her eyes were feeding her mind. She knelt next to the fallen Novice and felt gently for a pulse she knew was not there. Recanlin's forehead was gone. The back-blast of the grid burnout had exploded in his mind and exited in the direction his fireball had been sent.

"Oh, Recanlin, how foolish and brave."

Behind her, the hiss of a sword being drawn from its scabbard made her turn quickly. Lieutenant Nemos stood several paces away, his eyes fixed on her. He beckoned with the sword, motioning her to move towards him. As she stood to comply, she was startled by a cry from behind her.

"Coleni, brachda dias!"

She dove to her right, and dropped with a roll, jumping to her feet. The dagger blurred from her hand.

The crash of a lightning bolt roaring past her almost spoiled her aim, but the deadly missile slammed into the chest of the Hermanian Novice Aggressor, killing him instantly. Aetria whirled to look at Nemos, shocked to see the man down on his knees, his head lowered to the ground. His attempt to jump clear of the bolt had not completely succeeded. She rushed to him.

"Can you walk, Lieutenant? The Hermanian reserve is attacking."

Nemos shook his head, trying to clear his mind. He looked up at Aetria and swept her feet out from under her with a kick. She crashed to the ground in front of him. He picked up his sword, and stood up.

"Kill you!"

Aetria gasped out, "No! Nemos, it's me, Aetria!"

The Guard Commander stepped over her and raised his sword. Aetria watched in disbelief. *How stupid for Crusher to insist they wear Hermanian robes!* Was she to die, mistaken for a Hermanian sorcerer?

"Kill you!" he croaked and stabbed downward. She rolled to her left, barely evading the sword's point that rammed into the dirt beside her. As he jerked the sword back, preparing to swing at her instead of stabbing, she heard the hiss of an arrow fly past her head and watched it blossom from Nemos' throat. As she rolled more to her left, down the hill, she caught glimpses of a score more shafts bouncing off his leather armor, but many burying themselves in his exposed flesh. As he turned to face the Hermanian squad of soldiers rushing him, he looked like a practice target doll, festooned with arrows. He staggered towards the soldiers. Aetria turned and fled into the brush.

As she ran, Aetria ripped her dark gray Hermanian robe off. She thanked the Power she had had the forethought to order her group of Novices to wear their actual robes underneath the Hermanian disguise. The red of her robes did not blend well in the darker greens of the woods, but she preferred the risk of being seen over that of dying by mistaken identity, as she had just narrowly avoided doing.

Aetria paused her flight for a moment, listening to the sounds of the forest. She did not hear anything behind her. Either the Hermanians had given up the chase, or they were as skilled as the Sorcerer Guard was. From in front of her, she heard twigs snapping and muffled curses—some female. She moved cautiously in that direction. In a few minutes, she found the remnants of her Novices. Her appearance in the midst of the Novices brought yells of joy and shrieks of fear.

"Power, Sorceress, you scared the life out of me!"

"Jalista, and the rest of you, keep your voices down! I could hear you a hundred paces away. Now, calm down. I don't think our pursuers are that close, but you can be sure they are after us."

Tracilus looked back down their trail which was fairly obvious despite their efforts to avoid leaving one. He came over to Aetria and put his arm on hers, tugging her away from the others for a moment. "I can't tell you how much your return means to me, Sorceress. I'm afraid an ordered retreat turned into a rout, despite my leadership. Thank the Power you are back."

Aetria put her arms on his shoulders and gave him a little shake. "You did fine, Tracilus. You kept them together and moving away from the enemy. If it had been a rout, my Illusionists would be scattered in all directions and probably captured or killed by now."

Turning back to the rest of the Novices who now stood quietly as ordered, watching the two of them, Aetria issued orders. "Take off the Hermanian robes. Quickly! Hide them as best you can in the bushes. When we run into the Guard pickets securing the return path to the Company, I don't want us killed, mistaken for the enemy."

The Novices did as bade, grateful to be doing something other than fleeing, glad to be under orders again.

"Sorceress Aetria," Jalista asked in a subdued voice, "Novice Recanlin, is he—"

"Dead? Yes. He gave his life throwing that fireball, and thus saved ours. Honor his memory, Novices, and the memories of the other Aggressors who died. Inhestia has paid dearly today."

Aetria did not speak her next thought. Her heart ached for the loss of so many young sorcerers—and for what purpose? Crusher's vaunted weapon was flawed. Before they exploded, he may have been proving they could work, but something must have gone wrong. What had he gained from their losses? No enemy source. No victory to claim over the enemy. Nothing to give back to the Order, or the army, for the lives lost.

"All ready to go? Good. Does anyone know which way to go?"

The Novices looked sheepishly at each other. They had been fleeing away from the enemy, but not necessarily towards anything. Aetria was glad they had instinctively fled in the right direction.

"Poor assumption on my part, Novices. I thought you knew you were going in the right direction. Next time you go into battle, pay attention to the way in. As you have learned today, you may have to go out in a hurry. Follow me, and try not to make so much noise."

* * * *

Sliding down an embankment, Aetria and her Novices burst through a hedge and abruptly came face to face with a squad of four Sorcerer Guard, arrows notched into bow strings and pointed at the sorcerers. Aetria called out the password to the squad's leader. "Inhestia, Sergeant."

The sergeant's response was to pull back his arrow and aim at Aetria's heart. His men followed his lead. "Inhestia, Sergeant Maneles. It's me, Sorceress Aetria!"

Aetria felt completely helpless for the second time that day. There was no possibility of spelling them out of danger. She would be dead before she could toss a spell. She awaited the arrow, knowing that even with her Tierian Thief training, she might dodge it, but would die by the sword that followed. Sergeant Maneles slowly lowered his bow, gently releasing the tension on the bowstring. Aetria's tension seemed to flow out of her body at the same speed the feathers of the arrow approached the handgrip of the bow. Her knees wanted to buckle, and she tightened her muscles to keep herself from collapsing in front of the

Guard.

"Any pursuit, Sub-Commander?"

"None that I can detect, Sergeant."

"Guard Beltes, you and Garles remain to make sure. We will leave the horses for you to follow us and will proceed to the wagons on foot." Sergeant Maneles gestured for the sorcerers to follow the point Guard, who was moving off quickly towards the east. The sergeant moved up beside Aetria, touching her arm and slowing his pace so the others moved ahead. In a low, quiet voice he spoke to her.

"I was told the Hermanians would attempt to penetrate our rear guard by impersonating you and the Novices. I was also told to expect they would know the password, as it was very likely you had been captured and tortured to reveal it. My orders were to shoot first."

Shaken, Aetria almost stopped to stare at the sergeant, but his urging hand on her elbow kept her moving. "So, why didn't you, Sergeant?"

Maneles had been scanning the area continuously as they walked. He fixed his eyes on her face for a moment, a slight smile on his face. "Three reasons, Sorceress. The first is that I was told you would be in Hermanian robes. The fact you weren't stopped me for a second. How would the Hermanians know to get Delmathian uniforms and clothe their impostors with them? The second is that you knew my name. That is a piece of information the Hermanians would probably not try to torture out of you. Who would think to ask for the name of a rear guard leader? Lastly, Novice Jalista is from my village and was unconsciously making our warding gesture. I could not make myself kill you—despite my orders. You had to be our sorcerers."

"I am most glad you went against your orders, Sergeant. Who gave you those orders?"

"Adept Pleates, Ma'am."

Aetria did stop this time. The sergeant stopped beside her, his anxiety building with the delay. "When did he give you these orders, Sergeant?"

Maneles paused in his scanning and looked directly at her. "As he and the surviving Aggressors passed through my squad. The commander was riding Lieutenant Nemos' horse. He told me he had sent Lieutenant Nemos after you, and if the lieutenant was not with your squad when you showed up, then I was to kill all. He took two of our horses for the wounded Novices, and they rode off for the wagons."

"Lieutenant Nemos died defending me from an attacking Hermanian force. That leaves you in charge of the Guard, Sergeant."

His face momentarily showed his dismay at hearing the news. He quickly regained his composure. "Perhaps not for long, Ma'am, when the commander sees I have disobeyed his orders. I am sorry to hear about the lieutenant, Ma'am. He was one of the best commanders I have ever had."

They started after the others who had moved on out of sight.

Dreading the answer, Aetria managed to ask the sergeant in a calm voice, "Who were the Novices that Commander Pleates had with him?"

The sergeant pressed her to walk faster. "The commander said Novices Grivel, Idona, Moldos, and Elina had died under the counter assault by the Hermanian sorcerers. Novices Fernonia and Belanar were burned, but able to move on their own. They looked badly shaken. It must have been a terrible bombardment they took."

Aetria's heart sank. She thought about never seeing Elina's graceful dance again and mourned the loss. Five Aggressors dead—and for what? And what was this counterattack by the Hermanian sorcerers? The only one she had seen was dead with her knife in his heart.

"It was terrible, Sergeant. Do not worry about being replaced. I will ensure Commander Pleates does not punish you or your men for disobeying those orders. His caution was well taken, for we certainly were wearing Hermanian robes earlier, and spells of imitation are well within any Illusionist's skills. I can only thank the Power for Novice Jalista's country girl beliefs."

"Yes, who could know when one's belief can save a life, Sorceress?"

The two quickened their pace to catch up with the rest of the party.

* * * *

The Guards Beltes and Garles rode up behind Aetria and her squad at almost the same time they reached the assembly point. The point Guard, Prostosi, had alerted the four-man squad of Guards left behind at the clearing of their coming, and they were already on horses when the footsore Illusionists left the trees. Aetria looked around and saw only the tracks of their wagons leading away from the edge of the forest. Crusher had left the horses he had borrowed behind. He must have decided that, if the Illusionists did make it back to the assembly area, they would have to ride double with their escort. At least she gave him credit for that thought.

As the Novices were assisted up behind the Guards, she asked what Beltes and Garles had seen.

Garles looked at Beltes, who motioned with his head to tell his fellow Guard to make the report. "No movement of any kind in our direction, Sub-Commander. If I had been the enemy, I would be swarming all over us by now. We even rode to the edge of the trees near the hills. We could see movement on the top of the hills' clearings—looked like sorcerers, but we did not try to get any closer. Only movement we saw in the encampment was striking of tents. I bet the commander's last fireball convinced them we were too powerful."

"We still should leave here as soon as we can, Sorceress," Sergeant Maneles urged. He had brought over Lieutenant Nemos' horse as the two Guards were briefing her. "We should catch the wagons in a couple of hours, even riding double. Can't say I am sorry about the lack of pursuit, but I still think it is very odd there isn't any. Maybe Garles is correct."

After she had mounted, he signaled with his arm, sending the Guard moving away from the assembly area at a trot. The Novice Illusionists hung on as best they could.

* * * *

The arrival of the Illusionists at the wagon caravan was heralded by the rear Guard element as the nine mounts of the riders cantered into sight. Pleates must have been so concerned about a counterattack that he refused to stop the wagons until Aetria rode up alongside his command wagon and yelled to him that there was no pursuit. As the wagons braked to a stop, the Novices poured out of their transport and rushed to meet their Illusionist brethren. Their reunion was much more emotional than the public one between Aetria and Crusher. He pointed into his command wagon with a jerk of his head and

disappeared into its interior. Aetria rode to the back of the command wagon and dismounted. She took a moment to smooth her robe, collecting her thoughts before walking up the rear steps of the wagon. She didn't bother to announce her presence.

He slouched back in his chair, his eyes fixed on her as soon as she entered. His face was blank, devoid of any expression. If he had any welcome for her, it didn't show.

"Lieutenant Nemos was not among your group."

"No, Sir. He is dead—killed while I made my escape from the hill. He took a lightning bolt from an enemy Aggressor, and while able to get to his feet, was badly disoriented. I attempted to help him flee, but he mistook me for a Hermanian and attacked me. Before he could shake off the confusion, he was hit multiple times by arrows. As I escaped, I saw him turn to face an oncoming squad of infantry. I assumed he was killed by them, if he wasn't dead already from the arrows." Her report of Nemos' death elicited only a frown from Crusher.

"I sent him to get you and the Novices back safely. That was his mission. The fact you did so without his help does not override his failure in that mission. How did you make it through the Guards without his presence? I know I ordered them to kill anyone following us who was not escorted by Nemos. His appearance could have been imitated as well, but the Guards have silent recognition signals only they know and would never divulge under torture."

The lack of compassion for his lieutenant's death, and any concern for possibly causing theirs, did not surprise Aetria at all. She felt only disgust that his main concern was the disobedience of his orders by the rear Guard. But she had foreseen that.

"Ironically, there are other signals Sergeant Maneles understood. Novice Jalista unconsciously made warding signs as she faced the Guard's arrow, and he recognized them. Only a fellow villager would have. Otherwise, we all would have been killed. Your caution is understandable, Sir, but it could have cost you seven more lives."

"We will discuss that topic later, Sub-Commander. This is not the time or the place. Get your company back into their transport and the Guard organized to protect us from the rear. Just because you don't think there is any pursuit does not mean there won't be. We will drive through the night to get as far as possible away from the Hermanians. After that, I will determine whether we need to take further precautions."

Aetria turned to leave. Crusher stopped her before she had a chance.

"And Sub-Commander, I do not want you to talk to anyone, including the staff and Novices, about the new weapons or the battle. This is a forbidden topic of conversation until I release you to speak of it. Understood?"

"Yes, Sir." Aetria left the command wagon.

* * * *

Crusher's plan for the evening did not come about. They had just reached the original road they had been traveling north on, when one of the forward pickets rode back to inform Aetria that a squadron of Delmathian cavalry was coming down the road towards them. She had him report the same to Crusher, while she rode forward to meet them. As they came into sight, she could see the red robe of a Sorcerer beside their commander. As they came closer, she could see it was a woman, Halista, her former

Company commander.

The shock of seeing a friendly face almost made Aetria cry in relief. She settled for a frantic arm wave of recognition and rode at a gallop to greet her. The squadron commander, a wide grin on his face, halted his troops while the two women dismounted and rushed to hug each other. As the lead transport reached their position, the commander sighted Pleates in the aft-most command wagon and rode to meet him.

The arrival of a full squadron of cavalry changed Crusher's mind about riding through the night. The commander of the squadron, Gantnos, offered to escort the wagons north until they had reached the squadron's base. From there to the army's encampment was another two days.

The squadron even escorted the wagons north for several more miles until they reached a crossroads with a large field beside it. Aetria asked the handsome cavalry commander where the road led, as it appeared to head into Hermania. He told her it did indeed, but was no longer traveled because of the war. Aetria thanked him and ordered Sergeant Maneles to secure the area while she set in motion the now-normal routine of camping for the night.

* * * *

"You're pregnant!"

"Aetria, you make it sound like I have a disease."

"But, but—"

"But why am I still in the army? The Corps desperately needs sorcerers. I cannot use the Power, but I can still command those who can."

Aetria ushered Halista over to one of the two chairs in her tent and all but pushed the older woman into it. She was looking around for a cushion to put behind her when Halista waved her away and told her to sit down herself. Aetria poured two wines and brought one over to her friend before sitting down as ordered. Aetria had canceled all evening classes and study to give the tired and battle-shocked Novices a longer night's rest. She was spending the precious time with Halista, her first and only commander, and friend.

"You answered a question I was going to ask, Halista, but not the one I was trying to. Let me try again. Who is your life-mate, and when did you make the decision?"

Halista laughed heartily; she always had had a happy disposition. "Why, excuse me, Sorceress Aetria. I assumed you were still the serious professional who saw all things in relation to the army. I didn't think you would focus on such minor matters as life-mates. But since you asked, he is Commander Gantnos—you know the grinning fool I was riding with. Such a wonderful man, and so easily led. Don't tell his men that!"

Aetria sipped her wine and felt more relaxed than she could remember. The things she missed most were pleasant conversations with caring people.

"He is very handsome, and young to be a commander. How did you meet him? We weren't allowed to associate with the real troops when I last served under your command."

"That was the old days. My, you have been out of touch, Aetria. Right after you left, the sorcerer companies were broken up into smaller support units. Each support group was assigned to an infantry

regiment. The idea was to provide the regiments with a cadre of Aggressors, Illusionists, Provisioners, and Healers still under sorcerer command, that would respond to the needs of the regiment in their area of the battle. Rushing companies of sorcerers back and forth to meet threats was proving to be too hard.

"I was assigned to the 5th Support Company as its commander. The regiment I supported, the Albetlor Loyals, named after the Gem Guildtown that raised the regiment, was the same one Gantnos' cavalry squadron belonged to. After three years of fighting side by side, and with each other, we decided to combine our efforts and took the vow."

Aetria was astounded by the news. "You mean we are under the command of non-sorcerers and subject to their whims? You live with non-sorcerers in their units?"

Shaking her head, Halista wagged a finger at Aetria. "You were not listening, Sorceress. I said we were still under sorcerer command. The commander of the support company advises the regimental commander on all things magical and participates in planning the defense and offense of the regiment. We are still bound to take orders from the sorcerer regiment in the event the Hermanians try a concentrated attack by sorcerers which they haven't yet.

"The regimental commander, Adept Pleates, still reviews all plans concerning sorcerers and approves them, but he has left the daily offices of Healer, Provisioner, and Illusionist pretty much alone. He has an iron hand on the Aggressors, though. That is his true power base, and we all know that. And no, we don't live with the units we support. We still are encamped by ourselves because it is a lot easier to protect one group of sorcerers than it is over ten companies."

"I am glad I learned this now, so I can re-educate the Novices. What brought about the change?"

"After the Saphradean campaign, the regimental commanders began to agitate for more control of the entire battle. One in particular, Alenso Mythrian, held a lot of sway in the war councils."

"You mean *the* General Mythrian?"

"Yes. He became a force to consider four years ago, and of course, now he is the commanding general."

"Doesn't sound like he likes the sorcerer regiment if he is trying to break it apart."

Halista thought about her response for a moment. "No, I don't think that is what he is trying to do. It strikes me that he is not comfortable with the way spell warfare is fought and is trying to figure out a better way to do it. He and Adept Pleates are in constant opposition to each other over that issue. Otherwise, he leaves us alone and takes our counsel, albeit reluctantly."

"Which doesn't explain why you are sitting in my tent, pregnant, with a life-mate who is probably anxiously awaiting your return to his tent."

"Oh, you are so right about anxious. He is more of a worrier than you are, Aetria, and that is saying a lot. Well, the reason I am here is two months ago I conceived. This was perfect timing on my part as Gantnos' unit was posted to the border for guard duty. I was transferred out of the 5th to the 10th Support Company, which takes care of all the army units protecting the Delmathian western border with Hermania. Ours is one of the few units not encamped with the Sorcerer Regiment. We are billeted in a fortress on the border about a day's march north of here."

"Along with Gantnos."

"Yes, very cozy. Anyway, a week ago I detected source use on the Hermanian side of the border, south of our position. I sent word to the regiment who gave orders to keep track of it, but do nothing. They would send out a patrol to investigate. Gantnos doubled his patrols, but as the source was in Hermania, we were not about to cross the border and upset the balance of things. Our armies are fighting the war; we don't need to worry the populace with raids. That's a joke, Aetria."

"Sorry I didn't laugh; it makes too much sense to me."

Halista sighed. "One of my earliest concerns for you was that you were too serious for one so young.

You need to laugh more, Aetria. But we will talk about changing you later. Two days ago, another cavalry squadron arrived and relieved the 9th of garrison duty. We intended to ride south this morning to ensure nothing was happening on our side of the border. Around morning meal, I detected a lot of Power use. We immediately saddled up and started south. And found you, the cause of the commotion. Care to tell me about it?"

"I can't. Crusher has me under a vow of silence until we reach the army." Aetria got up and began pacing.

"Still pacing when you worry, I see. You must be under a lot of tension, my girl. If it has something to do with what happened back there, then I understand. The commander will make his report, and I will not have to do one myself. Someday, when you can talk about it, we shall talk. In the meantime—" Halista got up and intercepted Aetria in her pacing, giving the young Sorceress a firm hug. "Have I told you how big you have grown?"

Returning the hug tentatively, afraid to disturb the growing child in her old commander's womb, Aetria laughed. "I have not, Sorceress."

"Oh, yes, you have. You were tall when I first knew you, but weighed next to nothing when I carried you off the battlefield at Saphradea slung over my shoulder. Now, you have such big muscles for a woman—you must have worked out very hard at your Tierian exercises. And look at you. My, you have filled out very nicely. I am surprised Crusher is not hanging around your tent all the time."

"Crusher has shown no interest in me ever."

"Not true. When you first joined the regiment, I remember him giving you a lot of attention. I suppose you are too old for him now. He likes young girls, so I have heard. Your main competition is probably his focus of attention."

"I remember his attention as a strong desire on his part to make me feel degraded and stupid all the time. And what do you mean by 'my competition,' Halista?"

"The young Aggressor Novice, the one with the burns."

Aetria felt a twinge of guilt about Fernonia. When she had visited with the two Novice Aggressors in the Healing tent shortly after calling a halt for the day, Fernonia was fussing at Verdilan's treatment of her burns. Belanar only looked away, uncomfortable at the display. The verbal abuse Fernonia was piling on the heartsick Healer was caused more by her unhappiness with the loss of her hair than by her wounds which were minor.

The nearness of the exploding staff's blast had singed all the hair from her head, and she was wailing

about her marred beauty. All the assurances to the contrary were lost on her. Aetria took a different tack; she told Fernonia that at least she was alive to complain. Fernonia coldly told her she was alive because she had not been stupid like her friends. The tongue-lashing Aetria had given her for her lack of outward grief did nothing to change the Aggressor's mind, but at least it made Aetria feel better at the time. As Aetria had stormed out of the Healing tent, she reminded Fernonia and Belanar not to talk to anyone about the mission.

"You mean, Fernonia."

"Yes, such a beautiful young woman, and what an exciting figure she has. But you have one thing she doesn't, Aetria."

"And what is that, Halista?"

Laughing, Halista gave her a coy smile. "Hair. Goodnight, Aetria, we will have a long chat during our ride north together."

* * * *

Taking advantage of the senior Sorceress' experience, and maybe trying to ease her ride on the way back, Aetria talked Halista into riding in the transport wagons and giving the Novices an update on what army life was like nowadays. The day passed pleasantly enough, and their arrival at the fortress brought with it the blessings of real facilities, a hearty meal, and the security of four walls around them. It would have been an idyllic time for Aetria, if she had not received a summons from Crusher after the evening meal. She approached his quarters with dread.

Guard Garles was at his post by the door to Crusher's room when Aetria arrived. He announced her presence, and a muffled command to enter greeted her as she walked through the door. Pleates was standing by the narrow window looking out over the battlements of the fortress toward the south. Aetria stopped mid-room, waiting for him in respectful silence.

The lighting in the room was poor enough she had a difficult time seeing Crusher. His dark purple Adept robe hid his body from the light of the flickering candles on his desk, his face almost a disembodied white blur floating six feet off the ground. When he turned to look at her, she thought for a moment that she saw sadness in his eyes—then nothing. His voice coming out of the darkness was flat, expressionless.

"When I left Inhestia I had seven Aggressors, now I have two. I am sorry I did not adequately judge the strength of the Hermanians' sorcerers, relying on the advice of my Guard officer instead of determining it myself. This mistake has cost me dearly. But the lives of my Aggressors were not wasted, Aetria. We may not have achieved our objective of securing the source, but we gained a far greater victory over the enemy by proving the value of my weapons. Yes, we all should be proud of what we accomplished."

Aetria almost wanted to make a bland comment in agreement with him, just to be out of his presence. She had not come to argue with him, but he just didn't seem to understand what had really occurred.

"Sir, I was not looking directly at your position when the explosions hit you, but from the corner of my eye I did not see any traces of fire trails from fireballs coming from the Hermanian camp. I think those explosions came from the staffs the Novices were holding."

Expecting rage in return, Aetria was surprised by the calmness of his response. "You saw what you could see, Aetria. As you said, you weren't looking directly at us. I, however, was in direct line with the incoming fireballs and barely able to shout a warning before they hit. Fernonia and Belanar managed to

drop to the ground and save themselves, but the rest were caught up in the intensity of the fight and bravely kept up their fire to the end. They will be rewarded for their valor."

She could not answer his calmness with her own. *Was he so blinded by his belief in his secret project that he wouldn't even acknowledge truth when it was spoken?*

Her exasperation was revealed in her voice. "Those fireballs were too intense to be even thrown by a sorcerer. They were more of a white flash than a normal sun's glow. Your return fireball that stopped the charge was bigger, with your full power of an Adept behind it, and it was not as bright as the ones that killed the Novices. Those could not have been spelled by the Hermanians."

"Aetria, your emotional outpouring just now is a result of your sorrow over the loss of your friends from Inhestia, not the observation of a detached senior officer who has reviewed the facts. I have talked with Fernonia and Belanar, and they agreed with what I saw. I have talked with the Novice Illusionists in your party and they agreed with my observation of what happened. You alone have put forth the mistaken view the attack on my position was not made by enemy sorcerers."

"You asked young officers with no experience in battle what they saw, and they told you what you wanted to hear. They were scared stiff, confused, and in two cases, injured. And yet you take their evaluation over mine when I have had over a year's front line experience? Your weapons are dangerous, Adept Pleates. The only thing proven was that they kill the user."

Walking out of the shadows by the window, Crusher moved to the chair behind his desk and sat down. His expression was frozen, his lips a hard straight line above his chin. "You will write a full report of your observations, Sub-Commander, and I will submit it to the general, along with those of the Novices and, of course, my own. I caution you to leave out emotional claptrap and stick to what you saw. The general deals with facts, not opinion."

"I will gladly do so, Sir."

"And you are still under a vow of silence, along with all other company personnel, until further notice. The existence of my weapons is not to be known outside of the few who already know. These weapons, when produced in sufficient quantity, will be the turning point of the war."

Aetria found her exasperation turning to disbelief. *The man just won't quit* . Maybe she should report the incident to Trelana.

"In case you are not convinced of my justification for attacking the Hermanians, I am also sending a copy of all reports to the Council. They will be most interested in them."

At last, he had gone too far. "The Council will be interested?"

"Certainly. When I spoke with them last, they approved my plan."

"You spoke with the Council? Only Magi have a voice on the council."

That horrid smile of his appeared on his face. "As the Senior Sorcerer Regiment commander, I have access to the Council. As for speaking before them, I am a Mage candidate and have that right."

A Mage candidate? "How can you be a Mage candidate? You have not studied beyond the Adept level. You have not advanced your magic beyond..." She stopped, the image of the Aggressors wielding

the staffs flashing into her mind. "The staffs—you are using them to promote your candidacy?"

"I am not promoting anything, Sorceress. But yes, the staffs are the justification. In time of war, adjustments may have to be made to our advancement procedures. This is not my reasoning, but the Council's."

She was stunned.

"When you have gained enough experience in war, as I have, Aetria, then maybe your view of the significance of my weapon will change," Crusher continued. "Until then, leave weighty decisions to those who are trained to make them. I am in the midst of writing orders for the transfer of this recruit company's personnel into the army on our arrival. I will issue these orders then. Keep my candidacy to Mage to yourself and write that report tonight. Any questions, Sub-Commander?"

Too mad to talk, Aetria responded with a shake of her head. Crusher waved her away, dismissing her like a servant.

* * * *

Their arrival at the army's encampment was exciting for the Novices, and it made Aetria's heart fill with pride. This was the army she had such fond memories of, the one she tried to train her Novices for. They spent their time riding through the busy streets of the tent-city gawking at the furious activity that typifies all military operations. The Novices were too busy seeing everything to note, as she quickly did, that the usual overworked bureaucracy had fouled up their passage through the camp, mistaking them for a supply wagon train and directing them to the wrong destination.

By the time she had straightened out the mess, they rolled into the sorcerer regiment enclave two hours later than they should have. Darkness was falling across the assembly area in the middle of the regiment's tents as their wagons braked to a halt.

As they jumped down from the wagons, a cry of "fresh blood" resounded from the gathering crowd, and it seemed as if all the available sorcerers converged on the wagons to see who had arrived. The wagons were soon surrounded by a milling assemblage of bodies, with cries of recognition from various Inhestia-trained sorcerers seeing friends and relatives amongst the new arrivals. Aetria spotted a dozen sorcerers she had helped train over the past four years, but she did not see any of her old company. The noise of the crowd was rising by the moment when it was cut by the loud voice of Sergeant Maneles announcing the appearance of Crusher. Silence crashed down upon the area, all eyes turning to see the regimental commander emerge from his command wagon.

"You people have duties to attend to. I suggest you get at them. Sub-Commander Aetria, get the company in formation, then come pick up their orders. I want order restored in this encampment now!"

The swishing of robes rubbing against rapidly moving legs was the immediate response to Crusher's order. Barely discernible, a moaned warning rippled outward from the retreating sorcerers.

"He has returned."

As Aetria faced about to call her Novices into their final formation, she found them standing respectfully in position already. She nodded her approval and proceeded to Crusher's wagon.

"Here are their orders. Yours is on top." He pushed a pile of paper across his table. She reached out and took the first one off the pile. In his sweeping handwriting were the words: "Sorceress Aetria

Menhala is hereby assigned to the 5th Support Company of the First Sorcerer Regiment. She will report to Acting Sorceress Wilmina for duties as Sub-Commander."

"Acting Sorceress Wilmina? Wilmina was a Novice who reported to my squad during the Saphradean campaign. By the Power, how did she ever make Sorceress?" Aetria looked up from the orders, her eyes not believing what she had just read.

Crusher's smile was back on his face. "I told you several nights ago that the promotion process had been adjusted by the circumstances of the war. While you were sitting on your butt for the last four years getting the formal training you prize so much, she was fighting in the front lines."

"Sir, you were the one who ordered me to Inhestia after my burnout. You sponsored me for Sorcerer candidacy a year earlier than normal. It was because of you that I sat on my butt getting trained these past four years!" Her voice had been rising throughout her tirade, and she just managed to dampen it down by the time she reached the part concerning where she had sat.

"Your point, Sorceress?"

"I am a fully trained Sorcerer with over a year's army experience. I should not be penalized for training I was ordered to take."

Crusher stood and walked around the table. He stood so close that to look up into his face would have hurt her neck, so she stared at his abominable Adam's apple, wanting to slash into it with her teeth.

He kept his voice very low, whispering into her left ear. "I am taking a real chance on assigning you to anything, my dear. Your mentor may say you are fit for duty, but I am not totally convinced of that. You will serve under Sorceress Wilmina until you have proven you can control the Power—and your temper. If you can do that, then I will assign you to the position you could have had if you had not lost control."

He moved away and returned to his seat. He resumed his former tone. "You are not being penalized for that training, Sorceress. You are being reoriented to the new method of operations for our Sorcerer forces. Now, please deliver the Novices their orders and remind them to keep our recent operation secret. Dismissed, and good-bye."

In the short interval between turning her back to Crusher and exiting the door, Aetria had a monumental task getting her emotions under control and setting her face into a mask of calm. She was not sure how much of their conversation could have been heard outside the heavy canvas sides of the wagon, but emerging with tears pouring down her face, or an angry frown, was not going to be interpreted well by the Novices. Fortunately, darkness had enfolded the camp, and she had a moment more before emerging into the torch light of the waiting Sergeant Maneles. By the time she had marched to the fore of the Novices, she had regained her composure.

When the company simultaneously raised their right hands palm up and presented their flame, she fought her second most severe battle of the night. The tears flowed, and she had to take several deep breaths to keep from sobbing out loud. With heaving chest, she raised her hand in response and acknowledged their salute. With precision heretofore never seen, they all extinguished their flames together.

"Thank you," she croaked.

Swallowing hard, she brought the thick stack of orders clenched in her left hand up in front of her and with her right hand, held the first order to the light. "Before I read these orders, and you come forward to

receive them, I will relay Commander Pleates' last order to me for this company. Remember, keep our recent operation secret. I will now read these orders.

"Novice Verdilan is hereby assigned to the Headquarters Company of the First Sorcerer Regiment. He will report to Adept Loreana Jorell for duties as Healer Assistant."

Verdilan came forward, excitedly taking his orders and thanking her for all she had done. In a low voice to avoid embarrassing him, she pointed out they were at formal formation, and to observe proper protocol. She then spoke more loudly the first of her many goodbyes that night and wished him well as he walked off into the night.

* * * *

When the last Novice had departed, eagerly searching for his new company, Aetria walked over to the Duty Officer's tent and asked where the 5th was bivouacked. It was not far away at all, several hundred yards down the main road through the camp. Gathering her few belongings from the transport wagon, she said good-bye to Meloses, wishing him well, and walked swiftly down the road until she found the 5th Support Company. The command tent sat just off the roadway, the light from the inside casting someone's shadow on the hide wall. She requested permission to enter and was called in by a female voice.

"Aetria! I heard you were returning to us. We can really use your talents." The red-robed Wilmina was a short, heavy-set woman who was actually younger than Aetria but looked older. Like Pleates, the past four years of the war had aged her also.

Presenting her orders to Wilmina, Aetria reported for duty. As Wilmina took the orders and read them, Aetria looked around the quarters that should have been hers. The hide tent was about twelve feet square, with a raised wooden floor to keep the sleeping pallet, desk, and chairs out of the mud. A ten-foot main tent pole supported the ceiling, which sloped downward from the pole to meet the sidewalls at about the six-foot level. It was perhaps twice the size of Aetria's last tent.

Wilmina finished reading the orders and laid them on her desk. She did not look pleased to have Aetria in her company.

"Welcome to the 5th. Our old commander, Sorceress Halista, commanded the company until a month ago when she became pregnant and was transferred out."

"I know. I talked with Halista a couple of days ago as we passed through her area. She is doing well."

Wilmina had something unpleasant to say to Aetria from the way she was nervously wringing her hands. "Yes, we all wish her well, and the baby. Now, I have only had command for a month, being the senior Novice and with no senior sorcerer available to relieve her, so I was promoted. I was her Sub-Commander, and did a fine job, so she said. I deserve this company—yes, I do, and it is mine."

Aetria cut in, more to ease the growing tension in the woman than to be rude. "So you want me to keep my place and not to try to subvert your position."

"Yes, exactly. I am your commanding officer now. You are my Sub-Commander. You will follow my orders, like I followed yours when I was in your squad. I would rather you be one of my fellow commanders, but Crusher thought otherwise, else why would he put you under my command?"

"I understand my place, Wilmina. You have been fighting this war for four years now. I can learn from

your experience."

"Yes, yes you can. I will be happy to help you."

"Do I have my own quarters or are the women all housed in one tent, like in the old days?"

"You can take my old tent. Just tell Novice Ulnader that you have been ordered in as the Sub-Commander. He is, or was, my acting Sub. He will be quite pleased to see you as he finds the details of running a company tedious. Yes, he will be very pleased."

Wilmina's nervous addition of "yes" to everything was getting to Aetria. She would have to try to change that in her new commander.

"His tent is...?"

"Second tent down on the left; mine is the first tent."

"Then I will take my leave and get settled in. See you at morning meal, Ma'am?"

"Yes, come to my tent and we will talk about how to introduce you to the company. Goodnight, Aetria."

As she started to leave, Aetria turned back and held out her palm. She presented her hand flame at full intensity. The white hot star of the flame at Adept level cast such a strong light that every shadow in the tent was made bare, and Wilmina gasped in shock and covered her eyes. Aetria put out the flame.

Wilmina lowered her hands from her face, looking in shock at Aetria, then returned her flame timidly. "I get your point, Sorceress Aetria. You no longer have to present a flame."

"Thank you, Ma'am. Goodnight."

* * * *

Army life had not changed appreciably. It was still a lot of hurrying to go here and there, then wait. It had been a month since Aetria had reported in and she had not been involved in any action on the front. There was an overwhelming expectation that something was about to happen, and training was increased to get ready for whatever was coming. Her days were long, but filled with activity.

Aetria liked the 5th. It was a really good company. Once they had gotten to know her, the company responded well. Wilmina's fears of losing command were lessened considerably when she saw Aetria performing the role as Sub-Commander earnestly and with skill. As Aetria walked back to the command tent to meet with Wilmina about the supplies they needed, a guard lieutenant intercepted her.

"Lieutenant Maneles, congratulations!"

"Thank you, Ma'am. You came through on your word I would not be blamed for breaking orders. The commander promoted me two weeks ago to fill Lieutenant Nemos' position."

"I don't suppose you are making calls on your old friends to tell them of your good fortune?"

"No, Ma'am. Commander Pleates wants to see you immediately."

"Let us not make the regimental commander wait any longer, Lieutenant. Lead on!"

* * * *

"You want me to take orders from a sergeant?" Aetria stared at Crusher.

"That is exactly what I said, Aetria. Sergeant Borlock is the general's bodyguard and responsible for his welfare. While you are on this mission, you will take orders from her. I don't want any discussion from you on this; these are my orders to you and you will obey. Any questions?"

Aetria looked at the mercenary soldier's leather armor lying on Crusher's table. "And I am supposed to wear that instead of my sorcerer robe? I don't understand why I am being sent on this 'secret' mission, Sir."

The Adept sighed gently and walked over to Aetria. When he touched her arm, softly rubbing it at the shoulder, Aetria almost leaped backwards away from him. If he had struck her, he couldn't have shocked her more.

"Aetria, Aetria. Why must you and I always be at war with each other? When we first joined the army, you were the brightest and most enthusiastic officer I had. I went out of my way to give you the most challenging assignments because you would always do them with the most superb performance. I trusted you then, and I am willing to trust you now, but you need to trust me on this assignment."

His words almost did not enter her brain because she was concentrating on what he was doing as he spoke. He had moved behind her and was now massaging both of her shoulders, his lips only inches from her right ear.

Is he trying to seduce me?

Aetria turned to face him, bringing her arms upward and slowly outwards, gently sweeping his hands off of her, before stepping back a step. "Sir, I'm sorry my questions appear argumentative to you. I am thankful for what you did for me in the past, and appreciate very much your sponsorship to Sorcerer level. But as I am going out alone, unsupported by sorcerers, I think I need to know more of this mission than you have told me."

He almost reached for her again but stopped when she moved her right arm away from her side. He smiled at her. "I have seen you doing your defense exercises, Aetria, and I know how well you can take care of yourself. That is why I feel safe sending you out alone with the general and Sergeant Borlock. All you have to do is escort the general to his destination. Where he is going is his business, and you don't need to know where. The sergeant and you are posing as mercenary escorts to a merchant. Think of the uniform as a disguise. Why would a merchant have an army Sorceress riding with him?"

She lowered her arm back to her side and shrugged her shoulders. "He wouldn't. I understand I am to escort him in disguise, but why are we doing this in the first place? He could have his Royal Guard cavalry escort him, with as many sorcerers in support as he deemed necessary."

Pleates walked over to his desk and picked up something. "The general's Royal Guard will be escorting an officer dressed like the general. I will be supporting them. You may need this on your journey," he said, handing her a source box. She looked at it and realized it was his personal source.

She tried to hand it back to him. "You will need this more than I do, Sir. It is more likely you will come under attack than I."

He refused to take it from her. "I think you will need it more than I, Sorceress. Are you defying me again?"

"No, Sir."

"Then keep it. It was made for me just before I went on my quest for a new spell. Take care of it and be very careful using it. It is time for you to leave and meet the general. He will be waiting for you at the crossroads north of our billet. Don't keep him waiting any longer than you have to. Remember, tell no one of your mission."

"Yes, Sir. Thank you for the trust, Commander. I will not let you down."

CHAPTER 6

Aetria wiped the sweat from the tip of her nose with a backhand swipe of her sword hand glove and grimaced as the metal studs scraped her skin. Letting loose an oath that would have made a real soldier proud, she glanced quickly over at the battle-hardened sergeant riding to her right, waiting for the quiet rebuke she knew would come.

"Better to let it drip, Sorceress, than damage that pretty face."

"Better to take this blasted helmet off than sweat to death, Lady Grunt."

Heaving a sigh of exasperation, the short, lean woman dressed in the plain garb of an auxiliary cavalryman rubbed the back of her own neck and replied, "For one who was hired for her skills as an Illusionist, you don't seem to grasp the importance of maintaining a disguise. Soldiers do not ride down the road with their hair floating in the breeze, unprepared for crossbow bolt or bowman's arrow.

Furthermore, they don't swear aloud at every inconvenience encountered in doing their duty."

Aetria straightened up in the saddle, her pride slightly wounded by the hardened soldier's swipe at her professionalism. *Admittedly I'm not from the elite Royal Guard, as Sergeant Sonja Borlock is, but still...*

"I wasn't 'hired' for this job, Sergeant Borlock. I am just as much part of this army as you. My branch of service doesn't rely on physical protective devices so I am not adept at dealing with chafing leather armor."

The sergeant smiled at her discomfiture.

"As for my skills as an actress, I don't make any claim to those either. I may be overacting, but every oath is heartfelt."

"I can teach you some of the things you need to know to pass at a glance as a real soldier, Sorceress, but you should avoid, as much as possible, drawing attention to yourself. This mission is not about you; it is about getting General Mythrian safely to the king."

Aetria turned slowly in her saddle, moving her body instead of her neck, trying to keep from further inflaming her raw neck on the leather vest's rough edge, and looked back at the purpose of their mission with a mixture of awe and disdain.

The fabled conqueror of the Three Domains, Commanding General of King Phyrllatus' combined armies, Alenso Mythrian, was a huge man, heavily bearded, with weather-roughened features. He seemed to overflow his horse, looking more like a man riding a child's donkey than a general sitting astride a war charger. He was not obese, as his appearance suggested. Dressed in flowing merchant's robes, his well-muscled body's bulk was enhanced by the chain mail he wore underneath. An impressive figure when dressed in the gold plate armor he normally wore, his image in her eyes was now tarnished by her previous evening's experience with him.

To say he was fond of wine, woman, and song was to state it lightly. His appetite for all three was grossly demonstrated by the brawl he had involved them in.

"I'm not so sure how successful we can be getting that man safely anywhere when he breaks up a tavern and gets us pitched out into the cold night."

Sergeant Borlock shrugged noncommittally. "Maybe it is part of his plan. The enemy will be searching for a large escorting force moving swiftly through the country, the way the fake escort is doing off to our east. Not a merchant enjoying himself on his way home with his ill-gotten profits, protected by two women auxiliary soldiers."

"Perhaps, but I doubt he was acting the part. I swear he was enjoying himself overly much." The Sorceress began a careful search of her side of the road ahead, scanning her eyes from left to right as Borlock had taught her. The road was winding its way through a hilly forest thinly populated with trees. It was a smooth, well-traveled road. There was a good chance of being ambushed here because of thick, waist-high brush that covered the forest floor.

On her side of the trail, the sergeant was busy doing the same. "For as long as I have known him, nigh unto ten years of service, he has always enjoyed himself when not occupied with the business of killing."

Aetria stopped scanning the tree line ahead. A thought suddenly hit her. "Ill-gotten profits? Was he letting it be known he is carrying money? By the Power, isn't it enough we have to protect him from enemy soldiers, let alone bandits and thieves!"

The sergeant's answer was obscured by a loud clang by Aetria's left ear and a blinding white flash of light behind her eyes. Stunned, Aetria struggled to stay upright on her bucking horse. She was barely aware of the screams coming from ahead as a swarm of men poured out of the woods. Borlock spurred her horse forward and met the dozen or so men with slashing sword and kicking horse. Two or three went down in moments, but the others ignored the soldier and continued their rush for the general, who had drawn his own sword. He drove his horse forward, trying to cut his way through the horde and ride down the road.

Aetria instinctually kicked out at a face that appeared beside her horse and dimly cheered in her mind when the man clutched his crushed throat and collapsed beneath her horse's hooves. A strange thought drifted through her mind that she could never have done that with her felt sorceress slippers, and she was glad for the armor she wore. She struggled to free her sword and looked wildly around, trying to figure out what had happened and where she needed to be. A wave of panic surged through her as she saw the bridle of the general's horse being grabbed by multiple hands as the bandits struggled to stop the escaping "merchant" and haul him from the saddle.

The spell exploded from her mind before she had a chance to form it properly. Her last thought before she pitched forward off her horse was the disappointment her mentor would have with her lack of control.

* * * *

Sonja swept down upon the bandits surrounding Alenso's horse. She slammed her speeding mount into the pack, hearing the screams of pain as the horse's mass knocked aside the men like so much chaff, but knowing she would not be able to clear the men from the General before they brought him down. Her sword flashed across her body as she swung right and left into the sea of flesh. In the far field of her vision, she saw the sorceress fall off her horse and cursed for a moment the decision to include such an ineffectual escort. She really needed a seasoned cavalryman now.

As if in answer to her prayer, the blare of trumpets from over the trail behind her announced the arrival of a squadron of troops. The thunder of their mounts' hooves shook the ground. Who was more startled, she or the bandits, was indeed a question, but she recovered first and broke through to Alenso, clearing the bandits from around his horse's head.

Seeing a quick victory snatched from them, the remainder of men fled into the forests, leaving wounded and dying comrades behind. Sonja urged Alenso to flee up the trail towards the arriving squadron as quickly as he could, leaving her to ride to the assistance of the sorceress, lying comatose on the ground.

Scanning the unconscious woman for wounds, Sonja saw Aetria's helmet had a good-sized dent in it just over the left ear. She removed the helmet and found a swelling lump, but the skin was not broken. She looked over her shoulder to assess how soon help would arrive from the rescuing horsemen and was puzzled that the squadron had not crested the hill even yet. With a gasp, she realized what had happened and struggled to pull Aetria upright.

Although muscled from years of sword practice and hard riding, she had a tough time getting Aetria shoved prone across the saddle. She considered lashing her in place, but the desire to flee the area was so strong she settled for leading the two horses on foot back up the hill in the direction the General had fled. A few steps up the trail, the sargeant noticed a slightly flattened lead sling bullet on the ground and picked it up.

"This should prove to the sorceress she'd better pay more attention to me."

* * * *

Aetria slowly became aware of her surroundings as she dropped out of a very deep sleep. She was very comfortable, warm, lying on her right side in a bed, and snuggled up against another body. A large arm was draped over her and a hand tucked under her right breast. With a strangled screech, she jumped out of bed and backed away from it in horror.

"By the Power, what is going on?" she gasped.

Sergeant Borlock arose from a chair by the door and picked up a robe lying on a table, tossing it to the sorceress. "You were ice cold and I had to warm you up somehow. I couldn't do the honors, because someone had to watch over the general. So I fed him a few bottles of wine and tucked the both of you in for the night."

"He ... he didn't..."

"No, of course not. I wouldn't have allowed him that liberty. Not that he didn't want to, but I reminded him of the danger of bedding a sorceress—being drained of all his sexual drive for life."

Aetria pulled the robe around her, angry the sergeant had taken the liberty of putting the general in bed

with her, but seeing the need to keep her alive. One of the aftereffects of grid burnout was that one's body temperature dropped to a minimum. "That's an old wife's tale—"

Sonja cut her off. "Created by the women of your order."

With a sniff, Aetria jerked her head erect in offense. "Not the women, Sergeant. The men invented that one, back before the Sorcerer War. Said they were the only ones who could safely bed sorceresses. It also gave them cause to be very selective when testing for new candidates—just another way of deselectioning women and accepting only men. They said having too many sorceresses around was dangerous. The early sorceresses went along with it because it offered some level of protection from rape by non-sorcerers, but we don't need that excuse anymore."

"Well, it worked for the general. Well, that and the wine. Besides, I told him he owed you one."

"Owed me one?" Aetria asked with a puzzled frown.

Sonja tossed her the spent bullet, which Aetria did an admirable job of snatching out of the air with her right hand.

"Told him you took that bullet for him. He was impressed."

Aetria put her left hand to her head and felt the lump. "So that's what hit me."

"Would have killed you also, if you had not been wearing that helmet."

Aetria looked at the bullet in her hand, noticing the hole drilled through it. "Why is there a hole in it?"

Sonja wearily sat back down in her chair. "Serves two purposes. One, it stacks nicely on a rod, easily pulled off for rapid fire from the sling. Two, it whistles in flight and terrorizes the troops."

"I didn't hear anything."

"You wouldn't. You're the one that got hit. I heard it just before it hit you."

Aetria's puzzled look increased. "Why would bandits use a weapon that is noisy?"

"A bandit wouldn't, but a Hermanian Assassin trooper would."

"Assassin trooper! Those weren't bandits then?"

"No, they were dressed in disguise to keep their movement as inconspicuous as we were trying to be. It appears they were trying to take the general alive, but got scared off by your phantom cavalry squadron. Nice touch."

"Thank you, but terribly expensive."

"And revealing, I'll unhappily add, Sorceress. That display of magic clearly showed the presence of an adept class wizard—where one shouldn't be."

"Adept class? I'd say Mage level, at least. It cost me every bit of Power, burned out my grid."

"Grid burnout? I thought that was fatal?"

Aetria walked over to her saddlebags stowed neatly in a cupboard. She pulled a leather thong from the bag and threaded the strand through the hole in the bullet, then tied it around her throat like a necklace.

"It usually is for Aggressors."

The image of Recanlin's shattered forehead entered her mind and brought the pain of his death washing over her again. She halted for a moment, swallowing hard to keep from crying out. Sergeant Borlock stood watching her, puzzlement in her eyes.

"Someone you know died that way, Sorceress?"

"One of my Novices, a month ago. He gave his life for us."

"Sounds like an interesting tale. Happened a month ago? Wasn't much fighting going on a month ago."

Moving away from the bed and towards a nearby chair, Aetria sat slowly down. "Commander Pleates and I were bringing in a recruit company of sorcerers from Inhestia. We came upon a similar company of Hermanian sorcerers. The commander decided to attack them and take their source. He wanted to try out his new weapon, so he ordered us into battle. I told him it was not safe. The Novice Aggressors were untried and not ready. He overruled me. During the attack, his new weapons exploded, killing four Novices.

"I had a Novice Aggressor with me who was creating a diversion. When the Hermanian reserve rushed our position, he countered with a fireball, which he lost control of, and he suffered grid burnout. The backlash killed him, but he stopped the charge." Aetria paused to wipe the tears from her eyes.

Sonja had listened very attentively to her story. When Aetria stopped, the sergeant bluntly said, "According to Adept Pleates' report, you were attacked by a superior sorcerer force. He said nothing about a new weapon."

"He told me that was what he was going to report," Aetria said, grimacing. "I told him I disagreed with his belief the attack was by veteran enemy sorcerers. They were a small company of Novices like us. He insisted, but said I could make my case in my own report. Which I did, and which he sent forward with his."

"Sorry, Sorceress, but I do the general's paper shuffling, and there was only his and a bunch of Novices' reports. He said he was misinformed by his guard lieutenant's inaccurate estimation of the Hermanians' order of battle, but he took the blame because he was the commander in the field. What new weapon was he working on?"

Aetria did not want to answer that question, but Sonja seemed adamant. Aetria opted for letting Crusher explain his own way out of that mess. She had already disobeyed him by mentioning the weapon to the sergeant at all. "I think you had better ask him that question, Sergeant. He did not allow anyone but the Aggressors to have any knowledge of what he was doing. I am sorry if I am less than helpful in answering your question."

"The general may have some more questions of you after I brief him on this. For now, back to this 'grid burnout.' You said it is usually fatal to Aggressors."

Warily, Aetria took up her explanation. She worried she might be saying too much about sorcerer

operations to a non-sorcerer, but it was too late for that now. "For my specialty, illusion, it rarely happens. It isn't normal to expend that much energy for disguising magic. I..I have a slight problem of control." Aetria stood looking down at the bullet, a rosy flush coloring her face and neck.

"You've had this problem before, I take it." Sonja was looking intently at her.

"Once before. Five years ago, right after our order first joined the king's army. We were participating in the battle against Saphradea, who had taken the opportunistic chance to come in on the side of Hermania and were threatening our eastern flank. I was a Novice sorceress, tasked to cover a feint being made against the center of the Saphradean line by the 23rd Kelrossian Lancers—"

The Sergeant slowly nodded her head. "So you were the one. I was there. As the Lancers started toward the line through an intervening section of trees, they suddenly took on the visage of a company of elephant-mounted Royal Guard. A novel idea of yours, by the way. We were experimenting with that very idea and had imported a dozen elephants. They were not fielded yet, so it came as quite a surprise to all of us, including the Saphradeans, who thought they had pretty good intelligence on us."

Sheepishly, Aetria said, "They weren't supposed to appear to be mounted on elephants. I think that came about because I had been studying those huge beasts for weeks prior to the battle, hoping to use their image and movement to develop other monsters to terrorize the Hermanians with. In my enthusiasm to make the Lancers look like the Royal Guard, I added too much detail, and—"

"Whatever you did, it worked. As 'The Guard' charged out of the wood on their raging elephants, the enemy's center broke before the charging Lancers, with their soldiers fleeing to either side of the charge. The line rolled up the flanks, and the real Guard suddenly found themselves attacking in the face of twice as many enemy, an enemy already panicked and desperate. An enemy who now found themselves caught between a rock and a hard place. The Guard in front of them was less terrifying than the one behind them, and the Saphradeans attacked.

"The real Guard was rapidly being cut to pieces and we would have lost the day if it had not been for the Sub-commander of the Lancers. The Sub-commander saw the line had broken ahead of them, and led the Lancers straight into the Heir Apparent's entourage. The Lancers captured the Heir, and the Saphradean generals had to surrender."

Sergeant Borlock's eyes were now locked onto Alenso's sleeping form in the bed beside Aetria. "The Sub-commander of the Lancers was promoted and made a rapid rise through the ranks."

"You mean, my loss of control led to the general..."

"Yes, ironic isn't it?"

Sonja looked back at Aetria, her eyes narrowing slightly. "After the battle, our field commanders asked the commanding general about the 'elephant' charge. He said the Adept commander of the sorcerer regiment had decided to change the deception from what had been planned to what had been executed, and the Sorcerer Corps took the credit for your 'accident.' Since no one knew any better about your operations, we believed him. You people are too secretive about what you do! But enough on that, what happened to you?"

"I was packed off to our training lodge at Inhestia to learn control. I was only recently allowed to join my regiment."

"Well, your wild magic has saved the general. But what is this cost you spoke of? Is this something the general needs to know?"

"The Power I expended on the spell was all I had stored up. I am Powerless now. I can restore my Power, because my Adept gave me a source, but..."

Sonja sat up straight and looked hard at Aetria. "But?"

"It would take most of a day. I can't be moving around, and, well—"

"First a but, now a well. Spit it out, Sorceress!"

"Exposing myself to an uncovered Power source re-energizes me, but it also exposes the location of the source to any sorcerer in the area."

"You mean every time you sorcerers restore your energy you are telling the enemy where you are? By the gods, doesn't your Order understand the military significance of that small piece of information? Couldn't they have at least shared that?"

Chagrined, Aetria shrugged her shoulders. "We do, but the less you know of our weaknesses, the more secure we are. In six years of fighting this war by your side, we have learned much about the craft of fighting wars. We have never advised you falsely about what we can or cannot do."

Sonja burst out with a sharp, short laugh. "That's true, because you don't tell us anything. Well, that certainly explains why you sorcerers insist on being so heavily protected all the time. At what range can your sources be detected?"

Aetria found she had no desire or wish to keep information from Sergeant Borlock. She trusted the woman who was trying to keep the general and her alive.

"Depends on the skill level of the sorcerer, but nominally a day's march."

"So you can't restore your energy. That means we have now lost our sorceress."

"I suppose I should tell you all the rest of the bad news."

"There is more?" Clearly, Sonja was getting upset.

"The spell I cast? Expenditure of that much Power can be detected."

The sergeant let out a string of curse words that were certainly much cruder than Aetria could ever have hoped to duplicate. "In other words, you lit off a huge bonfire and every sorcerer in the country knows we're here."

"Not quite that bad, Sergeant. Just those within about a day's march. Which I expect aren't that many."

"We only need one Hermanian sorcerer to bring doom down on us, and you can believe that those Assassins were attached to one. Get dressed and pack up! We've been here far too long already. They could be on us any moment. Move it, woman."

Aetria stood transfixed under the glare of the angry sergeant. Sonja was about to slap her to get her

moving, when Aetria put up a warding hand.

"If 'they' are traveling with a sorcerer, then 'they' are not anywhere near."

"And how do you know this?"

"I am not completely useless as you supposed! Just because I can't cast spells doesn't mean I can't do anything. Being Powerless, I am very sensitive to the presence of Power. Any Powered sorcerer is like an exposed Power source to me. I can sense them."

"Another sorcerer secret exposed, Sorceress. Something else your Order has failed to tell the general and his staff!" Sonja muttered something about being kept in the dark, and sank down slowly into a chair.

"A secret, yes, Sergeant, but not the Order's—mine. As far as I know, I am the only one who can do it. If the Order ever knew what I could do, I would be brought before the Council and banned from the Order forever! Please don't tell anyone, Sergeant."

Sonja shook her head. "No, the general has to know, but nobody else. I promise. I think this skill of yours can work for us. How far can you sense another sorcerer?"

"Maybe a half-day's march, less if I am tired or too distracted."

"Sorry about the outburst. Please search again to the maximum range you can. I need to know how much time we have."

Aetria lowered herself into a slight trance again and started another sensing search. "I feel a faint presence to the north."

"That's in the direction we were originally headed. Our mission has been severely jeopardized! They obviously know our destination and are maneuvering to cut us off. They will probably send back the Assassins who attacked us with a lot more support troops this time. They will begin tracking us from where the skirmish took place. That will lead them here to this inn, south of the point of attack. The innkeeper will certainly remember seeing a soldier draped across her horse."

A blush flushed over Aetria's face and she thought of how undignified she must have looked in that pose.

Sonja continued to think aloud. "Now they know we have a sorceress. They think she is a very powerful one, but also know you're under-powered now. It follows that you won't use a source, or they would sense it. I just bet they will expect us to run for home since we have been discovered and our strength drained."

"Then we go east toward our troops and give up this mission."

"That's for the general to decide. Now go pack the horses. I'll wake and brief him on what has happened, and get an answer."

* * * *

Aetria sat slumped in her saddle, staring numbly at Sonja. It had been three days since she had awakened from the after-effects of the burnout, and she felt she had not slept since. The intervening time was one long, interminable horse ride interspersed with forced marches afoot, meals in the saddle, and infrequent periods of unconsciousness which she could not really call sleep. And always being driven ever

onward by Sergeant Borlock. Aetria craved sleep. Fatigue had dulled her mind to the point where she basically fainted in place when given the chance. The constant drain of scanning for the essence of Power was tasking her the worst.

"Anything, my wrung-out Sorceress?"

Aetria blinked several times and refocused. "As I said earlier, nothing. I'm not sure I could read a sorcerer across the clearing from us right now."

"It has been a half day since you last sensed anything, and we have been riding hard away from the source. Isn't it likely that we have outdistanced them?"

"As much as I want to believe that, I can't trust my readings. I told you fatigue affects my ability to sense. But if we rest to improve my range, they may get too close before I can detect them. I counsel moving on."

Sonja nodded in agreement. "Forgive my insistence, Aetria, but you were quite sure that your last sensing was to the south?"

Aetria sighed, more from frustration with her own loss of confidence than with the sergeant's lack of faith. "I'm reasonably sure of the direction; it is the range I can't trust."

Sonja let a small smile escape through the strain on her face. "Good. Then we may have escaped their noose. The general believed that by riding west until you lost contact with that northern group, which he believed was a picket or scouting force, then turning north until sensing them again, we would eventually scribe a circle around the patrol, putting them behind us."

"Why wouldn't they continue to track north from their first location until they came within a safe distance from making contact with the king's troops, yet still be between us and the king?"

"They would have, except the general's second ruse probably convinced them we were retreating back to the south. They had to search the area in between. When the northern patrol failed to detect you, the Hermanians would believe we were between their northern patrol and their intercepting force searching southward. The northern patrol would remain in place in case we evaded the main force, or until we had been located and attacked."

Aetria rubbed her face hard, trying to stay awake and focus on Sergeant Borlock's words. "Just why is it so important to get the general to the king, if a lowly sorceress might know?"

"No, you may not!"

"And this second ruse?"

"Can't tell you that right now."

"Why do I feel like I am not a trusted asset to this party?"

Sergeant Borlock took a moment to stretch her stiffening muscles, then turned toward the sorceress. "The less you know, the less you reveal if we get captured. The general and I will probably get killed in another attempt. He'll die because he is the reason for their search. As for me, well, it is my job to protect him. You, on the other hand, can be easily overcome and made to talk."

"What makes you think I can't defend myself? I am expert with a throwing knife and fairly capable with a sword!"

"You are dead on your feet, Sorceress. And I have seen your prowess with the sword. Now let's get moving. My guess is we are only a day's march to safety."

* * * *

Sergeant Borlock stopped their march as darkness fell. She was tempted to push on and end their journey at the king's stronghold, but the prospect of another night's trek through the dark and cold was too uninviting. They were within the patrol area of the king's army, and Aetria still sensed nothing. Their refuge for this night was an inn nestled up against a windbreak of pine trees. The party tied up their horses at the hitching post, noting the absence of other mounts.

Aetria scanned the clean-swept common room, as Sonja taught her. No other patrons occupied the scattered tables or the benches that ran around the edge of the room. An open window in the east wall overlooked the road. A maidservant tended the fireplace on the northern wall. The landlord scurried from the kitchen door in the west wall with an effusive welcome, shouting over his shoulder at his wife, whom Aetria glimpsed through the open door.

Aetria dragged her aching body to a small table near the kitchen entrance and sat down. The general positioned himself beside her with his back to the kitchen, facing the center of the room. He ordered a round of drinks and the house's finest fare in a loud voice and grinned at his female escort.

Aetria was spared conversation by the arrival of the serving girl, who slapped three tankards of ale down on the table and filled the remaining space with bread, cheese, butter, and empty bowls for a stew that the wife carried in. The general wrapped his huge hand around the handle of a tankard and downed its entire contents in one gulp. He banged it down on the table, the tankard's iron rim clashing on the hard wood, and roared for another. Aetria wearily pushed hers over to him and contented herself with a handful of bread.

The general ate and drank with fine gusto, and was regaling the landlord with a tale about outsmarting his chief guild rival—all made up, of course—when the front door banged open and another party, all well into their own cups, clattered into the room. The landlord rushed over to greet them. Three were women, underdressed for the cool night with high-necked silk blouses and flowing skirts. They appeared to be professionals of that most ancient of guilds. Aetria mentally dismissed the fashionably dressed men as fops with too much time on their hands.

One buxom woman walked to the head of the large table and sat down, surveying the rowdy crowd as they sprawled into available chairs and benches, bellowing out orders to the landlord. She turned her attention to the leader of the party, a tall, thin middle-aged man with perfumed hair and shifty eyes. The seductive gaze she cast at him was as raw as her painted lips, rouged cheeks, and heavily shadowed eyes could convey.

Sonja stared at the woman with disgust but growing curiosity. What was this crew doing in a plain roadside tavern? She glanced over at the sorceress. Aetria's eyes were almost closed. A gentle tap of Sonja's tankard on the table startled Aetria awake, and she followed the sergeant's eyes back to the whore. At first glance, Aetria thought the woman looked familiar.

"Do you sense anything, Aetria?"

"No, should I? Let me rest, then I'll try again later."

"Something is wrong with this situation. Something about that woman bothers me."

Aetria looked again, but sensed nothing. If you were the type that liked your woman painted with hair teased out like a lion's mane and breasts the size of melons, then perhaps you would find a woman like her appealing. The general certainly seemed to think so.

"No accounting for some men's tastes! But there is no spell, although she certainly needs one."

Sonja sat up straight. "We've got to get out of here."

The general casually glanced around, as if surveying the other women in the room for a night's dalliance. He gave the men hard stares and the women leers, and reached for a full tankard of ale.

He spoke to his escort in a low voice. "Our way out the front door is completely blocked off. I'm going out the front window while you escape through the kitchen. If we get split up, well, it's been fun, ladies."

Before Borlock could protest, Mythrian rose to his feet and staggered toward the woman at the head of the table. As he approached, the woman turned her head, her protruding Adam's apple shifting upward as she swallowed preparatory to uttering some pithy remark. Aetria and Sonja simultaneously drew in a breath of surprise. The seasoned sergeant recovered first and leaped to her feet. "Alenso, she's a—"

The general hauled the woman up by the front of her well-filled blouse and planted a beery kiss on her protesting lips.

"He! It's Adept Pleates," Aetria finished. Mythrian roared with laughter at the gagging sounds made by the woman/man and took a pull on his tankard of ale, still holding tightly onto the violently struggling man whose blouse tore open. Breast-sized melons dropped to the floor. Mythrian tossed the man against the fireplace and turned, crashing his tankard down upon the leader of the "fops," crushing his skull. He then dove for the window.

As Sonja started around the table toward Alenso to keep his back clear, Pleates whipped out a wicked little knife and threw it at her. With a cry of pain, Sonja grabbed the handle of the knife protruding from the leather armor above her right breast and pulled it free. Aetria paused for a moment of anguished hesitation, spent looking between her superior Adept and the sergeant, then let fly her own dagger. She watched in satisfaction as Crusher sagged to the floor, her knife through his Adam's apple. Aetria flipped the table over at two advancing assassins, grabbed Sonja by the arm, and dragged her toward the kitchen.

The two fled through the door, knocking aside the maidservant who rushed in to find out what the commotion was about. Sonja glanced over her shoulder, and her heart seemed to twist inside, as she saw Mythrian hauled back through the window, knives plunging into his body. The mortally wounded giant of a man, with an assassin cutting his throat from behind, had two more assassins by the backs of their necks and, as his blood sprayed across the room, smashed their heads together. The grin on his face was as wide as the one across his throat as he sank dead in a pile of bodies. Sonja and Aetria fled into the night, the heavy underbrush swallowing them up and hushing the sounds of their departure.

* * * * *

Aetria entered the bath tent and dropped her robe at the edge of the large tub sunk into the ground. Sonja's head was visible just above the surface of the steaming water, her eyes closed. As Aetria entered

the water, Sonja sat up, exposing the tops of her breasts.

"I see the Healer has sutured your wound, Sergeant. If we have any more days, you must tell me about those other scars."

"What makes you think our days are numbered, Sorceress?"

As she sank beneath the hot, soothing water, Aetria found a bench-like rim along the bottom of the tub and settled down on it. She rubbed her face with the water, both to clean it and brush away the tears that had started again. She did not take failure easily.

"The last day has been a complete blur. I remember little or nothing since fleeing the inn. I know we ran through the forest for what seemed like an eternity. I dimly remember crashing into a horse and rider. I awoke once in a pitching, rocking wagon, and a few minutes ago was rudely roused from a very soft sleeping pallet and told to get my butt in here, get bathed, and prepare to receive the king's justice."

"A reasonable account of what happened. Your eternity was only a half-hour or so. The rider was the lead scout of a cavalry patrol. I told the patrol commander about the assassins and she rode off with her platoon to try to capture them. She left behind the scout, who took us to their squadron headquarters. They provided transport to the king's encampment. His Majesty was quite unhappy about the death of Alenso. They were very close friends."

"Do you think he will have us thrown out of the army for failing in our mission?" Aetria asked.

Sonja answered with a noncommittal shrug. Aetria sat soaking in the healing steam of the tub. Minutes passed before Aetria had to ask the questions raging in her mind. "I can understand being punished for our failure to keep the general alive, but I would like to know why he took this risky journey in the first place."

Sonja handed her a sponge and a bowl of liquid soap. "I owe you the answers to your questions on the trail. But before I tell you what I know, please tell me what your orders were."

Lathering up, watching with satisfaction as the dirt disappeared from her body, Aetria filled in the sergeant. "Pleates called me in and told me I was assigned to a secret mission, of which I could tell no one anything. I was to dress myself in the supplied soldier's uniform, meet the general and his personal bodyguard at the crossroads north of our billet, and escort them to where they were going. Although of officer rank, I was to consider myself under orders to the bodyguard sergeant and do exactly as she ordered."

Sonja took the sponge and soap from Aetria and indicated the younger woman was to turn around so her back could be cleaned. Aetria did so and then continued her tale. "At that point I was thinking Pleates had been standing too close to a source."

The grunt from behind her caused Aetria to turn around slightly. Sonja was looking at her with a quizzical expression.

"Sorry, that's our way of saying someone is not operating at full mental capacity. Exposing one's self to a source too long does that to you."

"I'll try to remember that, Sorceress. You are a refreshing source of information about sorcerers."

"As I was saying, being ordered to take orders from a lower ranking soldier was definitely abnormal, let alone taking orders from a non-sorcerer. I was given no voice in the matter, being told to keep quiet and listen. Like a good soldier, I obeyed. He handed me his own source, saying I might need it. That was decidedly strange because we are not allowed individual sources until reaching Adept level. I tried to give him back the source, saying I probably would not be able to use it, but he insisted I take it."

"That is very interesting, Aetria. It might explain something I will share with you in a moment."

Sonja repositioned herself in her seat, letting Aetria rinse off. As she did, Sonja said, "The king is a wonderful man, a fair and just ruler."

"That I sincerely hope!"

"As do I, Sorceress, as do I. He is a fine leader, but not much of a military strategist. The king's forces here are badly needed to spearhead an offensive that is hoped to turn the tide of the war. The king is not up to that task. The general was needed here to lead his troops. So, get the general to the king."

"Makes sense."

"The general saw an opportunity to solve a problem that had been plaguing the army. There was evidence of a spy within the general's staff. The spy, who we now know was Pleates, had alerted the Hermanians that the general was going to visit the king. Pleates didn't know why, but knew the trip was necessary. The Hermanians pre-positioned scout troops to locate him, but to prevent disclosing that they knew our plans, they had not made any attempts to gather an appreciable intercepting force, waiting until they saw movement on our part. Our agents caught wind of the reason for their patrol movement and alerted the general that he had a spy problem."

Aetria ducked her head underwater to get her hair wet, exploding to the surface with a gasp at the heat that surged through her tingling scalp. "Forgive my interruption, Sergeant, but these inter-weaving high strategy matters are a little above my level of interest."

Sonja smiled. "When you have had to stand in a room full of generals and listen to it for hours, as I have, then you can say that. Stay with me for a few more minutes, Sorceress."

"Well, I did ask."

"When word came to the general that the king's men were in position and ready to attack, awaiting their leader, he acted. Rather than try to make the trip with a sizable escort, he believed he stood a much better chance evading their patrols with a minimal party consisting of the two of us. To draw off the expected pursuit, he planned to dress the commander of his Royal Guard cavalry squadron, Commander Preldones, in his general's gold armor and send the squadron riding north. He told no one of his plans until the very last minute, which would—"

Aetria finished for her. "Put the spy in a position where he would have to expose himself to convey that information."

"Exactly. The general had just finished dictating the orders for the fake escort when Pleates came forward and suggested to the general that the services of a sorcerer were needed on the fake escort. The size of the 'fake' escort could draw a response from the enemy, and it wouldn't hurt to have the army's 'most potent weapon' along—himself, by the way. He also insisted sending his best Illusionist with our party would enhance our deception. Not knowing he was the spy, and because the Adept's suggestion

did make sense, the general approved it."

"Me, his best Illusionist? I'm flattered."

"Pleates had, in fact, set us up. He ... Well, don't take this too hard—"

"Wanted me there instead of someone with control. Added insurance that things would go wrong,"

Aetria cut in, a bitter edge in her voice.

"You are awfully hard on yourself, Sorceress. I wonder if your 'lack of control' is directly connected to your lack of confidence. You were under a lot of stress when you created that phantom squadron, and it truly was a thing to behold."

"Someday I'll explain the spell-making process to you, then you can stop wondering."

Sonja smiled sweetly, a very odd expression for such a hardened soldier. "Thank you, I would like that.

Now that you know the why, the second ruse—"

"I was wondering where that came in."

"As I said, our intelligence had their patrol areas fairly well located, so our intended track would avoid them. Our run-in with the bandits was totally unexpected, although the timing was perfect."

"The timing was perfect? You just said it was unexpected!"

"Your exposing our position was also unexpected, but as it was, we had pre-planned that two days out from the front lines an alarm was to be spread that the general was in danger and a rescue party formed.

The rescue troops would rush north. The enemy would now be forced to find our party before the rescuing troop, so would commit maximum resources to do so. The general wanted to draw as many troops as possible from the enemy lines, even commit their reserves if that was possible. Between the fake escort and the rescue party, we had a sizable force formed and ready for a quick strike once we knew the enemy had committed his reserves."

Aetria, although finished washing, was reluctant to leave the soaking warmth of the bath. She had a few more questions, but the king was waiting. She heaved herself out of the tub and, dripping water, walked to the towel rack. As she dried off, Sonja emerged from the tub and did the same.

"Sounds like a wonderful plan, but one that went wrong in the end," Aetria said. "Pleates apparently broke away from the fake escort, found himself some Hermanian assassins, and raced north to catch up with us. How he tracked us, I am not sure."

Sonja wrapped a towel around herself. "I was hoping you could tell me that. My guess is, Pleates was somehow able to track his own personalized source, which was probably the point of giving it to you in the first place. You would have drawn the traitor to us."

"I don't know anything about personalized sources, Sergeant, but your theory has merit. Pleates was an Adept. And he did show up at the inn. Since he was well-known to both of us, he disguised himself as a woman to get into a position where he could kill the general. Which he did, accomplishing his mission, thanks to me."

"And accomplishing half of the general's mission, ridding the command staff of an enemy infiltrator,

thanks to your excellently thrown knife. Oh! Almost forgot. The patrol reached the tavern and found Alenso's body, but there was no sign of the assassins, their dead, or Pleates' body. They must have taken it with them. They are still searching for the assassins, but I think the Hermanians got away safely," Sonja added from behind the curtains of her adjacent sleeping area.

A sorcerer's uniform of flowing red robes was draped over a chair near the towel rack, no plain soldier's armor in sight. Aetria felt almost strange dressing in her normal uniform, after spending the week in leather and steel. "Why would they take Pleates' body with them?"

"Probably so we could not make a public spectacle of his body to embarrass the Hermanians. This way they could say we are trying to cover his desertion by making false accusations about his spying for them," Sonja said over the clink of metal as she put her armor on. "The Hermanians risked all to get the general. They have lost a very valuable spy. They have unbalanced their forces and made their position very vulnerable. They will be paying a very stiff price for their errors. It is time to meet the king."

Aetria followed the voice out of the tent and into the bright midday sun. She stood blinking for a few moments, trying to adjust her eyes. The glare was magnified by the reflection from the general's highly polished gold armor. The hand that steadied her arm was not huge and hairy, but small. Aetria realized with a shock that Sonja was the one in the armor. "But..."

Sonja led Aetria toward the king's pavilion. "The commander of the Lancers was Alenso. I was, in fact, his sergeant, but the one who saw the opportunity and led the charge. I credited him with the victory because five years ago there was no chance a woman would rise to command an army. I have stayed in the shadows, commanding through him. The king knew, of course, and with his support, I was able to make changes in the army, and today I take my rightful place. I want you by my side, today and in the future. You made that decision when you stood by me at the inn. We need to work closer, the grunt and the sorcerer. I trust we can do that, Sorceress."

"Yes, Ma'am, General, I believe we can!"

CHAPTER 7

"Your request for a Sorcerer Guard escort has been disapproved."

Aetria stared angrily at the small, thin Adept Provisioner, and wondered if Cemaron understood what he had just said. Until a few weeks ago, Cemaron had been the commander of the king's sorcerer regiment, a rule-bound, administrative commissary who had advanced through the ranks by being able to meet the needs of the king above the needs of his troops.

With the death of Pleates, and the two armies now combined after the stunning success of General Borlock's last battle, he was left the senior sorcerer and elevated to Pleates' position. He might have the king's ear, but he still worked for the general.

"I'm sorry, Sir, but I am on the general's business. She wants me to travel to Inhestia, and I need an escort."

Cemaron was standing next to Aetria. She was much taller than he was, and she could tell he was not comfortable having to look up to her. He walked slowly around to the chair behind his desk and sat down. He picked up a scroll and tapped its end lightly on the hard, wood surface of the desk.

"I remind you, Sorceress Aetria, that the Sorcerer Guard is under direct command of me, the Sorcerer Commander, and as such, does not fall under the control of the general. You, on the other hand, are not under my command which is a clear violation of the Council's agreement with the king. This order from the general"—Cemaron waved the scroll at her—"makes you her Chief Advisor, a position which is not described in any agreement, and conflicts with my role as the primary advisor of things magical to the general."

Frustrated with dealing with the man, Aetria reminded herself that technically he was right, and that she had to deal with someone who had a history of resisting change, of any kind. "General Borlock specifically states in her order that my job does not supplant your position as Advisor of Spell Warfare."

"True, true, it says that, Sorceress, but everyone on the staff knows that she turns to you for advice about the use of Power," the little Adept pointed out to her crossly.

She made a point back to him. "And she also turns to me for advice on things having nothing to do with the Power. The engineers don't—"

"You are not an engineer, Aetria, or an arms master, or any other staff member; you are a sorcerer. You are not under the control of a sorcerer. The Council is making a formal objection to the king on that issue, but in the meantime, is forced to allow the general to take your services from us. We need your skills to do magic work, not to make my job difficult by providing conflicting advice."

"Sir! When in the past two weeks have I provided conflicting advice? I have, on at least three occasions, supported you publicly."

"It is what you tell the general in private that worries me."

Her temper rising, Aetria clamped down on the urge to yell and said very evenly, "Meaning what, Sir?"

Tossing the order on the desk, Cemaron folded his arms across his chest and sat back in his chair. "You have revealed practices, which up until you talked about them, were considered none of a non-sorcerer's business. This made us look like we were withholding information from her. Now she questions everything."

"If Pleates had used better sense and not tried to keep everything he did a secret, the general would have more trust in the things we do. The sorcerer regiment having been the source of one major spy, do you blame her for looking for more?"

"You are treading on dangerous ground, Sorceress."

"Sorry, Sir, but about the matter of my escort. As a Sorceress, I am entitled—"

"To nothing. You are not acting in a position of a sorcerer. The Council has revoked your entitlements. When you come back under our control, we will take over your protection, supply you with a source of Power, and allow you to exercise your authority as Sorceress. Until then, you are the general's concern."

Unable to control her anger, Aetria wheeled about and walked away, saying over her shoulder, "The general will hear of this!"

* * * *

The general had visitors when Aetria stormed up to the command tent. Lieutenant Valetti, the general's

aide-de-camp, wisely sent Aetria back to her own tent with a promise to notify her as soon as the general was available. By the time the aide sent word for her to come, Aetria had cooled down enough that she was able to present her problem to the general without screaming.

"He has the right to do this, Aetria. I knew that when I wrote the order. I was hoping the Council and I would not end up in a confrontational relationship with each other. Well, it was expected, so I should not be surprised."

Aetria stood clenching and unclenching her fist. The urge to pace up and down was almost overwhelming.

"Relax before you break something, Sorceress. I have a simple solution to the problem. I am going to appoint you a Captain of Cavalry, effective immediately. You will then proceed to Inhestia with a patrol of my Royal Guard as escort to find out what you can about Pleates' ability to track us down. Return when you have information for me." Guiding Aetria out the door with one hand on the Sorceress' back, Sonja added, "Don't stay there for four years getting the answers, either. I need you back here as soon as you can return. We have a war to end."

* * * *

Aetria looked at her new armor resting on its armor rack with a Captain of Cavalry sash draped over the breastplate. She wondered if what she was doing was what she wanted. In the morning she would be leaving for Inhestia, but was she going as member of the Order? Or as an officer of the king? The ban on her entitlements did not demote Aetria from the rank of Sorceress, and she could still practice magic, but it made her a virtual outcast to her regiment. Losing access to a Power source cut her off from the community sharing experienced during the nightly meditation done to charge their Power grids to the maximum. She thoroughly enjoyed the exchange of the news of the day afterwards with her fellow sorcerers, especially Acting Sorceress Wilmina, catching up on what the 5th Support Company was doing.

Although banned from using the regiment's Power source, she still had access to one, Pleates' source. Until now, she had never had to use it. With a sigh, Aetria opened Crusher's source and began her meditation. And stopped.

What is that strange feeling?

She closed the lid, and the feeling went away. Opening it again brought back the strangeness. To her Power sense, it was like a buzz around the normal flow of energy from the source. She backed away from the box, wondering if she had positioned herself too close to the dead Adept's source. The strangeness did not go away, although her sense of received energy decreased every so slightly. She had a choice, put up with the buzz and Power her grid, or give up. She decided to continue her meditation and find a way to block out the irritation, at least until she had sufficient Power in her grid.

How did Crusher put up with this? she wondered, as she absorbed the Power.

* * * *

Her personal pride was all that kept Aetria in the saddle during the grueling three-day trip from the army's encampment to Inhestia. Her escort of eight Royal Guards had set a fast pace the moment they had left the last sentry post, and continued it from morning meal to dusk every day. Bivouacking at night consisted of a quick meal eaten in the dark, rolling oneself in blankets, and falling asleep instantly. After rising at dawn, a trip to the bush to take care of nature's call and a splash of water in one's face were allowed before gulping down the morning meal of watery gruel and fruit.

Aetria could have slowed the pace early on after her escort commander, Sergeant Delmona, a woman as hardened as Sonja was, had asked her if they were moving too fast for the captain. Aetria, looking back over the past three days, regretted telling the sergeant to keep up the pace. She ached in every muscle she had, and then some. When the gates of Inhestia appeared at last, shortly before dusk on the third day, she sighed in relief. Her mind raced ahead to a longed-for hot tub and a soft sleeping-pallet. The challenge from the gate sentry drew her mind back to the present as Sergeant Delmona announced Aetria by her rank of Captain of Cavalry. The sentry called for his duty officer, who appeared within moments.

The elderly man stepped forward into the torch light of the gates to get a better look at the distinguished visitor. She recognized the old Sorcerer Guard as Lieutenant Hamilto, who had been a guard at Inhestia for as long as anyone could remember.

"Sorceress Aetria?"

"It is good to see you, Lieutenant Hamilto. Sorry to disturb your evening meal."

"Receiving one of our own back home is never a disturbance, Sorceress. You confused me by your uniform and fancy title. Do I alert Mage Kelristo, the headmaster, or Magess Trelana?"

"I am here to see the Magess. Please see that my escort is billeted promptly."

"It will be done, Sorceress ... I correct myself, Captain. Welcome home."

* * * *

"Captain of Cavalry?" Trelana said, her eyes running over Aetria's armor. Aetria wondered if she appeared as exhausted as she felt to Trelana, with the strain of travel on her face and the smell of unwashed clothes faintly present. Trelana held out her arms for a welcoming embrace. Aetria came forward and gave her a firm hug. The coldness of armor's hard metal made a barrier to the warmth of their reunion.

"It is a long story, Magess. After a hot tub and some rest, I'll be ever so happy to relate all." The tiredness in Aetria's voice confirmed her condition for Trelana.

"Of course, the tub is waiting at the visitor's cottage. I will cancel my morning classes so we can be undisturbed. We have much to talk about, Aetria."

* * * *

Aetria luxuriated in the tub, soaking for much longer than she had ever remembered, the aches of the three-day ride seeping out into the welcomed heat of the water. When she finally emerged from the tub, she donned a soft sleeping-robe. At Inhestia's elevation, the summer's night still held a chill, and as she lay down in the soft bed, she considered using a blanket. Those were her last thoughts as sleep crept over her.

Arising the next morning, Aetria felt well-rested and starved. Trelana had suggested Aetria take the morning meal with her, and she had agreed. Eating with the students would have given her the opportunity to visit with friends, but it would also have delayed her meeting with Trelana. She had a busy day ahead of her.

After her morning toilet, she stood staring at her saddlebags, trying to decide if she was going to wear

her armor or her red Sorceress robe. Wearing armor here at Inhestia seemed to be a way of showing the Council that Sonja had control of her instead of them. Not wearing armor would be less confrontational.

Wearing her sorcerer uniform would mean capitulation—giving into their demands. Neither of those options appealed to her. She did not want to anger the Council, but she thought their actions to ban her from the regiment harsh and unfair. She impatiently scolded herself for not being able to choose.

You are the general's Chief Advisor—make a decision! She made one.

* * * *

Trelana missed Aetria's arrival, although she was watching for it. As she looked toward the visitor's cottage, waiting for Aetria to emerge, she was thinking of that moment only a few months earlier when Aetria had walked across the square in her Sorceress uniform, so proud, so military. The knock on her door startled her, and she turned from the window to tell the student page to answer it. The page escorted Aetria into the room. Aetria was wearing a student's robe, a red Sorceress sash the only color against the plain white cloth.

Knowing Trelana was staring at her robe, Aetria said, "I thought it would be less of a barrier between us if I took on my role as your student instead of a king's officer or a banned Sorceress."

"I can understand why the general made you her Chief Advisor, Little One. You try to think of all sides of a situation. Your decision was the right one for me."

* * * *

The page had removed the remains of the mid-day meal before Aetria finished telling Trelana all that had passed since her departure three months ago. The Magess had not interrupted once, letting the younger woman get the entire story out of her system without putting her on the defensive. Aetria had carefully deleted any of the story that connected to her Power-sensing ability, preferring to give Sonja the credit for maneuvering them away from Hermanian patrols. With a great deal of trepidation, she told her mentor of the grid burnout incident. Trelana reacted with sadness, but again had not questioned her for more details. Until now.

"A most interesting story, Aetria. You say your concern for Alenso Mythrian's life, and the shock of being hit by the bullet, is what triggered the burnout? I believe you are right. Yours are the only battle-related burnouts that we have a survivor to question, and yours are under the most trying conditions. I don't know how we can overcome the effect of pain and severe emotional stress on spell use. I don't see the value of torturing a sorcerer to see if they can control Power under pain.

"I must talk with Mage Kelristo and come up with a solution to this problem. The obvious one is to forbid the use of Power under those circumstances which would be very hard to do during a fight. Your loss of control, Aetria, is distressing, but we don't have enough information to say it is uniquely your fault."

"By forbidding, do you mean—"

Trelana reached out and patted Aetria's hand. "Oh, no! I don't mean casting you out. If we forbid it, then all sorcerers will be affected by the edict. And relax, I am not going to recommend years more of control work for you. Unless," Trelana looked hard at Aetria. "Unless you have something else to tell me."

The shock of her words surged through Aetria, causing her to wince slightly. Trelana's hand pat became a firm grasp. "Tell me now, dear."

She couldn't lie to Trelana, but she couldn't tell her everything. Hiding her Power sensing for so many years would be unforgivable at this point. Frantically she tried to think of something to say that would sound plausible. Her mentor sat there waiting.

"The reason I was sent here by General Borlock was to try to determine how Pleates tracked us down when the Hermanian army couldn't. She thought it might be his source. She knows that an exposed source can be sensed by sorcerers."

Trelana frowned and thumbed their joined hands gently on Aetria's leg. "From what I have heard from Adept Cemaron, you told her that. The Council is not taking that well. But continue."

Freeing her hand, Aetria took Pleates' source out of her robe pocket and handed it to Trelana. "She asked if Adepts had special skills to track their own sources. I told her I don't know because I have not been instructed in that area. I was sent to ask you if that were possible."

Looking at the source, Trelana opened the lid and exposed herself to the Power. After a moment, she closed the lid and handed it back to Aetria. "There is no secret knowledge about personal sources. If there were, I would have to enjoin you never to reveal it, even to your general. You would obey me on that, wouldn't you?"

Aetria dropped her head, the shame she felt from the rebuke reddening her cheeks. "Yes, Ma'am."

"When we send an Adept candidate out on their quest for a new spell, they have to have a source. We give them one, crafted uniquely for them in honor of their candidacy. If they succeed in their quest, then they are allowed to keep the source. I sense nothing different in this source. You have not finished telling me what I asked you to tell me."

"I—you know I have been banned by Adept Cemaron from exercising my entitlements as a sorcerer. He said it was by order of the Council."

Trelana nodded her head.

"I haven't been banned from using the Power, so I have been using Pleates' source to recharge my grid." She added breathlessly, "No one said I couldn't do that."

"That is true, otherwise I would have taken the source from you."

Thank the Power, Aetria thought. "I told you he gave me his source before sending me off to escort the general. When I tried to give it back, he insisted I would need it. I never used it once. After my burnout, I knew I couldn't expose it or our position would be known. When I opened his source for the first time just a few days ago, I sensed a 'buzzing.' I don't know how to describe it, but it does not feel like the normal energy from the source."

Trelana reached for the source again. Aetria almost did not hand it to her, afraid her revelation had changed her mentor's mind. The Magess opened the source again, concentrating on it. The "buzz" Aetria had described was still there to her senses, as it was the first time Trelana opened the source. Trelana closed the source and held it in her hand. Aetria held her breath unconsciously.

"Since the burnout, had you been exposed to any source before Pleates'?"

"No, Trelana."

The Magess got up and walked into her sleeping chamber, returning with her own source. "Remember not to stand as close as you do to Pleates' source. Look at mine."

Even at a further distance than she thought prudent, the Power coming from Trelana's source was stronger than she felt comfortable with. She backed up a further step. Trelana shut the lid on her source.

"Well?"

"The 'buzz' is there, Magess," Aetria said. *But why is the buzz from Pleates' source so much stronger? It would be nice to be able to ask Trelana, but I'd better not.*

"I will ask Mage Kelristo what he thinks, but my guess is that your second burnout has caused you the same over-sensitivity you felt last time. Have you spelled anything since your burnout?"

"No, I have been—"

"Busy playing soldier? Illusion me a thunderstorm, complete with hail."

Why is she prodding me? The storm was spectacular, even in Aetria's opinion. She added water from the horrendous rainfall rising rapidly up past their ankles. The thunder was deafening; the lightning's sharp bursts of jagged light reflected brightly off the descending rain. The egg-size hail splashed water up from the rising flood like rocks thrown into a pond.

The page ran into the room and shrieked when she saw water flowing towards her. Putting her hands over her ears, she rushed out. Aetria ceased the illusion, allowing an echo of the thunder to sound faintly off the room's walls. She felt as drained as the water that disappeared from the floor.

Trelana handed her Pleates' source. "After that, you are going to need this. Very impressive; almost as good as the one you did for me months ago. Then you had more hail, but the water was a nice touch. You have gotten out of practice, but that is not your fault. You know a thunderstorm is one of the hardest exercises of control you can do, and you do it well. I will report this also to Mage Kelristo. You must promise me that you will report any abnormal spell effects at once."

"Yes, Ma'am, I will." *My Power sensing isn't exactly a spell effect.*

Trelana left the room to find her page. Aetria walked to the window and looked out, the scene so very familiar to her. She had spent hours staring out this window during her course of studies with her Mentor. Aetria's guilt for not telling Trelana about her Power sensing was becoming a stone around her heart. The Magess had only tried to do the best for her, and Aetria rewarded her Mentor with half-truths.

Perhaps it would be better to tell her and accept the consequences.

Trelana swept back into the room and sat down in her favorite chair. She pointed to the hard, straight-backed chair next to her, the one where her students sat uncomfortably for hours at end, and Aetria sat down in it.

"Your killing Pleates has caused quite a commotion in the Council."

"It was either kill him or he killed the general."

"Don't get me wrong, Aetria. Pleates deserved to die for spying on our country and dishonoring our Order. The commotion is about the growing animosity between the general and the Council. Pleates did us no favors by his actions, and it has aggravated the mistrust the general feels about sorcerers. General Borlock's making you a field officer is not going to be taken well."

Aetria clasped her hands together in her lap and leaned forward slightly, putting as much sincerity as she could into her voice. "Sonja Borlock is a superb officer and commanding general. She only thinks of the good of the country and her service to the king. She is not spiteful and mean. Hard, yes."

"Distrusting? Not if you give her no cause to be. Pleates did that. He lied to her, or at the very least, misled her on several occasions. For example, the report he gave her of the incident involving the death of the five Novices did not contain my report as he told me it would. I stated in my report that I believed he had unreasonably increased the risk of grid burnout on the Novice Aggressors by sending them into battle before they were ready. I also said I believed his projector weapons killed the Novices."

Trelana jerked, as if stabbed by a needle. "His projector weapons were responsible for their deaths?"

"Yes, that is what I saw." Aetria told her the events of the battle. Trelana did not react further, except to frown at the end of the story.

"What you have said is at odds with what we know of the incident. Pleates had been sending the Council daily reports since we gave him permission to create the weapons. Those reports did not mention any problems with the staffs, but they did have some uncomplimentary remarks about you."

Aetria sat back, knowing the hurt showed in her face. "I am sorry to hear that, Magess. When he foolishly went after that source and caused the death of my charges, I lost whatever respect I had for him. He is dead, and I am not sorry."

"Sometimes the dead have a way of taking revenge, Little One. You must be very careful what you say about him. He still has supporters around, despite his treachery."

"I hear you, Mentor, but please keep in mind that, with all the bad Pleates is connected to, the general still does not consider his beliefs and attitude as the same as the Council's. If the Council stands up for him, then she might. That will widen the gap between the Council and the general. Please, listen. Sonja is willing to trust sorcerers. She trusts me. That is why I think it is important to complete my mission, to build on that trust with her."

Trelana nodded. "I agree, and I have told the Council your relationship with the general can be a very good thing. Now, how can I help you with your mission?"

Aetria needed to know more about Pleates. He was well known as a powerful Aggressor, but little was known about his student years. "What was Pleates' new spell, that he was elevated to Adept for? Could he have found a way to track sorcerers?"

"No, his spell was related to pure destruction. We have kept it secret because it is so deadly. I will tell you now, but I caution you not to tell anyone else except General Borlock, and only if you feel that is necessary."

"I promise."

"Pleates was sent on his quest into the foothills of our estate. There are rustic cabins in isolated places

that we use for the purpose of putting initiates off by themselves, so they can concentrate on their studies. Sorcerer Guards take them food and check on their welfare, but that is the only company they get. Quests normally last several years. Pleates returned to us after six months, surprising everyone. Even more surprising was his new spell. He could destroy sources."

Aetria's jaw dropped open in surprise. "Destroy sources. How?"

"We don't know. I saw him explode a source in the courtyard of the Council chambers. It was very impressive. Crusher's elevation to Adept was hotly debated in Council because, although he had advanced spell knowledge, he was unable to teach the spell to other sorcerers—an historical requirement. None of the senior Aggressor instructors could duplicate his source-destroying spell. In the end he was elevated for the practical reason that the Order had joined the army and his particular skill would be useful when facing enemy sorcerers. With his death, that skill is gone."

Probably a good thing, Aetria thought. "He told me he was a candidate for Mage, and implied the staffs were the reason he would be elevated. Is that true?"

"Yes. He discovered a way to project a fireball spell into a special box at the end of the staff. The box acts to increase the intensity, until it releases out the front end of the projector. It only seems to work for Aggressor spells like lightning and fireballs. The advantage of the weapon is that the Aggressor using it does not have to use much of his own Power to eject it from the staff box. Thus, the Aggressor can maintain effective spell use for five times his normal ability."

"That is incredible. It means the Laws of Spell Warfare have been changed forever."

"Maybe not, Little One. Pleates kept the secret of how he made the projector weapons. Our Engineer, Aristes, made the staffs for him, but Pleates added something to them later on. Aristes is trying to figure out what it was but has not been successful so far. We only have two of the weapons."

"Novices Belanar and Fernonia survived the blasts. I was told they were sent back to Inhestia after Pleates' death."

"They are here. They are working with Magess Corerilla, the Aggressor Mentor, showing her the techniques they were taught by Pleates."

"They have been using the weapons? By the Power, Magess, we have lost four Novices to those weapons already. You must stop this insanity!"

Trelana reached out and touched Aetria's arm. "The weapons have been working just fine. Until now, no one has said anything about the weapons being at fault. I will do so today to Magess Corerilla, but don't take this wrong, Aetria. Yours is the only voice that says there are problems—"

"And I am under a cloud with the Council! Do what you can, Trelana. I know what I saw, and I saw those things explode."

A knock on the door drew their attention. Trelana's page stuck her head around the corner and said a messenger from Mage Kelristo requested the Magess's presence for an emergency meeting of the Council.

Trelana groaned. "These things last all night. Tell the messenger to tell Kelristo I am coming. Aetria, will I see you again tomorrow?"

Standing, Aetria shook her head. "I'm leaving in the morning to visit my parents before I return to the encampment. I will stop by to say goodbye before I go. Can I walk with you to the Council chambers?"

"That would be nice, but no marching. I am not in the army."

* * * *

As her escort clattered into her father's courtyard, Aetria realized she had made a mistake by not riding in alone. The work hands surrounding the wagons being loaded with provisions were slowly putting their burdens down, their posture expressing their wariness with the arrival of an army unit in their midst. Her father left his seat in the shade of the warehouse porch where he had been supervising the loading of the wagons, and came down the steps at the end of the dock, approaching Sergeant Delmona's horse slowly.

"Can I help you, Sergeant?" he asked in his heavy Tierian accent.

The sergeant turned in her saddle and looked back at Aetria in the rear of the formation. The sun at Aetria's back made her father shield his eyes as he looked in the direction the sergeant was looking. Aetria dismounted and walked toward her father.

He squinted at her. "Captain? Is there something wrong with our deliveries?"

Removing her helmet and tucking it under her arm, Aetria smiled at her father. "Father, it is just your foolish daughter coming for a visit."

With a shout of recognition, her father rushed forward and hugged her fiercely to him. Patting her armored back, he said, "This is not an illusion, my sorceress child? A captain in the Royal Guard? No matter, you will explain. Welcome home! Foreman Penvel, give the men a break. A ration of cool wine for all in celebration of my daughter's return home."

A cheer greeted his announcement; the men reacting in relief from what they thought was going to be a confrontation, that had turned into a happy occasion. Aetria nodded at the unasked question from Sergeant Delmona. The sergeant ordered the escort to dismount.

"Father, could you please put my men up for the night in the warehouse?"

"Gladly, and we shall continue the celebration with meat and cheese for the evening meal, plus more wine. But only after the break is over and the wagons are loaded! I have a business to run here!"

The prospect of a party lightened the mood even more. The foreman sent a youngster running for the wine and waved to Sergeant Delmona to get her attention, then pointed behind the warehouse to the barn where the escort could stable their horses. Aetria's foster father guided her towards the modest house where her mother, Valeria, waited. The smile on her face was as large as her ample girth.

* * * *

Aetria paused at the top of the steps that led to her attic bedchamber and looked down at the common room where her foster parents awaited her appearance. They were talking animatedly, the excitement in their voices causing an occasional word to float upwards to her hearing.

Captain of Cavalry...

So grown...

Beautiful woman...

Sorceress.

She leaned on the railing, her attention on her mother, the woman who had taken in a baby girl so many years ago and raised her as her own. Childless, her mother had longed for babies of her own, but accepted a fate that denied her children. Her father had told the story of her arrival in their lives many times, the tears of joy always flowing from his deep-set Tierian eyes. When the mysterious man had appeared in the middle of the night with a blanket-wrapped bundle in his arms, her father had taken the baby and brought it to his wife. She had taken the child from him, and checking it over, smiled her wide smile and said, "It's a girl. Her name will be Aetria." Her father nodded. "Tierii Aetria Menhala v'Grelnes."

"I forgot, it should be Aetree, I believe."

"No, my wife, the 'a' is for the Delmathian woman who stole my heart," he said, hugging the woman he had given his people up for. "Her name should have your people's ending. Aetria is the daughter of our two peoples."

Her mother gave him another smile, her life now complete.

* * * *

The woman in that story had grown older, heavier, gray creeping into her hair. The beauty that had caught her father's eye was still there but had matured. The worry wrinkles around her eyes were not from anything Aetria had done, having been a quiet girl who always did the will of her parents. No, as Aetria watched her mother, she realized the fears that had etched the skin around those shockingly blue eyes were for her father.

An outcast from his Tieri people, his decision according to him, he was not accepted by her Delmathian people. After all these years as a merchant, it was only during the war that he prospered beyond the level of breaking even. Her home villagers distrusted him for his Tieri ancestry and were quick to blame him for the misery in their life. Aetria had not been spared their pettiness, but because she lacked the hooked nose and deep-set eyes of the Tieri people, they tolerated her.

Her mother looked up and saw Aetria at the top of the stairs. She called up to her. "Hurry down, my daughter, I am dying to hear why my little girl is wearing that ugly armor instead of her lovely robes."

Straightening, Aetria fluffed out her skirt, the first time she had worn anything but a uniform in years, if she included her student's robes as a uniform. The loose blouse she had donned felt cool on her skin, not the sweat-soaked under blouse that had been stuck to her for the past five hours. Washed, in clean clothes, she was ready to join her family.

"I'm coming, Mama."

* * * *

"I must check on our people to ensure they have been properly fed and aren't too drunk." Her mother left them.

They were seated in what served her father as a library. He was not a learned man, compared to Mage

Kelristo, but he prided himself on being able to read the histories of the land and of its leaders. This was one thing that made him different from his Tieri people; he was interested in things besides gold and material wealth. She truly loved this room. When she was little, Aetria had spent many hours in here listening to his tales of travel and prying from him the secrets of his people.

She looked at the wall behind him lined with shelves holding his tomes and scrolls. His writing desk sat against the wall to his right with several stains forever absorbed into the wood from Aetria spilling ink when she was a young girl learning to write. Her father had encouraged her education, tutoring her himself when he could not afford to send her to the village teacher. She remembered so well his grumbling about spending even the small amount of gold he had on her being educated by a people who taught her values different from his, but as he had said so often, "You have to live in this world!"

It was years later before she learned what he really meant. Not being well accepted by the other village children, she had spent a lot of her time playing in her imagination. He was afraid her constant escape to that world would make her too vulnerable to the threats of the real world. He knew also that she would not be free to live the life he had growing up, for Tierians were wanderers and rovers, not tied to the land.

Here in this room he had taught her some of the language of his people, useful when they wanted to hide their conversation from her mother, who had refused to learn her husband's native tongue, saying it was too hard for her simple mind. In here he had also taught her a little of the Tieri's secretive culture and their proud traditions. They had not always been the fiercely independent clans they now were, but had been one nation under the rule of the Rhuhani clan. A war was fought amongst the Tieri, and an event he called "The Dispersal" sent the clans out into the world. She had never found out what had happened, and he would not speak of it again.

In this same room, after pushing the chairs and desk out of the way, she had spent endless hours learning the self-protection skills of his people, the infamous "Tierian Thief" style of fighting. She had asked why they were called thieves, and he had told her that the Tierians were accepted reluctantly by all of the land's peoples, as their main interest was in accumulating as much gold as possible by any means available to them. They would deal in any commodity, preferably legal, but if there was no market trade to be had, they found other means to accumulate wealth—hence their reputation as thieves. He told her that the Tieri skills in stealth were legend, aided by their magic and their self-defense disciplines.

She had been intrigued by their use of magic, for in her Delmathian world only sorcerers practiced that skill. When she had tested for magic use and was selected, her mother had been very pleased and proud of her. Her father approved in his quiet way, but she worried that his heart was not in letting her go. When she asked if she would meet any of his people at Inhestia, he laughed and said no. Those that tested for magic had rarely chosen to go into training, for using the power for the good of all was not in the Tierian interest. Instead, those who were found to have the "touch" were trained by the clan's elder to use their skills to acquire gold via sales of potions and charms. Some used their skills to disguise themselves, handy when carrying out nefarious activities. At Inhestia she had asked Trelana why the Order allowed the Tierians' use of Power. Trelana told her that the Order did not approve of their dabbling in magic, but there was no law that said they could not hawk their medicines and lucky charms.

Her father interrupted Aetria's musings. "She is worried, Aetria—not for those men, but for you. That Pleates was a dangerous man."

Relaxing in her leather chair, a copy of which her father sat in opposite her, Aetria said, "I know, Father, but he is dead now. He was a spy for the Hermanians and betrayed our Order, and the king!"

"Yes, I have known for a long time that he was spying for the Hermanians."

The shock in Aetria's face was echoed in her voice, as in exasperation she said, "But why didn't you tell me, or if not me, then someone?"

Her father looked at her for a moment, a hesitation in his response, as if he was considering avoiding her question.

"The risk to you was too high, and I feared for your mother and the home we had built."

"Fear of whom? You would have been protected by the king for coming forth with that information."

"Your King would not have been able to protect you, or your mother, or myself from paying the consequences."

"What consequences?"

Her father shifted in his leather chair, perhaps feeling uncomfortable with having to say more about the subject than he wanted to. "Talupna Ani, Aetria," her father said in Tieri.

Powers, her father was swearing her to secrecy with the strongest of Tieri vows! "Dama iko," Aetria responded, meaning, "So I swear."

"It is a long story, Aetria, but I will tell it short. Among the Tierian outcasts, we have our own organization. We share information and watch out for each other. Shortly after Adept Pleates joined the army, he began to use the services of our people to do certain tasks that he did not want his own people to know about. Since we were outcast of the Tieri, and not as bound to either The Code or an established clan, we were considered by him to be safer than using other professional 'services.' It was mostly courier work, passing messages back and forth to a special location. After several years of this work, we found out who was receiving those messages and stored that information away for future use. We suspected that he was spying but did not see any results which could be tracked to him."

"Even that information would have been helpful to us, Father."

"Aetria, remember the nature of our people. Information is useful for sale, but not if you give it away. Our people were not threatened, nor was a great loss of life caused by our not revealing his efforts. We did not yet see a need to waste this potential source of gold. The courier business was good. About two years ago he expanded his needs. He engaged some of us to acquire certain minerals he needed."

"Minerals? Why didn't he just buy them?"

"These minerals came from places that were under the most serious protection."

A look of disbelief crossed Aetria's face. "The source mines? He wanted you to steal sources?"

"No, but he wanted certain minerals that existed in the mines. It took us quite a while to 'acquire' them.

At this point one of us decided that it was time to use the information we had to his advantage. We argued against it, but he went ahead with his plan. Before his plan reached fruition, we received a warning from a highly placed Tierian in the Hermanian army to stop what we were planning to do. We tried to convince our member to stop, but he continued. Within a week, he was found dead, along with most of his family, killed by assassins."

"Hermanian Assassins?"

Her father grunted in disdain at her question, as if words were too valuable to use in his answer. "The army said so. But the way of death had a signature of its own. We knew it was Kanchala."

"Our own people? The Death Clan?" Aetria almost whispered the last, as if afraid the source of nightmares could hear her.

"The Kanchala had been hired by the Hermanians very early in the war to train their assassins. The murders were made to look like Hermanian assassin work, but the method of killing was Kanchala. They would never have taught this method, for a master does not teach his apprentices everything he knows. No, this was a Rhuhani warning directly at us, and we had no choice but to obey it."

"But the Rhuhani no longer rule the clans. Why should they interfere?"

Her father looked off into the corner of the room, his eyes focused on something in his past. "Always respect the Rhuhani, Aetria—but watch your back. The Tierian who warned us off the first time was Rhuhani. There must be a very important reason for their actions if they involved the Ruling Clan."

Aetria pulled her feet up under her in chair, as if to protect them from some evil thing crawling around on the floor. She hugged herself, cold even in the warmth of the summer evening. She looked at her father, waiting for him to finish his story.

He shifted his eyes off the past and back to her face. "Several more years went by. Pleates continued to use our services, but infrequently. Perhaps our member had caused him to become cautious in his dealings with us. His activities were subdued. It was so until he returned to Inhestia in the spring of this year."

"That is when I rejoined the army."

The sadness in her father's deep-set eyes jolted Aetria. His voice dropped a level as he spoke. "You caused him a great deal of concern, my daughter. Whatever was his plan, you were interfering with it. On reaching the army encampment, he sought us out once more. He wanted you taken care of."

Her breath exploded out of her. "What?"

His voiced shifted, anger creeping into it. "He hired one of us to kill you. The member was a very old friend—one who had watched you raised from a babe-in-arms. He told me and then took an extended journey. While he was away, the Delmathians discovered Pleates' activities, and the rest of the story you know."

Nodding, Aetria kept her eyes fixed on her father's. "Yes, but not who told the general about Pleates. Her own spies noticed the Hermanians getting set up to capture her and told her she had a spy in her staff, but that is not the whole story is it, Father?"

"There is never an end to a long story, Aetria. Just retellings and revisions."

She knew that he was not going to answer her last question. He had secrets that he was not going to tell.

"Does your 'organization' know why Pleates became a traitor to his Order and king?"

"No, but we know he had a fascination with the Logathian Mountains. Perhaps a journey there after the war would be profitable."

"Assuming we win, maybe so. In the meantime I have serious questions that I need answers for now. With him dead, who would know the answers?"

Her father rubbed his eyes, tired after a long day's work and this late evening reunion with his daughter. "The one who knows some of those answers leads the Hermanian Sorcerer Corps. But I do know the Hermanians had told their sorcerers to be on the lookout for Pleates, in the event he fled the Delmathians and sought shelter in Hermania. Perhaps a talk with a Hermanian sorcerer might be useful."

"Could you arrange that, Father?"

Laughing, he said jokingly, "For a price."

* * * *

From the safety of the trees, Aetria and Sergeant Delmona watched the worn path that came up and over the ridge to their south, wound past their hiding place, and continued across the grassy glade before starting a slow climb up the hill to the north of them. It was a path well traveled by horse in recent times, a path marking the easternmost flank of the Hermanians, made by patrols and skirmishers moving back and forth. In this area, the trees were thick and close together; the hills and little valleys made the lay of the land unsuited for movement of infantry and heavy horse. No serious battles would ever be fought here.

"If your father's information is as accurate as it has been up to now, they should be along soon." The sergeant shifted in her saddle.

Aetria looked to her right and left, seeing the other seven Royal Guardsmen sitting quietly on their horses, watching the path as she had been. Her father's price for telling her how she could capture a Hermanian sorcerer for questioning was to return home more often for visits. He told her the Hermanians did not have enough sorcerers to station them in fortified strongholds as the Delmathians did, so they routinely sent a sorcerer riding the skirmish lines to scan for source activity. The sorcerer was protected by a patrol of cavalry, normally about a half dozen men. They rode quickly between their outposts, disguised as normal skirmishers, so their presence was not marked as anything out of the ordinary. He said they moved their sorcerers before dusk set in. She had been sensing movement from the south for the past hour, but the reading was very weak. Perhaps the sorcerer had powered himself down to maximize his own search for a source.

Sergeant Delmona had not protested her request for the use of the escort to capture a sorcerer. The sergeant said getting some action on an otherwise dull escort job, begging the captain's pardon, would be nice. Aetria felt that the odds were in their favor—eight Royal Guards were more than a match for six Hermanian horsemen. The sergeant asked how they were supposed to know which one of the party was a sorcerer, if they all dressed alike. Aetria answered it would probably be obvious at the time, "but just in case, don't kill anyone unless you have to." Having powered herself down, Aetria knew she would be able to spot the sorcerer. So here they sat, waiting for the skirmishers. Her father's information was correct.

The horsemen crested the ridge to the south and cantered along the path in single file. The third soldier back had an aura. She did not have to tell Delmona anything; the sorcerer was wearing his robe underneath the leather armor, and the gray material was clearly evident. The sergeant signaled who the

target was to her troop, and they readied their crossbows. As the skirmishers rode by, Sergeant Delmona dropped her raised fist and crossbow bolts sang out, felling the skirmishers and leaving the sorcerer trying to control a panicked horse, wondering where everybody went. Delmona came out of hiding and rode down upon the struggling sorcerer, backhanding him out of the saddle with an armored fist across his chest.

Dazed, the sorcerer crashed to the ground, and Delmona was at his throat with a dagger, ordering him not to try any magic or he was a dead man. The sorcerer froze in place, the sergeant's knife cutting into his skin. Her Hermanian may have been crude, but he seemed to understand. Aetria rode out of the trees and approached the man. She was in the process of dismounting when, without warning, crossbow bolts hissed by, a number of them hitting Aetria's horse, who reared and plunged under the deadly missiles.

Aetria had already been hit, the bolt slamming through her armor into her right shoulder, and her last thoughts were of being pitched backwards through the air by the bucking horse.

The Royal Guardsmen broke cover on seeing Aetria go down, two rushing to assist their sergeant, the other five wheeling to face the onrushing group of skirmishers who had ridden down from the north just as Aetria's escort had executed their ambush. The emergence of armored horsemen out of the trees gave them pause, and they broke their charge, choosing to loose arrows and bolts at the armored troops instead of sword or lance. Two Royal Guardsmen went down while the sergeant and one of the men shoved Aetria into the arms of the last assisting horseman, who draped her across his saddle and headed for safety. Delmona turned to pull the sorcerer up, and saw that he was no longer of any value, his head pulped by the flailing hooves of Aetria's horse. She grabbed Aetria's saddlebags off the back of the now-dead horse and mounting, rallied her troops. They rode off down the southern trail, crossbow bolts arching out after them.

CHAPTER 8

Lying on her sleeping pad, looking at the bloody hole in her Captain of Cavalry commission sash, Aetria berated herself for the hundredth time that day for being so stupid. Taking a crossbow bolt in the shoulder was certainly painful. But it was going to be nothing compared to the discomfiture she would experience when the general returned to her headquarters from a field unit inspection and found out her Chief Advisor had returned from Inhestia wounded, with two of her escorting squad of the general's own Royal Guard dead.

And for what? A questionable raid into enemy territory to kidnap a sorcerer, and no sorcerer gained for the losses.

The dull ache was returning to the wound site. Aetria slipped into meditation mode to release the healing spell she had coerced out of the Adept Healer, Loreana Jorell, who was very reluctant to provide such skills to any non-healing sorcerer, let alone Aetria. Trying to ease Loreana's fears, Aetria pointed out to the healer that it wasn't exactly a heavy-duty spell, more of a self-help, quick bandage kind of spell.

Loreana countered with the argument that, with Aetria's record of spell control, she could turn a toothache cure into a resurrection spell without any effort at all. Even coming from her closest friend on the general's staff, that comment stung.

Perhaps that unkind slap at her friend's sorcerer's skills was the deciding factor that overcame Jorell's hesitation to teach her the spell, but in reality it was probably the fear of annoying one so close to General Borlock. Loreana gave her the spell, and it worked well. Aetria relaxed as the pain eased away.

The blare of trumpets from the direction of the encampment's main gate signaled the general's arrival and sent a shock of anxiety through Aetria. If she hadn't been so weak from blood loss, she would have struggled to her feet and started pacing up and down. She spent the time before the general's arrival calming herself, going over the argument again and again in her mind, trying to eliminate all emotion and leave sound reasoning and clear thinking as the basis for her actions, as she had been taught by Sonja. As the clatter of an armored body dismounting came from outside her tent, she mentally wailed, *How could I be so stupid?*

Sonja entered Aetria's tent without the normal courtesy call of "Request permission to enter," an act which Aetria misread as being out of anger, instead of what it was, concern for her welfare. Aetria's response was to pretend to be asleep.

Sonja looked at the "sleeping" sorceress, noting the paleness of blood loss in her face and the worry lines wrinkling Aetria's brow. Sonja smiled in relief. The Healer's hastily delivered report of Aetria's status was that her wound was serious, but unless infection set in, not life-threatening. If Aetria was this worried about Sonja's reaction to the news, then she couldn't be that near death's door.

"Not too wise, Sorceress," Sonja said bluntly.

Aetria sighed out her held breath. Sonja could read her too well. "I'm sorry, General."

Sonja responded to the apology somewhat harshly. "Why was a raid into enemy controlled territory so important that it lost me the services of my Chief Advisor and a squad of my personal Royal Guard?"

"I needed information from a Hermanian sorcerer, and I needed it as soon as possible," Aetria answered in a subdued voice.

"So why didn't you tell that to my Chief of Staff and let him 'acquire' the sorcerer for you, instead of taking it upon yourself to lead such a foolish raid? Don't answer that. I know your answer already. I will point out to you that your commission in the cavalry is more honorary than actual. You received it for your invaluable participation in the mission to escort me to the king. As I have told you on numerous occasions, your purpose on my staff is advisory. I have officers to lead line troops and sorcerers. Your desire to be in the midst of everything is starting to be annoying."

Lying down as she was, it was hard for Aetria to use any body language to show her contrition other than with her face, and the fire in her eyes lit by the need to rise to her own defense was not helping that. She decided an aggressive offense might be better than a passive defense.

"I sincerely appreciate the value you place in my advice on a variety of subjects, but I cannot sit around and wait for wisdom and knowledge to come to me so I can be ready to advise you. I took what I considered to be a calculated risk to gather information, which I could then turn into facts. Those facts are needed to answer your question on how that traitor Adept Pleates was able to track us cross country, thus being in the position to ambush us and cause the death of Alenso Mythrian."

Sonja sat down wearily in a chair near the camp table that served Aetria as a place to dump her few personal belongings, and untied the leather thongs that held her breastplate in place, dropping it to the rug-covered ground with a dull clang.

"Good diversionary tactic to use Alenso's name. How I miss that man. He was more than just a stand-in puppet to play the general in my place. He was a true friend, and—"

"I'm sorry, General, I didn't mean to evoke sad memories, but that truly is the reason for my actions."

Sonja's eyes swivelled to focus on Aetria, returning from that point in space where memories rest. "Not sad memories, Aetria. Alenso died as he lived: eating, drinking, wenching, and fighting at the end. A near perfect death for an imperfect man. His death would have been perfect if his last kiss had been on a woman, instead of that cross-dressing traitor of a sorcerer."

"That kiss distressed Pleates as much as anything I can think of, probably saving your life by affecting his knife throw at you. Do you really miss that huge hunk of depravity you called friend?"

"Oh, yes," Sonja smiled. "He was very good in the saddle."

"Being a good horseman is not a reason to miss someone, General."

"Wrong saddle, Sorceress."

Aetria bit her lip to stop the response that almost flew from her mouth. She quickly changed the subject. "There has been a slight complication in my life as a result of my recent visit to my mentor to tell her of my second loss of control and subsequent grid burnout."

The need to do more than lie on her back and talk was too much for Aetria. She struggled to sit erect and get up, but Sonja prevented her from leaving the sleeping pallet, actively forcing her back down. She acquiesced to her friend's protested desire to sit up by pulling Aetria's saddle around to the pallet and bracing the sorceress' back in a sitting position.

"My mentor, Magess Trelana, had already heard of the death of Adept Pleates and was gravely concerned about his traitorous acts, especially their impact on the relations between sorcerer and non-sorcerer. After I had told her the story of the escort mission, and Pleates' ability to track us down despite my not using an exposed source, she was quite surprised he could do that. Although she also thought it odd he had insisted I take his source with me when I started the escort mission, she had no idea on how he did it."

"So my theory of something special with personalized sources doesn't hold," Sonja asked.

"Yes, and no." Aetria winced when the general snorted in derision. She hastily added, "Now, please, I know you dislike my mushy answers, but this really is the case here. I had said I didn't know if Adepts was trained with special skills associated with the sources given to them by the Mage Council.

"It turns out there are no secrets attached to personal sources. A candidate for advancement to the level of Adept, after receiving the necessary training and approval by their mentor to try, must develop a new spell in their field of expertise. To increase concentration and effort, the candidate is ordered out into seclusion, given a Power source to work with, and not allowed back into the Order until she or he has mastered the new spell. If you pass, you keep your source. They are rare and valuable, but not unique. On the other hand, I think you may be correct about Pleates' source."

"The 'complication' you mentioned, Sorceress?"

"Yes, Ma'am, get to the point. Since I had kept his source, I gave it to her. She looked at the source itself, but sensed nothing out of the ordinary. She gave it back to me and asked why I thought she should. I knew better than lie to her, and risking her displeasure, told her I felt an odd discordance."

"Why should she have been upset with you?"

"Since my first burnout experience, she has been struggling with the decision to terminate my sorcerer abilities."

Sonja shot out of her chair. "Who does *she* think she is, that she can do that to one of my officers?"

"*She* is on the High Council of Magi, and my mentor. If she believes I endanger our order of sorcerers, then it is her duty to report me to the Council. It has nothing to do with the army."

"It is not the army she will have to answer to, it is me, and if I can't influence minds, I'm sure the king can."

"Now, General, please sit down and stop throwing your weight around." Aetria's pleading tone mollified Sonja somewhat, and she returned to her seat, muttering curses into her wine cup.

"Since I am to be nice, please explain to me why you could be thrown out of your order?"

"Trelana believes my grid burnouts may have had serious effects on my sorcerer ability. When I was sent back to her the first time for additional training, after the incident with the guard elephants, I discovered I could sense the presence of Powered sorcerers. When I related that to her, she became quite concerned. Her initial belief was that I was super-sensitized by the burnout, and that as I healed, the phenomenon would go away."

"Which it did not, as you used it to get us around the Hermanian pickets," Sonja interjected.

"As I said then, General, it was a secret I needed kept. Trelana lectured me on the dangers of abnormal spell use and the possibility of being thrown out of the Order. It scared me so much I did nothing to dispel her belief and avoided the topic as best I could."

"She took an awfully big chance with you, Aetria."

The Sorceress blushed, looking down to avoid eye contact. "I know, but I was her best pupil. She allowed me to train to Sorceress level and beyond. She doubled the usual level of control exercises to test me to the limit. I passed and exceeded her expectations, but she would not sponsor me for Adept level until I had proven myself once again. She sent me back into the field—with a stiff warning not to dabble in areas in which I was not specifically trained. Two months later I return, having experienced another burnout. This loss of control, plus sensing a 'discordance' from a source—well it might be the point of no return for her."

"What is this 'discordance' you feel?"

"Trelana's question exactly. My answer: I don't know. It is not something you sense with physical senses, but a parallel from the physical sense of sound helps me to describe it. It is like two singers trying to sing the same note, but one is ever so slightly off. I have exposed myself to other sources since the second burnout, and I don't really experience the same intensity of that odd feeling I do with Pleates' source, although all have some amount of 'discordance.'"

"Sounds odd to me, Sorceress. What did Trelana say?"

"Never been heard of before."

"What did she counsel you to do about it?"

"She thought it was the same manifestation I had experienced before, being super-sensitized to a source. I am to keep her informed of any changes in my spell casting."

Sonja finished her wine. "I get the feeling you are not finished with your story about your trip to Trelana, but enough for now. You are to get rest and heal. I am ordering Adept Jorell to make a special case of you. I want you on your feet in three days."

Aetria slowly eased her back off the saddle and pulled the blanket up to her chin. "Yes, Ma'am, General, I will report for duty in three days."

* * * *

Aetria was ready in two days, making good use of her borrowed healing spells and the services of Loreana. When she was able to stand and move about, she looked for "her" source, as she thought of Crusher's source now, and was distressed to find it missing from her tent. She knew she had it in her possession when she started out after the Hermanian sorcerer, but after the skirmish and her wounding, she had no memory.

Because of her lowered Power condition, she sensed sorcerers arriving outside of her tent before the request to enter was called out. She granted permission and was surprised when General Borlock brushed through the door veil.

"Good evening, Sorceress. I am very pleased to see you up and about. I have brought a present for you." Sonja held back the veil for two members of her Royal Guard, who entered carrying a litter with a body covered over with a blanket except for its hood-enshrouded head. Trailing them were Adept Jorell and Lieutenant Valetti, the general's aide.

Aetria's puzzled look brought a smile to Sonja's lips. "You wanted a Hermanian sorcerer. Now you have one."

The guards set the litter down and withdrew hastily as a moan escaped from the hidden figure. Loreana moved in swiftly to kneel beside the awakening enemy sorcerer, speaking softly in reassuring tones. Aetria watched as the healer removed the hood from the sorcerer, and would have fainted except for Sonja moving in quickly and bracing her with a strong arm around the sorceress' shoulders.

"Double surprise, Sorceress. I caught you."

The shock in her face changed to bewilderment as Aetria looked at herself lying on the litter. That "Aetria's" hair was much longer, down on the shoulders as Hermanian women wore theirs. As the healer peeled back several layers of blanket, looking for wounds, she exposed the dark gray robe of the Hermanian army's Sorcerer Corps, the sash insignia ranking her as a Novice officer. No traces of blood or entry sites for wounds were evident.

Aetria asked anxiously of Loreana, "Is she all right?"

Before Loreana could reply, Sonja spoke. "She took a sling bullet in the ribs, which might have broken one, but other than that we didn't lay a hand on her." Sonja led Aetria to a chair and eased her down into it. "Now calm yourself while the lieutenant gives his report."

Loreana poured a few drops of an amber liquid into the awakening sorceress' lips, and the woman soon relaxed into a coma-like state. While the Healer attended to the sling bullet damage, she also listened intently to Lieutenant Valetti's story of the enemy sorceress' capture.

"We took the source that the general 'borrowed' from you while you were asleep yesterday and, with the help of a platoon of the general's personal guard, set up a trap at the location of your skirmish. Your dead horse and gear were still there, although getting a little ripe with decay. We scattered the contents of your saddlebags as if wild animals had been into them, left the source slightly ajar in the debris, then hid ourselves.

"We had expected a much longer wait than we experienced and were surprised when the enemy showed up near dawn this morning. We were prepared for a stiff fight and had spread the platoon out around the bait to give us the maximum amount of warning time from our sentries as possible. The sorcerer came alone, passing by our sentries unnoticed."

"I must talk with your soldiers about their laxity, Lieutenant," Sonja said with a frown.

"I already have, Ma'am, but in their defense they were looking for an armed force with accompanying sorcerers, not for a wolf."

Aetria looked from the aide to the sleeping sorceress, "She came alone, disguised as a wolf?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Slipped right past our guard. Only noticed her when she, I should say the wolf, 'nosed' around in the debris and picked up the source. One of my men saw the wolf as it started to run away from the dead horse and let fly a sling bullet, hitting it in the side. The wolf let out a human shriek and there she stood. My men rushed in upon seeing a sorceress standing where a wolf had been. She would have escaped, but she suddenly dropped unconscious in her tracks."

Sonja glanced at Aetria as she asked her aide, "Now, how could she have escaped from a platoon of soldiers rushing her, being on foot in the middle of the them?"

The lieutenant, with a slight smile on his lips, answered, "The dragon had pretty much captured all of our attention."

Aetria reacted as if she had been stabbed in the back, jerking upright and gasping, "A dragon?"

"Yes, Ma'am. A really fierce, fire-breathing, roaring monster with huge teeth, razor claws, and terrible disposition."

"What ... what color?" Aetria asked in a little girl voice.

"Red with blue belly scales."

"Oh!" Aetria said and sat down.

"I take it then, Lieutenant, that you overcame your fear of the dragon, stood your ground, and discovered it was an illusion?" Sonja asked her aide.

"No, Ma'am, truth being, most of troops turned tail and ran. I would have also, but I was there when the 'elephant' guard charged the Saphradean line, and I knew we didn't have any elephant cavalry. I know dragons don't exist, except in children's tales, and I've always had a fondness for them. I was scared stiff,

but fascinated. I just stood there with my mouth open catching flies."

"Nice image, Lieutenant, but—"

"I guess with the sorceress passed out, there was nothing to direct the dragon. It charged off into woods, running through some of my men and nearly giving them heart failure. I snapped out of my paralysis and ran over to capture the sorceress. Took me quite by surprise when I rolled her over and found myself staring at Captain Aetria. She was cold as ice. I had to wrap her in a couple of blankets before I bound and hooded her. I then spent the rest of the morning rounding up my troops."

"Thank you, Lieutenant. That was excellent work, and thank you for telling me the truth. I would have probably been leading the troops in their headlong rush away from such a monster."

"Begging the general's pardon, Ma'am, but I think you would have probably walked up to it to study it better."

"Perhaps. You're excused. Get some rest. First, though, express my thanks to the Guard."

The Lieutenant saluted and left. In the silence of his departure, Sonja moved take a chair next to Aetria. "You knew the color of the dragon, Sorceress?"

Aetria nodded her head. "As a child I had often dreamed of such a monster. He was my special friend, Rajii. His belly scales were green, but only I could talk and play with him."

"Seems as if someone else shared your dreams, like maybe your twin sister?"

"I was an orphan, raised by foster parents. They told me I was the sole survivor of a raid by bandits on my parents' trading caravan. They said nothing of a sister."

"Maybe the bandits took her. You can't deny the similarity of your looks. She also has the talent for illusion—and also apparently your lack of control. Why did she attempt to capture the source on her own? Was she under orders, or taking matters into her own hands like a sorceress I know?"

"When she awakens, I'll find those answers for you, General, and some of my own."

A rider dismounted outside the tent and hurriedly asked for the general. Lieutenant Valetti answered him and led the messenger into the tent. Loreana covered the Hermanian's face.

By his colors and insignia, the messenger was from the general's Royal Guard cavalry. He saluted the general. "General, Squadron Commander Preldones sends his respects and reports he will be entering the camp within the hour with an emissary from the Mage Council."

"Thank you, Soldier. Tell Commander Preldones to meet me at my command tent."

Saluting, the rider dashed from the tent and rode off.

Sonja looked at Aetria, who gave her a shrug in response to Sonja's unasked question. Exiting the tent, Sonja said, "I'll change into something official looking. Meet me there as soon as you can."

* * * *

Aetria rushed towards the entrance to the general's tent, arriving just as Sonja emerged dressed in full

armor and beckoned her wordlessly to stand to her left side. Aetria followed the general's eye down the row of command staff tents to the party of an arriving dignitaries, heavily escorted by Commander Preldones' full squadron of guardsmen. Behind the Royal Guard was another squadron of Sorcerer Guard.

In their trail were two mounted Aggressor Novices carrying the strange projector weapons of Crusher's design. She recognized the two—Feronia and Belanar—as the surviving Novices from Crusher's aborted attack. Immediately behind the two Novices was a Magess dressed in the formal black robes of a member of the Mage Council, with the white shoulder to waist rank sash of a counselor.

By the Power! It was Magess Corerilla, the Adjudicator! With impending sense of doom, Aetria awaited the message about to be delivered.

The Counselor dismounted with slow grace, handing her horse's lead to a member of her own escorting Sorcerer Guard. She scanned the faces of the soldiers in front of her, briefly locking onto Aetria's. The older woman gave Aetria a frown of disapproval, probably because she was dressed in her Captain of Cavalry uniform instead of her sorcerer robe. She addressed the general formally.

"I am Counselor Corerilla, sent here by the High Mage Council, to summon the Sorceress Aetria. As she is a member of your staff and not assigned to a sorcerer regiment, I make this in the form of a personal request to you, General Borlock, from High Council Leader Meldoran."

Sonja made no effort to break the chilly reception of that delivered message by offering the hospitality of her quarters. She doubted if Corerilla would have accepted, with too much animosity between Sonja and the Council of Magi from past disagreements in the way the army and sorcerers conducted the business of war.

"We are in the middle of a campaign, Counselor. I will release her to respond to the summons when I feel I can afford the loss of her services."

The Magess Corerilla's initial response to the general's reply was a downward twitch of the corners of her lips. Aetria had the feeling Corerilla had expected such a return message and was trying to keep from making what she considered a proper retort.

"Of course, General. The Council has every faith that your normally brilliant strategies will bring a quick end to this war and we can conduct our business very soon." She handed a scroll, pulled from the recesses of her robe, to Sonja. "The reason for the summons is contained therein."

Sonja handed the scroll to Aetria without even looking at it. That brought another frown from the Counselor, who turned and remounted her horse.

"Good day, General," she said, waving her escort forward, not waiting for Sonja's response.

"I think I would rather negotiate with Hermanians than I would with her. What a cold-hearted bitch she is," Sonja said to Aetria, turning to re-enter her tent. "Your mentor finally decide to kick you out of the Order?"

Aetria hurriedly read the scroll. "A charge of unfitness for duty has been made," Aetria said, as she followed Sonja into the tent. "I am to present my case to the Council, and they will decide."

Sonja went to the weapons rack and strapped on her sword. "Fine, we will handle that when the time is

right. I have made a serious effort to keep the presence of the Hermanian sorceress secret. Adept Loreana, Lieutenant Valetti, yourself, and, of course, I, know she is here, and looks exactly like you. My guard platoon know they snatched a Hermanian sorceress, but will keep that to themselves, at least as best as any group of soldiers can keep interesting events to themselves. Make sure you safeguard that secret well. Have you talked with your sister yet?"

Aetria had to take a moment to shift mentally from the briefing she was going to give on the contents of the scroll to answering Sonja's question. The general's leap from one subject to another was a sign she was about to take some form of momentous action.

"No, I have not talked with the Hermanian sorceress yet, and we don't know that she is my sister, General."

"Yes, well, when you are as comfortable with that fact as I am, you will feel much better about it. In the meantime, I have a battle to fight, which will probably make your Counselor's prediction come true. You are to remain here and question the 'Hermanian sorceress.'" Sonja put up a cautioning hand to cut off Aetria's protests. "No, you are not riding with me; you are still too weak from your wounds. Get the answers to my questions, Sorceress. That is an order."

* * * *

Aetria's fears of conducting the interrogation through a translator were dispelled the moment she entered her tent and found the Hermanian sorceress talking with Adept Jorell in Delmathian. Loreana smiled at Aetria and introduced her patient.

"Aetria, this is Coleni. Coleni has promised to behave herself, so I have released her restraints. Coleni, there are plenty of guards to prevent you from escaping, so please don't try. With that, I will leave you two to get acquainted, or should I say, re-acquainted."

The two women watched the Healer leave and stood warily studying each other. Aetria spoke first. "Coleni ... I have heard that name before!"

"Why, I didn't know my fame had spread to the Delmathian army. Perhaps you should show me more respect. Why have I been captured?"

"I am supposed to be asking the questions here, Coleni. Once you have answered them, you will be free to go."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I will turn you over to our inquisitors and let them get the answers to my questions. They will not be so willing to let an enemy sorceress go. They may have some questions of their own to ask."

Coleni stood stiffly erect, her face set in defiance. "You will learn nothing from me, Captain."

Forcing herself to relax, Aetria held out a hand as if to plead with the other woman. "Look, Coleni, I am not after military secrets, at least I don't think the answers to my questions are. I think of this as an exchange of information, not an interrogation. That is why I am willing to let you go after the coming battle."

Reacting to Aetria's silent plea for cooperation, Coleni walked over to a chair and sat down, crossing her arms over her chest. "Very well, ask your questions. If I think my answers have military value, I will

not speak them."

"That is reasonable." Aetria walked over to the remaining chair and picked it up, positioning it across from Coleni several feet away, and sat down. "A little background first. We recently uncovered a spy in our staff. He was the Commanding Officer of the First Sorcerer Regiment, Adept Pleates. Did you know him?"

"That could be military information, so I won't answer it."

"Pleates is dead, so you do not have to protect anyone."

Coleni dropped her crossed arms, resting her hands in her lap. She carefully considered her response before speaking. "I saw him when he passed through my unit on his way to kill General Mythrian. He ordered my superior, Sorceress Telori, to brief him on all she knew about the general's whereabouts."

Aetria hesitated a moment before asking her next question. She wet her drying lips with her tongue. "I am curious as to how he reacted when you met him. You look so very much like me, he must have been taken aback by the likeness."

"Sorry, I was not introduced to him. Being a lowly Novice, I was not allowed access to that meeting."

"For a lowly Novice you know a lot about what was going on."

Coleni stiffened at her remark and Aetria regretted making it. The tone of Coleni's voice was edged in coldness when she responded. "This is turning into an interrogation, Captain. If you are going to question everything I say, then bring on your inquisitors."

Aetria made a noticeable effort to relax her stiff posture and sat back into her chair. "Now I am the one who needs to say she's sorry. I am so anxious about getting answers to my questions that I have been rude. Please forgive me."

"Not that I have a lot of choices, but I will forgive you, Captain Aetria. You have probably guessed that I was eavesdropping on their meeting. I have a reputation of being a curious person, sometimes to my detriment."

"Weren't you a little surprised when an enemy Adept sorcerer appears in your midst and starts ordering Hermanians around?"

"Not really. Before being sent out on our mission, our Adept Commander had very strongly stressed the importance of finding and capturing the general. She said our High Command had placed such a great importance on this mission that they were willing to pay the price of exposing their highest placed spy in the Delmathian army staff to get the information on the general's movements. Since they were expecting the spy to flee, they warned us he might appear at one of our intercepting units. We were given a description of the spy and told we were to take orders from him. When he showed up—"

Leaning forward in her chair, Aetria asked eagerly, "Did he say how he knew where the general was?"

"No, he didn't. As ordered, Sorceress Telori briefed him on all the information we had on the general's movements. Our Assassins had been involved in the first attempt at capturing the general and had reported there were three in the party, the general and two female escorts. We didn't know then that one of the escorts was actually the general. She told him one of the escorts was a sorceress. We knew

because we had sensed the spell she had used to scare away our troops. Of course our Assassins had sworn they had been driven off by a rescuing cavalry squadron, but Telori was convinced it was a very powerful illusion spell."

Looking at Aetria thoughtfully for a moment, Coleni said, "That sorceress must have been you."

"What makes you think I am a sorceress?"

Coleni studied Aetria for several moments. Aetria felt like a trainee under the eye of her mentor and stirred uneasily in her seat. Coleni said cautiously, "Call it intuition, or maybe I just know."

"I have enough mysteries to solve, Coleni. I don't need any more. To solve the ones I've got already, I need answers to my questions. I suggest we be more open with each other. I'll start." Puffing out a breath of air, Aetria said, "Yes, I am the sorceress you detected. I've been trying to figure out how Pleates tracked us down. I had hoped to get more information by talking with a Hermanian sorcerer. The general arranged for that to happen. You are the results of her efforts. Unfortunately, you are creating more questions than I had anticipated asking."

Coleni nodded her head slowly, as if she was beginning to understand. "Now I understand your question about wanting to know how Pleates knew where you were. I can't help you there."

"What did you think of Adept Pleates?"

"He was very haughty and rude."

Aetria smiled. "That sounds like Pleates, all right. He always was one to believe himself above others, and their beliefs and concerns were beneath him."

"It appears we have a small degree of agreement on our dislike of Adept Pleates, Captain," Coleni said. "I know my Sub-commander, Sorceress Telori, didn't like him. She isn't known for her tact and rather bluntly asked him what would make an Adept turn on his own people."

"I would be most interested in that answer myself." Aetria said.

"I thought that might be one of your questions. He said he had done it for money. After we had won the war, in payment for his services to us, he would be given a large estate in our Logathian mountain range. I was very surprised by that, and so was Telori. She laughed and told him there was nothing of value in that area of Hermania. You can't farm anything, there are no towns or cities to trade with, and there are no mineral mines. He sneered at her and said that remained to be seen."

Aetria did not believe Crusher did anything for money. It had to be something else. But then again, she didn't know Crusher that well. "Did he say anything else of non-military value to us?"

"Sounds like you are fishing, Captain Aetria. No, he left immediately afterwards, heading north with a squad of Assassins. By their uniform markings, they were from our Headquarters Unit. He must have had friends in very high places. We were all very happy to see him leave. I heard he was killed in a fight."

Aetria fingered the dagger at her waist, remembering her throw that ended the traitor's life. She looked at Coleni and found the woman staring at her hand on the dagger.

"What an interesting dagger. May I see it?"

"You want me to give an enemy sorceress a dagger? You must think I'm mad."

Coleni looked frustrated for a moment. "I will give you my word of honor I will not make any attempt on you or anyone else."

Aetria took a moment to consider Coleni's words, then flipped her the dagger. "I may be stupid taking the word of an enemy, but my Order respects honor. I have heard yours does also."

Catching the dagger deftly in her left hand, Coleni looked at it closely and slowly shut her eyes, a look of pain crossing her face. Tears fell from her closed eyes.

"My dagger causes you to cry, Coleni? Another mystery."

Opening her eyes, Coleni brushed away the tears and blearily looked at Aetria. With a croaking voice, throat tight with emotion, she said, "A Tierian dagger, just like this one, killed the closest friend I have ever had. It was found stuck in his heart."

"And you think I did it? Tierian merchants sell their weapons to anyone, Coleni."

Cautiously, the Hermanian sorceress extended her hand and offered the dagger to Aetria. She took it equally as cautiously.

"I will trade you the answer to one of your mysteries if you will answer one of mine," Coleni said.,

"Agreed."

"I know you were a sorceress because I sensed an aura of stored Power in you. That knowledge will be my death if my Order ever find out."

Aetria reacted with shock. She turned her back for a moment, not wanting Coleni to see the look of horror on her face. What kind of a Mage Order would cause the death of one of its own sorcerers for such a flaw? A flaw she possessed herself. Calming herself, she turned back to face Coleni.

"I know your fears only too well. Although my Order is a little more flexible in its view of the world, they also do not allow sorcerers manifesting what they consider aberrations to continue in the profession. If they can't reeducate them, they give them a hearing. The results range from a stern warning to being banned from using sources and casting spells. It took a lot of courage for you to tell me you can sense an aura of stored Power. I can sense that aura also. I told my mentor—now I have been summoned for a hearing. I am to report for my trial as soon as the general can be browbeaten into submission by the our Mage Council and lets me go."

"I am sorry you have to face such an ordeal, but you are lucky to have been given any chance at all. Now please answer my mystery, Sorceress. Were you with the sorcerer unit that attacked my camp three months ago?"

Aetria nodded, looking with sad eyes at Coleni. "I was the Sub-Commander of a Sorcerer recruit company traveling from our training lodge at Inhestia to join the Delmathian army. We detected your source, and our Commander decided to attack your camp. We tragically lost five Novices for no reason at all."

Coleni interrupted with an angry retort. "You only lost five fledgling sorcerers and you are sad about that! We lost over fifty seasoned soldiers to your fireballs and a dozen of our guards—" She gagged and choked, as if the image of the dead guards in her mind kept her from talking. "A dozen with slit throats. I also lost my best friend."

Tears started flowing again from Coleni's eyes, and Aetria felt a wrench of strong sympathy for the Hermanian sorceress.

"My sadness is not for losses that happen in a battle fought between our forces. We are at war. I am sad because it was senseless for my commander to even attempt a fight under those conditions," said Aetria.

"We were badly outnumbered, and I couldn't convince him not to make the attack. I blame myself for not trying harder. Instead, I went along with a plan I felt very risky. My concerns were soon proven true. And yes, it was my dagger." With a dawning realization, Aetria remembered the words of the

Hermanian. "Coleni, what does 'brachda dias' mean?"

"It means 'behind you.' Where did you hear that?"

"It was your friend's last words. He yelled, 'Coleni, brachda dias.'"

Coleni broke down, wails of agony pouring from her throat. Aetria rushed to her side. She spoke a calming spell, which acted to decrease Coleni's distress somewhat, but she continued to moan pitifully. Aetria couldn't think of anything more to do, so she held her double close and rocked her. Coleni slowly collapsed, dragging the two of them down to their knees.

The door to the tent flew open and Loreana entered. She took one look at the two women, and seeing Coleni's distress, moved in quickly to assist Aetria in supporting the young woman. Shooting a questioning look at Aetria, she said quietly, "The guard reported screams coming from your tent. What is going on?"

Struggling with the now dead weight of Coleni, who had fainted, the two women carried her over to Aetria's sleeping pallet and lowered her to the floor. Aetria couldn't think anymore. She felt a building of distress in her own heart.

"Please help her. I-I killed her closest friend. She became hysterical. I tried a calming spell, but the pain is too great."

Without looking back, Aetria walked off into the night, marching to nowhere.

* * * *

A Novice Healer found Aetria standing by the main entrance to the camp, watching a seemingly endless line of troops pouring through the gates and into the darkness beyond.

"Sorceress Aetria—Oh! Please excuse me, Captain Aetria."

Aetria turned to look at the Novice. She recognized her as Carleena, one of the Novices who had made the journey from Inhestia with her so many months ago. Numbly, she greeted her with a tired, sad smile.

"Carleena, how are Novice Verdilan, you, and the others finding army life?"

Returning Aetria's somber greeting with one of greater warmth and enthusiasm, Carleena gushed, "We are all just fine. Busier than we had ever thought we'd be, but all well." Giggling, she continued, "I guess one would expect Healers to be well. And I think we will be busier soon. My, there are so many of

them!"

"There will be fewer, come morning."

Afraid to touch the more senior officer, but needing to soothe the distress shown, Carleena put a tentative hand on Aetria's arm and dropped into the empathic stance of her profession. She spoke reassuringly. "As you have taught us, Sorceress, that is the nature of war. Don't let it burden your heart so."

"The burden in my heart is not for the dying to come, but for the dying that has been. You have a message for me?"

"Yes, Ma'am. Adept Loreana would like to see you as soon as possible."

"I am finished here. Where is she now?"

"She said she would meet you at your quarters."

CHAPTER 9

Aetria entered her tent and found Loreana seated in a chair next to a sleeping Coleni. Loreana motioned for Aetria to take the empty chair next to her. After she had, Loreana handed her a goblet of wine. Aetria waved it away.

"No, take it and drink. You have suffered blood loss and I, your Healer, am telling you to drink."

After taking the proffered goblet, Aetria took a sip of wine and tried to relax in her chair. "Could you help her?"

Loreana bent forward resting her elbows on top of her legs, lowering her head into her hands, and looking at Coleni. "I gave her temporary relief from the pain she was inflicting on herself. She would not talk to me directly, only kept saying she wanted to die to stop the misery."

That shocked Aetria. "Why would she want that? She had obviously learned to live with the loss of her friend months ago."

"I don't know, but I have put her into a trance to try to find out what the source of her pain is. Wanting to die may be a way of punishing herself."

"I don't understand."

Loreana got up and crossed to Coleni, adjusting the blankets that didn't need adjusting. She looked back and forth between the two women. "Did she tell you that Lornes—that is the name of the Novice you killed—was a friend? I think he was more than that."

"You think he was her lifemate? Why didn't she say so?"

Loreana returned to her seat, turning to face Aetria. "Could not have been her lifemate. Hermanian sorceresses are not allowed to marry and continue in practice."

A look of disgust crossed Aetria's face. "Surely they don't hold to that archaic nonsense about madness in the woman and her children if she uses spells."

"The Hermanians are a very conservative Order and have many very strong beliefs. Their beliefs are based on experience gained over centuries, just as our Order has. Our rules, and theirs, are drawn from the shared history of all sorcerers."

"But we do not believe that rubbish—"

Loreana stopped Aetria with a warding hand. "It is not rubbish. Even our Order does not allow a mother to absorb or expend Power in spell use once it is ascertained she is with child. We women laugh amongst ourselves and say you have to be crazy to want to be a mother. A pregnant woman is a woman in transition. We know there are many changes occurring in her body, driven by the formation of the baby, which are manifested not only in physical change, but mental, as well. We know there are mood swings and cravings experienced by mothers-to-be. It affects the way the mother-to-be thinks, and remember the saying, 'I think, therefore I spell.'"

Aetria felt embarrassed, more by her outburst than being lectured to. "Yes, I understand that rule, but carrying it past the birth of the child and forever is not sensible."

"Not taking it in the context of the whole view of sorcerer life, I would agree. But add other facts into the argument. Remember that in the early days of our Order, marriage was only allowed with another sorcerer. We laughed at the non-sorcerer's belief our sorceresses would absorb the life force of normal man, but did nothing to discourage it because it provided protection for our sorceresses."

Remembering her own explanation to Sonja during their stay at the lodge, Aetria nodded in agreement to the Healing Adept's words.

"In fact, there is a very strong bond between people who share the same life's experiences, and naturally enough, sorcerers sought out each other. The males tended to dominate in the early years, both from being males and their aggressive behavior, but also because life was shorter and women had to produce more children in a short period of time."

"You mean they were more breeding stock than partner."

Loreana smiled at Aetria. "An interesting choice of words, Aetria. Healers are trained in animal husbandry, as well as healing men. There are Healers dedicated to that one field. We are told by controlling the mating of animals, you can develop in a selected breed of animal certain improved characteristics: more milk from milk cows, bigger poultry, quicker hunting dogs. We think what caused our Sorcerer War was very powerful but unstable sorcerers began to appear among the sorcerers. They took over ruling the land and were responsible for our near-extinction in their battles for dominance. The non-sorcerers suffered terribly and have never forgiven us for the chaos we caused in the world."

"I had not heard of this breeding theory before, Loreana. Most of the reasons I have heard for the War were due to male egos and thirst for power." Aetria suddenly felt as if her instructors at Inhestia had lied to her. Had she been perpetuating a lie all these years in her training of Novices?

"I think you have found that our Order is not so unlike Coleni's in having conservative beliefs. I know you have been summoned to appear before the Council. There are very powerful members who do not like your liberal ways."

"My liberal ways?"

Loreana reached out and put a calming hand on Aetria. "The regiment does not understand your being assigned to the general, and some are convinced you have sold out our secrets to her. I don't know for sure, but that may be a cause for your summons."

"My ways are liberal because I believe that we, the sorcerers, should show more respect for the non-sorcerer and be more open about our ways? Must we hide everything in mystic lore? We come from the non-sorcerer. We don't become something different just because we spend years at Inhestia. That is your definition of 'liberal ways'?"

"Aetria, you have supporters as well among the sorcerers. But you are not a Mage, and not on the governing Council. Maybe someday you will be, but the path you are taking now will more likely lead to your living back among the non-sorcerers if you are not careful."

Shaken, Aetria seemed to understand for the first time what she was facing. "I hear, Loreana. I feel so very alone."

"You are not, Aetria. I count you as a friend. But we are far afield of Coleni and her problems. I am a strong believer in the breeding theory, as you call it. Our Mage Healers took the lessons learned from the War and influenced the Council to encourage marriage outside of the sorcerers. To ensure more stable babies, we discouraged spell use until mother and child are past suckling and the mother's body returns to natural rhythms. The Hermanians took their experiences further and banned all intercourse between sorcerers, unless married; then the woman must stop being a sorceress. Therefore, Coleni could not have been married."

"But you said Lornes was more than a friend?"

Loreana nodded her head. "Yes, I did. I think he was her lover."

The frown on Aetria's face told Loreana that Aetria was confused before she spoke. "You said the Hermanians banned all intercourse between sorcerers? What do they do to sorcerers who break the ban?"

"I don't know, but we will soon find out."

Turning her attention to Coleni, Loreana said quietly, "Coleni, do not try to break through the haze you feel in your mind. I put it there to help you. You can hear me and answer me, but you must not fight the relaxation you feel. No one will hurt you; you are very safe in your dream world. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk now."

"I know, but I can help you. I need to understand. What happens to Novices when you break the rules?"

A childlike voice, weak and barely audible, said, "They cloister you. So sad, go away!" The sitting women turned their heads toward Coleni, Aetria in surprise and Loreana with intense interest.

As Aetria started to speak, she was stopped by a sharp glance from Loreana, who put her finger to her lips to intensify her command for Aetria to be quiet. "I know, dear, but as you talk you will feel the pain leaving your heart, and you feel even better, more safe, more at ease. You want to feel at peace, don't

you, Coleni?"

The answer was a sigh. "Yes, peace."

Loreana got up and knelt beside the resting Coleni. She checked the Novice's pulse and listened to her slow breathing. Satisfied Coleni was in the prescribed trance-like state, she repositioned herself up by the supine woman's head and sat on the rug-covered floor, her feet curled underneath her.

"Now, continue to relax, dear. You said sorcerers who break the ban are cloistered. What does that mean?"

Coleni stirred, starting to become restless; a frown danced across her forehead. She seemed to be fighting an unpleasant memory.

"Speak, child, and release the pain."

"They shut you away from the others. You can talk with no one but your keepers. They don't want to talk to you, they just want to lecture—listen, just listen and obey!"

Aetria could see the memory evoked in Coleni was not a pleasant one; she was stirring even more. Loreana extended a hand over Coleni's face and spoke a soft spell. Aetria felt the release of Power like a puff of gentle breeze in her mind. Coleni stopped her restless movement.

"Coleni, release the pain. You did not like being cloistered, but that is not what hurts you so. You defied them in your mind, but made them think they had won. Why did they cloister you?"

A smile crossed Coleni's face and she almost laughed aloud, a little girl's delight in her voice as she spoke. "You are so right. I fooled them; they thought me repentant. It wasn't my fault I lost control. They pushed me to get ahead. I was so much better than the rest. I tried so hard to please them, but I tried too hard. Oh! Had their dreaded burnout! Their horror, their shock. Scared them more than it hurt me."

Loreana looked at Aetria, seeing the flash of compassion cross the Sorceress' face. "How long did they cloister you, Coleni?"

"A year, from spring to spring. I missed the winter games. I was so mad. All my classmates moved on in training and I was left behind with the newest applicants. Not fair."

"And the next time?"

"My fault ... was so stupid ... should have been more careful."

"Careful of what, Coleni?"

"They tracked our training sources, caught us in the forest by the lake. Wasn't looking for them. Should have. Stupid of me."

Aetria could see Loreana didn't understand Coleni's train of memories. She queried the Healer with her eyes, pointed to herself, then to her lips. Loreana nodded permission. Aetria moved beside Loreana. Speaking as softly as the Healer had, she asked. "Caught you at what, Coleni?"

"Making love. Oh, how wonderful it was, so strong, so satisfying after such a long time."

Loreana spoke. "But Coleni, that is forbidden."

Another sweet smile appeared on the young woman's face. "Yes, but understandable among the first years. One chance given. They didn't know I was not a virgin. Would have beat us and let us go, but said I was a troublemaker. Had to be made an example of. Very stupid of me to seduce my mentor's son. He was very angry and embarrassed. Cost me so very much." An anguished frown began to appear again on her face.

"Release the pain, Coleni. How were you punished for seducing your mentor's son?"

"Serve the crone! Worse than cloistering. Mentor guessed I was not responding to the obedience teachings. Convinced the Lodge Master to send me to care for mentor's mother until she died. Was so alone, with only the grandmother of my lover to talk to, and she could not speak Hermanian. Three years in the mountains. Twisted, spiteful woman! Had to learn Delmathian just to survive. Came to respect her knowledge, evil as it was. Eternity until she died. Wanted to kill her to make my time go faster, but couldn't. She taught me to, taught me to..."

Coleni slipped deeper into her trance. Loreana tried to call her back. "Coleni, she taught you what, dear?"

Realizing Coleni was not responding, Loreana checked her life signs and sat back suddenly. Aetria panicked.

"She's not dead! By the Power, no!"

"Calm yourself, Aetria. She is resting. I have to say I am very surprised at what I think just occurred. She broke the trance."

"I didn't think that was possible, Loreana. She could not have gotten any Power to counter-spell yours with."

"It wasn't a counter-spell. I have heard of this being done. I have studied the field of mind-healing far more than most. I hope to continue to higher levels when I leave the army and return to Inhestia. Mage Kelristo is the most knowledgeable Mage Healer in our Order on the subject of mind-healing. He once told me that a skilled mind Healer can set up conditions in a patient's mind, that when met, trigger the patient into a natural state of unconsciousness. We must have triggered that in Coleni."

"But who could have done that to her, and why?"

Loreana shrugged her shoulders, "Don't know, but I suspect 'The Crone.' Hermanian sorcerers still tend to marry amongst themselves. So her mentor's mother was probably once a sorceress."

"Are you saying that every time we approach that subject, she will pass out? We could never find out what happened when she was cloistered in the mountains."

Stretching to relieve her tension, Loreana sighed wearily. "As you know, we have a battle to be fought. I can't do any more tonight. I must prepare for the casualties that will soon be upon us. Let Coleni rest and heal. To be very truthful, I don't think I can get past the triggers implanted in Coleni concerning what happened to her in the mountains. That information will have to be from Coleni herself—awake and willing. However unpleasant that experience was, I don't think it is the source of her current pain. When I

can in the next few days, I will try to find what is causing her pain and release it. That is our goal, Aetria. Not to pry into Coleni's background—as much as both of us want to do, that is not our purpose."

Both women cringed, sensing of massive Power usage coming from the front lines. The battle had begun, and from the energy being expended, it was going to be a major one.

* * * *

The Delmathians overwhelmed and humiliated the Hermanians' armies. Having lost two major battles in less than a year, the Hermanians sued for peace. Loreana became swamped by the returning casualties and had to take two days to gain control over the death rate and stabilize the wounded so long-term healing could take place.

Aetria was kept just as busy trying to take care of Coleni. The young woman was not responding to Aetria on any level beyond staring at her when Aetria spoke to her. Coleni would not move beyond the sleeping pallet she lay upon, even for nature's calls. Aetria became convinced Coleni was dying, not from any wound or grid burnout, but by willing herself to do so. Finally, out of desperation, Aetria sent for Loreana. When the Healer arrived, Aetria regretted sending for her, for she had clearly not rested for the last two days and looked totally worn out.

"Loreana, I'm sorry, but Coleni is not responding to anything I do. I think she is dying."

The Healer moved over to the sleeping Coleni, monitoring the woman's life signs. "She is healed of the broken rib, but her heart is still broken—not literally, but might just as well be. You were right to call me. We must find the source of her pain and heal it before she can mend. I am depleted of any Power. I must restore my grid, at least partially, to be of help. I will return in several hours. If I do not, come get me yourself. You might find me passed out by a source."

Loreana had no sooner left the tent than Lieutenant Valetti arrived with a summons from the general for Aetria. As the general still wanted the presence of Coleni kept secret, Lieutenant Valetti was to watch over Coleni in Aetria's absence. She ran to Sonja's command tent. With receipt of permission to enter after her arrival hail, she passed by the guards at the door and went in.

"Reporting as ordered, General."

"You look much better than I last saw you, Sorceress. Adept Loreana has done miracles." Sonja was dressed in a plain robe, fresh from a hot bath, her short hair still damp.

"Thank you, Ma'am, you are looking rather refreshed yourself."

Sonja towed off the wetness in her hair and draped the towel over the weapons rack to dry. She offered Aetria a seat as she moved to take one herself.

"The king was approached by Adept Cemaron and asked to exert his influence on me to release you. As the commanding officer of the sorcerer regiment, he is miffed he doesn't control you, and used his position as Mage Council representative to petition the king directly. I blistered his butt for the effort but couldn't prevent him from doing so. The king asked me to release you to attend your hearing."

Aetria held her breath, waiting for Sonja's decision.

"I told him I would personally escort you to the hearing. Of course, it will take a little longer than it would if you had to ride direct, since I will have numerous protocol visits to make with villages and towns along

the way. My guess is at least a month. That should give you adequate time to prepare a defense, Sorceress."

"It is more than I could possibly hope for, except..."

"Except? You need more time?"

"No, Ma'am. Could we ensure our route passes by the Logathian Mountains? They lie along the eastern border between Hermania and my Order's estates. You could say it was part of a victory tour."

"Then it shall be so. We will leave in a week. I will send a messenger to the Council of Magi that we will arrive within six weeks." Aetria stood, expecting Sonja's dismissal.

"How is the Hermanian sorceress doing?"

Aetria could not help the distress that showed on her face, which must have alarmed Sonja. "Something is wrong. Tell me," the general said.

Aetria wrung her hands briefly, then answered in a rush. "Her name is Coleni, and she is dying of despair. Loreana is going to try to heal her tonight. Coleni was among the recruit sorcerers that Pleates and I fought three months ago. The Hermanian Novice Aggressor I killed there was very close to her. She collapsed on hearing that news and has not responded to me since."

Sonja sat staring at Aetria, a slight smile on her face. After a moment, she stood and came over to the sorceress. Putting a hand on her shoulder, she looked into Aetria's eye.

"You certainly do lead a complicated life, Aetria. This time I am not going to even try to figure this out until you do. One thing I do know about death, and people's response to it, is that some act as if to blame for what happened. Let me know how Loreana's treatment works out. Coleni seems to be the key to this puzzle, a puzzle that is getting bigger every day."

* * * *

Aetria found Lieutenant Valetti slumped in a chair, staring at Coleni. Hearing her enter the tent, he stood up and walked over to her. "She does not look good, Sorceress," he said, in a soft voice. "I have seen soldiers who have given up on life, and she has that look. Did the defeat of her people cause this?"

Looking at Coleni, who appeared asleep, Aetria shook her head. "I haven't told her about that. I don't think she feels that strongly about the rights and wrongs of who won or lost. This is something else.

Thank you for watching her for me. Did she say anything at all?"

"No, I don't think she even knew I was here. Good luck on saving this one, Sorceress." He left, shaking his head sadly.

* * * *

"Coleni, can you hear me?" Loreana asked the woman lying still on the sleeping pallet. She had spoken the trance spell over her and was seated by her head as before. Loreana looked almost as bad as Coleni, but the intensity of the concern the Healer felt for her patient was burning in her eyes.

"Go away, I want to die."

"No, I am here to bring you peace. Don't you want peace most of all?"

"Peace? I want to stop dreaming, to stop knowing."

Aetria slowly moved up next to Loreana. She was having a hard time hearing the exchange between the Healer and Coleni.

"Knowing what, Coleni?"

"No, run away—won't go there."

"Coleni, stop running. Turn and look back. What do you see?"

"The enemy! Delmathians dressed like us. Too many of them. Aggressors."

Loreana looked quizzically at Aetria.

"Where? On that hill, the hill south of the camp?" Aetria asked, using the same soft tone as Loreana.

"Yes, attacking the camp. And ... Oh! More sorcerers over there on the northern hill."

"Where are you running to?"

"To warn Sorceress Telori. To get help. Find Lornes!"

Aetria recognized the name of the young Aggressor Novice she killed. "Where is Lornes?"

Coleni was beginning to writhe slowly, her arms and legs demanding to be part of the picture she was seeing in her mind. "Sent him for help. Told him, 'Warn the Watch Captain, intruders in camp. Then report to Sorceress Telori!' He insisted I go instead. Refused because Lornes is hurt. I tell him it is an order. I am senior Novice. Mistake—Oh! Shouldn't have left him."

The Healer shushed Aetria with a finger to her own lips. The events in Coleni's mind must be so close to what was causing Coleni's pain that she wanted to back away in time to ensure Coleni did not break the trance again. "Coleni, before you ran, before seeing the enemy, before that—what do you see?"

Coleni relaxed; her intensified writhing stopped. A soft smile came to her lips, and she moaned gently. "Almost dawn, it is dark, but above me. Lornes' face, his eyes, closed? Why does he close his eyes when he makes love to me? Doesn't he want to see my happiness? So nice, so exciting."

The change in Coleni was shocking. One minute she was in agony, the next in ecstasy. Loreana was in tune with Coleni, the older woman having had more experience in life than Aetria, perhaps even this. Aetria had known a lover's caress, but not his intimacy. She felt very odd listening to this.

"Where are you now, Coleni?" Loreana asked quietly.

"Hiding in these nice thick bushes. Alone, with Lornes."

"Why are you in the bushes?"

A gentle laugh escaped from Coleni. "Supposed to be on watch. Can't make love on watch! Can't make love at all; stupid rule."

Aetria's first reaction to Coleni's words was anger. The two Novices were having sex while they were supposed to be guarding the camp. An angry glance from Loreana stopped Aetria from admonishing Coleni. She sat back and willed herself to be free from emotion, to open her mind and keep from feeling the indignation.

"And Lornes? What is he doing now?"

Aetria looked in shock at Loreana. Why was she abiding this behavior?

"Oh, he stopped! He is looking around. He says he hears ... hears gurgling?"

"Gurgling?"

"Oh! Power, someone smashes into us. Blood! Blood everywhere. Our guard, our real guard—his throat gone. A shadow, it moves. A man all in black—no face, just eyes. Lornes standing, trying to protect me. The man knocks him down, a knife at Lornes' throat. No, no ... He laughs at us. Kicks Lornes in the stomach. Lornes is gagging. The man is gone. Danger, danger." Coleni began to writhe again. Loreana deepened the trance.

"Rest, Coleni. You are safe and in peace. Rest."

Coleni stilled once again.

Looking up at Aetria, Loreana asked, "Do you know what happened there?"

Aetria nodded, her mind still locked on the scene as she herself had experienced it. "She and Lornes must have been standing Novice watch as part of their indoctrination training, probably at the base of our hill. The real guarding of the camp was done by the regular army troops. We had scouted their guard positions previous to our attack and had sent the Guard to take them out.

"The Guard's uniforms are all black, and they cover their faces. Apparently our Guard came upon the two in the bushes while killing the sentry he was sent after. Don't know why he didn't kill them also. Amused at their sexual activity? Apparently he tossed the dead sentry on top of them, then took off to join the other Sorcerer Guards who were mounting up to rush the camp. We attacked at first light, so there was a time difference between our lovers being discovered and her seeing our attack."

"It does seem that way. Very well, we will bring her back to that point."

Bending over the sleeping Coleni, Loreana brought her closer to awake. "Coleni, slowly, slowly think of Lornes hurt. What is happening now?"

"Must warn the camp. Lornes is holding his stomach, groaning. I look around, trying to see the man. There, on the hill above, I see people silhouetted against the dawn's light. Our Novices? Lornes, get up and go get help. I'm going to warn our people on the hill. No, he won't go, says it is his job. Wrong, wrong junior Novice! Do as you are ordered. He is running towards the camp. I am climbing the hill. The others are in danger from the man in black.

"Wait, wait! Why are they spelling fireballs at the camp? Not ours—Delmathians! Run, have to get away. Fierce screaming next to me! Horses and men, men in black charging the camp. Turn left, run back into the brush. They don't see me! There in the clearing, I see our guards forming. The Reserve, it is

coming towards me. 'Look out, enemy sorcerers on the hills. Look out.'"

Aetria quietly but urgently asked, "Coleni, where is Lornes? Is he with the reserve?"

"I don't see him. They are rushing the hill. An explosion, I am on the ground. Dizzy. Where is Lornes? I don't know. Must find him. Up on the hill, a lightning stroke. Lornes' magic! The Reserve regrouping, running past me shooting arrows. Must follow. Oh! Power, oh! No, Lornes, Lornes—"

Loreana spelled the convulsing sorceress into a deep sleep. Monitoring the young woman, she sat back and said with a sigh, "We have found the event that triggered her withdrawal, but now, how do we stop her pain?"

Aetria's mind was reeling from the images evoked by Coleni's gasped-out, tortured story. She wondered if she was somehow connected to the woman's mind. She got up from her stiff kneeling position by the Healer and walked to her table to pour them some wine. Her throat was raw and dry, as if she had been living Coleni's last desperate few minutes. Loreana sat in a nearby chair, watching her as she brought their drinks.

"You must have been in empathic link with Coleni. You should have been a Healer."

Shaking her head, Aetria sat down beside her friend. "Didn't test out that way at all. Maybe I feel her story so strongly because I was there at the same battle."

"Or maybe because you two are twin sisters. The chance of two non-related people of the same age looking alike has got to be almost none. We do know that twins share a bond; we are not sure how or why."

Taking a long sip of her wine, Aetria avoided a response. Was Coleni her sister? How? What did her parents not tell her?

"Look, Loreana, I am a foster child to a Tierian father and a Delmathian mother. All I know about my earliest life is what they have told me. I could very well be Coleni's twin sister. What if I am? How does that help you heal her? Can't you just stop the pain?"

"I wish I could, Aetria. This is a mind-created pain. I can stop the pain only by numbing the mind. In effect, as long as she is aware, she will be in pain. She is trying to punish herself for something. I think she blames herself for Lornes' death, but why should she? As you pointed out, she had already accepted his death months ago. What has changed?"

Putting her wine cup down on the floor, Aetria got up and walked over to the sleeping Coleni, looking down at her for a moment. "What has changed? She has been captured by the enemy, wounded, discovers she has a twin sister, and that her sister killed her lover."

Aetria sank slowly to her knees beside her sister. Coleni must be her sister, for there was no other reasonable explanation for their likeness. She thought back on the scene when Coleni broke down and realized what might be the cause. The horror of it made her moan and start to cry. Loreana swiftly moved to Aetria side, and dropping to her knees, hugged her. "Aetria? What is wrong?"

"I think I know what caused her breakdown. I had asked her what the Novice had yelled at me in Hermanian. It was, 'Coleni, behind you.' Don't you see, Loreana? Lornes' last moments alive were seeing his lover throw a knife at him. The knife that killed him."

Nodding gently, Loreana did indeed understand where Coleni's mental pain was coming from. Aetria had stopped weeping, her tears only a reaction to the horror, like hearing a sad story and crying for the sadness. Coleni's horror would not go away, for she was living it. Loreana helped Aetria to her feet and back to their chairs. She refilled both wineglasses.

"How do we change the horror of that scene in her mind?" Aetria asked before sipping a drink of her wine.

Loreana shrugged helplessly. "To change Coleni I have to be able to reach the rational Coleni. We know the cause, but to change her to want to live, we have to change her current belief that she caused Lornes' death. Through the trance technique, I can reach Coleni in her memory world, but that is not where the rational Coleni lives. To reach that Coleni, I have to be able to talk to her, and she is not communicating with anyone."

"I doubt if any of her own people will be available to help us reach her," Aetria mused. "I guess we have no choice but to try to talk with her. Do you think I really have a bond with her?"

"The strength of the bond is directly related to how close the twins were as children. From what you said, you were separated as babies, maybe within the first two years of your life. Is there anything you remember from your childhood that supports you having a bond with your sister?"

"I don't remember much about my earliest years. My Tierian foster father was an outcast to his people, and to the rest of the village people, he was an outcast because he was Tierian. I had very few playmates. I played more in my imagination than I played in the real world. Guess that is why I tested so high for Illusionist."

Loreana's eyes flew open wide and she excitedly turned toward Aetria, her right hand reaching out to touch Aetria's shoulder. "Didn't you say that Coleni conjured your dragon?"

"It sounded a lot like him, but how could she do that?"

"You were both scared and lonely children, needing a strong protector. Isn't that what he was to you?"

"Yes, Rajii was my protector. When I had grown up enough to take care of myself, I guess I didn't need him anymore and found other things to dream about." The sadness in Aetria's eyes told Loreana that Aetria was not happy about having to leave that world.

"We all have to grow up, Aetria." The excitement was back in her voice. "But we can use Rajii to talk with Coleni. I can bring her to almost total consciousness. From your meditating trance, you can conjure Rajii for us. Take yourself back to when you were a little girl and project that into your illusion. I think Coleni will see that vision and make contact with Rajii, and maybe you. If she at least talks with Rajii, then we have a chance."

"How is talking with a dragon going to help?" Aetria asked, a puzzled frown on her face.

"I will talk for Rajii," Loreana said, smiling broadly.

Aetria did not cast the illusion of Rajii as one complete spell. Loreana suggested she build it up, a little at a time, like telling a story. While Aetria was doing that, Loreana would slowly bring Coleni to consciousness. This, they hoped, would fix Coleni's mind on the illusion, instead of her rejecting it out of

hand. Aetria began by letting her mind think back to her earliest memories of sitting in the woods behind her parents' home, talking with her friend Rajii. She imagined...

There he was, curled up on the soft, moss-covered ground of the glade, resting in a beam of bright sunlight. The air was still and warm, smelling of leaves, with a hint of musky leather—Rajii's smell. Only an occasional bird song cut through the peace and quiet. As she watched, the fierce red dragon raised his head and looked at her. A very toothy grin filled his face.

"Little One, it has been a long time since you last came," he said.

Aetria skipped across the glade and threw herself into the open arms of her dragon, his razor sharp claws closing gently on her back. She wiggled free and dashed about, begging for him to get up and go explore with her.

"We must wait for another."

"Don't want to, you are mine, and mine alone."

Rajii looked at her, his fierce eyes gentle. "Not true. I also have another Person."

"No, only me."

"My friendship is big enough for you, and for others."

"No, not enough."

Rajii grew huge as he stood up on his hind legs. Magically, he grew even bigger, his head rising above tops of the trees, his voice almost thunderous. "Big enough now!"

Aetria ran to him, hugging an ankle and whining. "Oh! Please, not so big. You are scaring me, Rajii." She looked up to find him back to his normal hugeness.

"Big enough to share, Little One?"

"Yes." She pouted.

"Promise."

She shook her head, and he poked her in the ribs. She stamped her foot, and he tickled her. Giggling, she said, "I promise."

"Thank you. Now we wait for the Person."

"How much longer?"

"The Person is coming now," Rajii said.

Aetria looked around but didn't see anyone. "Where?" She asked.

"Down the path," he answered. Aetria craned her neck to look around behind the dragon's wide body. She didn't see a path.

"Look behind you."

She turned and did as asked. There behind her was the same path she had followed in. Little bright stars of light were running up and down the path, making it glow and pulse with a life of its own. "That path?" she asked.

"No, that is your path. Only you can walk it."

She looked up at him in frustration. "I don't see a path, Rajii!"

"You must look very hard, my child."

Aetria somberly paced around the huge dragon, staring at the green grass of the forest floor, looking for any change, any little stars, anything. When she had reached the point where her path touched the glade, she saw, ever so faintly next to it, a shadow of hers. "This path?" she asked.

"Yes." Rajii said.

She tried to follow the path with her eyes, looking for the coming Person, but the path was too faint to see beyond a few feet. "Where is the Person?" she asked.

"Share," Rajii answered.

Aetria put her hands on the ghostly path and imagined it dancing like hers. Tiny pulses of light leapt down the path, and it began to glow. She looked around at Rajii, and the dragon slowly bobbed his head up and down in agreement. She saw a shimmering around his chest and ran to look closely. Aetria reached up to touch the breast scales of Rajii, wondering why the familiar blue was blurring and shifting in color. It seemed to be turning green. "No, no. Stay blue."

The scales blurred and became blue again for a moment, then started shifting again. Making an angry frown, she started to change them again when Rajii covered her small hand with his large clawed one and whispered, "Share. You said you would share."

Confused, she looked up into his huge emerald eyes. "I will share, I promised."

"Then share."

The scales on his breast slowly turned bluish green, not blue, but not green. It was a nice color also. She smiled. She looked up into his eyes and saw he was happy, too. The scales of his face slowly turned from a fierce red to a softer red. She looked sad, as she always thought of him as being fierce. Like a blush, a darker red spread across his face and down his body.

It's all right, she thought. A shimmer appeared around his throat, becoming a blue ribbon, with gold streamers laced through it. She clapped with delight. "How pretty!"

Racing back to the path, slowly growing on its own, she put her hands out and willed the lights to jump and grow.

"Slowly," Rajii said. "Patience."

She did not want to go slowly, but to disobey her friend was unthinkable. So she puffed a tiny breath of impatience and willed slower. The path spread outward like a wave returning back to the sea.

"The Person is near."

A shadow moved on the outward end of the path, and Aetria ran back to the protection of her dragon. He closed one arm around her in a hug.

The shadow figure inched down the path. The Person also was afraid. Aetria was glad for Rajii, but she wondered why the Person didn't run the way she had. Rajii said there was more than enough of him to share. The Person began to pass from shadow to form.

"Oh," she said.

"Rajii?" the Person said.

"Coleni," he said.

Aetria looked up past Rajii's grinning mouth full of razor sharp teeth, into his eyes. "It is me?" she said.

"No, it is your sister."

"But I don't have a sister," Aetria said.

Rajii held out his empty arm for Coleni, pulling her into his embrace. "You do now," he said. The two little girls looked at each other. It was like looking in a mirror. One smiled, the other responded likewise. They each giggled. One reached to touch the other, their hands meeting.

"My sister," Aetria said.

Rajii looked down at his two children and sighed. They looked up at him, questioningly. "You have so much to learn, but no time, my little ones."

"But we are to go explore, as you promised, Rajii?" Aetria asked. The little girls were still holding hands, bonded together in their desire to play and have fun together with their friend.

"Yes, but first we must get ready."

The two girls clapped their hands excitedly and raced around, unable to contain their joy. They simultaneously ran back to stand before him, their uplifted faces asking the same question, although only Coleni spoke. "What must we do to get ready?"

Sadly, Rajii said, "Grow up."

Aetria looked over at Coleni, wondering what Rajii meant by that and saw, in wonder, the child she had been holding hands with slowly expanding and filling out. She knew without looking that she also was changing. Her wonder turned to studied appraisal, viewing the emerging woman with the critical view of an adult, instead of with the innocence of a child.

Coleni's simple dress became a sorcerer's robe, covering her torso and legs, but leaving her arms free. Coleni was slightly heavier than Aetria, her upper arm muscles more developed, stronger. The ribbons

that had been in her hair disappeared. The most marked change was that the joy and adventure in her eyes had faded into sadness, dark shadows adding to the gauntness of her face. Aetria wondered what

Coleni saw her changing into. Coleni would have stepped back and away if Aetria had not kept possession of her hand, refusing to release it as Coleni started to tug it away. Aetria turned back to the dragon, noting that as they had grown, so had he. He was watching Coleni intensely.

"Why is Coleni so sad?" Aetria asked Rajii.

"She believes she is responsible for Lornes' death," Rajii said.

"I killed him," Coleni moaned, tugging more strongly to free her hand.

Rajii reached out with his clawed hands and gently pulled Coleni into his embrace. He offered Aetria an opening in that embrace by holding out his other arm. She moved in, putting an arm around her sister. Rajii shook his teeth-filled head, his emerald eyes fixed sternly on Coleni, who was watching him with apprehension and fear.

Fear that he would agree with her?

"No, you did not. An enemy killed Lornes in self-defense."

"But I led him to his death."

"No, you ordered him away. You told him to go for help, then to warn the Sorceress. You did not tell him to follow you to the hill. You were the senior Novice, you were the Sub-Commander, were you not?" Rajii asked insistently.

Coleni hesitated. "Yes, but—"

"And what is the result of disobeying orders?" Rajii asked.

"You are punished." Coleni moaned.

"What orders of yours did you disobey when you went to the hill, found the enemy instead of friends, and retreated to get help?"

Puzzled, Coleni said, "I didn't disobey any of my orders."

"Then why are you punishing yourself?" Rajii asked, hugging Coleni gently.

"He died because of me," Coleni said, laying her head on Rajii's broad shoulders.

"No, my Coleni, he died because he disobeyed your orders. He followed you to the hill, saw you being threatened by the man in black, and attacked."

"But he died knowing I had killed him," Coleni wailed.

Rajii's voice grew rougher, deeper, with more of a gargle in his words. "No, he died knowing he had saved you."

"How can you say that?" Coleni asked angrily.

"Because I was there. I have always been there protecting you and your sister. Lornes saw your sister being attacked by the man in black. He called a warning and spelled the lightning stroke. He did not see the knife that hit him; he only saw the stroke hit the man in black. He saved Aetria, as I had willed him to. If you must blame someone, blame me."

Aetria stared at Rajii, the truth of his words ringing in her head. It was Nemos drawing his sword that had alerted her to his presence. He had been trying to kill her, and continued to try even after being hit.

"Why was he trying to kill me?" Aetria asked quietly.

Rajii held them both for a moment, then said, "Your sister and you must find that out."

"Lornes saved Aetria." Coleni sighed.

"Yes." Rajii said, his voice pitched higher, no longer rough with a gargle.

"His death had value."

"If any death is to have value, then his did. Little Ones, you both must go now. Let me rest until I am needed again. Be at peace."

Rajii began to fade into the glade. In moments Aetria found herself kneeling beside Loreana, her arms around both the Healer and Coleni. Coleni began to cry gently, the tears flowing slowly down her cheeks. Loreana rocked Coleni, making soothing sounds. The Healer smiled at Aetria over her sister's head.

"Coleni is healed," she mouthed.

The relief that flooded over Aetria was overpowering, and she sat back down onto the sleeping pallet with a heartfelt sigh.

The two women stood watching the sleeping Coleni. Loreana wrapped her outer cloak over her dark purple Adept robe and sighed wearily. "I hope I can sleep tonight as deeply as she is. She is truly at peace with herself."

"Your idea to use Rajii was a stroke of genius, Loreana."

The Healer touched Aetria's arm. "But your creation of his illusion was what made this all possible. I can see a very positive use of illusion spells in healing the mind. Mage Kelristo will be very interested."

"If he is still talking to me when we arrive back at Inhestia. What is the sorcerer regiment saying about my upcoming hearing?"

"Only what they know—which is nothing." Loreana stepped in closer to Aetria. Being shorter, she craned her head up to whisper in Aetria's ear. "What happened here tonight must be kept unspoken, not only because of the secrecy around Coleni, but because I saw spell use which has never been done. When you put your hands on Coleni's path, and helped make it grow, you were actually transferring Power from your grid to hers. I don't know how. My requesting Rajii to appear was to allow Coleni to change his image more to her own accepted mental image of him. To do so meant she also needed Power and you gave it to her. This is very exciting."

"I.. I don't know how I did it either."

Giving Aetria a fierce parting hug, Loreana whispered, "And having Rajii say he was there was brilliant. I couldn't think of an argument and stalled. Your voice was different from mine, but I don't think she noticed. This was excellent healing tonight, and I am proud to be involved in it. Goodnight."

Loreana was out the door before Aetria could say anything. She looked at Coleni. "But it wasn't my voice," she whispered.

CHAPTER 10

Coleni slept through the night and most of the morning. When she awoke, she rushed off to use Aetria's private privy and returned looking less disheveled. Aetria suggested a hot bath was in order and arranged for a portable tub to be brought to her quarters, along with a hot meal. While Coleni was luxuriating in the hot, steamy water, Aetria laid out her spare field cavalry uniform. At least the uniform would fit, since she and Coleni were the same size. She sent off for a lieutenant sash, wondering what Sonja would think of her promoting an ex-enemy sorceress to officer rank in the general's personal guard. Aetria had sent word to the general that Coleni had been healed, and she suspected Sonja would be sending for them soon.

When Coleni emerged from her bath, Aetria gave her a towel to dry off with and one to help dry her hair. A naked Coleni looked very much the same as a naked Aetria, but there were subtle differences. Coleni did not seem at all embarrassed by Aetria's appraisal of her body. She was not as supple as Aetria. Her muscles were slightly bigger, and she carried slightly more weight.

"You look a lot stronger than me. What form of self defense do you practice?" Aetria asked.

Coleni looked down at her body, then at Aetria's, noticing the differences from what she could see of Aetria underneath the Captain of Cavalry uniform. "The sword. Not very ladylike, but it suits me. I was Wendelia's Champion last year."

"Wendelia?" Aetria asked.

Using the second towel to rub her hair dry, Coleni wrapped it around her head to keep off a chill. Aetria wondered why she wore it so long. Her own reddish-gold hair was so short it would be dry in minutes.

"My training lodge. Not surprised you have not heard of it. It is well back in the mountains. Your lodge was...?"

"Inhestia."

"Have heard of that one. Home of your Coven, I believe."

"Coven? Oh, you mean our Mage Council. Yes, it is. Inhestia is our oldest training lodge."

Looking around for her uniform robe, she didn't see it. Aetria pointed to the uniform lying on the chair next to her.

"I am not going to wear the uniform of my enemy, Captain, sister or no."

"The general has ordered your presence to be kept a secret. A Hermanian sorceress looking like her Chief Advisor is going to get noticed very quickly. I'll cover your face with a glamour, but it would be a lot easier if I didn't have to cover you completely. Besides, we are no longer at war. While you were, ah, ill the war's final battle was fought. Hermania is suing for peace."

Aetria would have expected more of a reaction out of her sister than she got from hearing her country had just lost a war.

Coleni just shrugged, and sighed. "I'm not surprised. It was stupid of us to get into a fight with your people in the first place. The only real reason I could see for us starting a war was that we had a chance to grab land and power. Our Supreme Ruler charmed the Coven leaders into thinking their use of magic would make a quick end to the fight, and they foolishly went along with the plan. It was supposed to be a quick summer campaign.

"It started out that way, but got bogged down when your Order entered the fray. Our Ruler then coerced the Princes of Saphradea to enter the war, promising them half the spoils. Unfortunately for us, the Saphradean Order refused to support their army, and we were stuck with trying to cover two armies with sorcerer support. We got caught with too little, too late."

"All the lives lost, and for nothing. I'm sure our King will ask for compensation from your Supreme Ruler for the cost of the war," Aetria said, with a heartfelt sadness in her voice. "For a war started to gain wealth, Hermania has spent everything trying to take gold away from us, and it will now cost even more. What a waste."

Bitterly, Coleni agreed. "The real loss in this war has been our violation of the 'First Rule of Power Use,' we will never be able to put the monster back in his cage. We are spiraling back to the days of the Sorcerer War, my long-lost sister. One day, the common people will wake up and see that magic only brings them death in the end, and they will decide to end it in their lives by ending you and me."

Coleni had a point, but her pessimism bothered Aetria. "Then it is up to us to cage that monster before it happens. Our two Orders must work together to make this happen."

"I don't think you will find that our two Orders will ever agree on anything, let alone working together. Yours will blame ours for breaking the First Law, justifiably I might add. Mine will say they had to because yours has strayed from the correct path. Both of our Orders will insist that only they have the right way of practicing magic, and nothing will be solved."

The incredulous look on Aetria's face spoke louder than her words. "Surely you don't believe that?"

"You don't know my Order. These are the same people who accepted Pleates' offer to spy for them. They will do anything to get their way."

Someone called a request for entry through the door veil. Coleni needed a disguise quickly. The first face that came to Aetria's mind was Elina's, the dead Novice Aggressor. Why that one came to mind, she couldn't say. She spelled Coleni with the glamor to disguise her features, and Aetria granted the caller permission to enter. It was Lieutenant Valetti. He smiled at Aetria, delivered a precise salute, and looked around, seeing Coleni standing by her chair.

"Novice Coleni? Or should I say, Lieutenant Coleni."

Aetria dropped the glamor. Coleni acknowledged Valetti's question with a slight bow from the waist, the Hermanian form of salute.

"You are looking very well, Novice. The last time I saw you, I would not have wagered you would live past the week."

"Your Adept Loreana is an excellent Healer."

Lieutenant Valetti turned back to Aetria. "The general sends her respects and wants to see the two of you as soon as you can come."

Looking at Coleni and receiving a nod of concurrence, Aetria said, "We're ready now."

She set the glamor again and they followed Valetti out of the tent. The trip to the general's command tent was short and, thankfully, in the dark. The sentries at the general's door were the only people they encountered. They were expected and waved by. The general stood waiting in her quarters.

Sonja looked closely at the woman Lieutenant standing beside Aetria and tried to see past the disguise, but couldn't. The sorceress was very good with her illusion.

Aetria dropped the glamor, and Coleni bowed. "I am your servant and slave, O Conqueror of my people."

"Correction, Coleni. You are a furloughed sorceress who is free to go provided, of course, you pledge not to take arms against my King."

Coleni smiled and thanked Sonja. "You have my most solemn pledge. Thank you for my freedom."

"You are welcome. Now, Aetria, why have you promoted her to lieutenant in my personal guard? She needs the job?"

Aetria had anticipated the general would question her "promoting" Coleni, so she had prepared what she hoped was a valid excuse. "I needed to dress her in something quickly, and my clothes were what I had available. There are not that many Captains of Cavalry, but there are numerous lieutenants. It seemed the most sensible thing to do given the limited time to act."

Sonja smiled at her, gesturing for them to take seats. "Then she may retain the disguise for the moment. Our capturing Novice—or should I say Lieutenant—Coleni had a purpose. Did you get answers to your questions?"

"We have made a start, Ma'am. I believe that, with a little help from my twin sister, we will find an explanation of how Pleates was able to track us."

"You now believe she is your sister?"

Coleni spoke first. "It seems very likely we are sisters. I was kidnapped by bandits from a trading caravan and sold to a Hermanian childless couple. They told me I was the sole survivor of that raid. They couldn't have known anything more than what the bandits told them. Maybe the bandits missed Aetria and thought I was alone, or maybe they didn't want to complicate the sale." Coleni looked at Aetria, who smiled in agreement.

"We are reconciled that we are twins," Aetria said.

"You do not have much time left before we start for Inhestia, Sorceress. We leave in five days."

Coleni gave Aetria a puzzled frown. "You are going to Inhestia?"

"Yes, I am to be given a hearing for charges of being unfit for sorcerer service," Aetria sighed.

Coleni stood and bowed to Sonja.

"I request I be allowed to accompany you on your journey to Inhestia."

Sonja looked at Aetria, who was staring at her sister. Coleni returned Aetria's gaze, a pleading look on her face. Aetria slowly nodded.

"Your request is granted. I will tell my staff I have taken on a new female aide. As of now, your promotion is real, Lieutenant Coleni. Keep your true identity secret. No one is to know you are a sorceress, but I suppose you will have to have access to Power to keep up your own glamor."

"That will not be a problem, Ma'am. She can use Pleates' source like I do."

"Good. Get me some answers, Sorceress. I suspect you will need them for your own defense soon.
Dismissed."

* * * *

Returning to Aetria's tent, Coleni asked for the use of a source to Power up so she could handle her own disguise. She had decided to use the visage of a friend she had known at Wendelia who had since died in the war.

Aetria went over to the table and pulled Crusher's source out of her saddlebags, then walked over to Coleni and handed it to her.

"That is the source I was trying to retrieve when your soldiers attacked me. It has a strange feel to it that I noticed as soon as it was exposed. I reported its presence to my company commander, Sorceress Telori, who rushed the two of us to our regimental commander, Magess Chalinee, and asked to be allowed to retrieve it."

"Chalinee? Sounds Tierian. Your senior sorcerer commander was Tierian?"

Coleni nervously brushed her hands across her uniform pants. Aetria wondered if Coleni's regimental commander evoked the same reaction in her sister that Pleates did in her.

"Oh, very much so Tierian. Everyone in Hermania wards against her name, for she is the power behind the throne. Even our Coven gives her a free hand in everything she does. She is a most impressive Aggressor. None of our own people can match her skills. As for her loyalty to her own Tierian people, I think she has given up her allegiance to them, but I am not sure. No one questions Chalinee." Coleni sat down in a chair, the thoughts of Chalinee making her knees a little weak.

"So Chalinee decided to do what about the source?"

"She was not interested in including a Novice in capturing such a prize and shooed me away while she

rushed off to get an armed party together to go after the source. I decided to grab it by stealth so I could study it on my own. It might have secrets that would help me get back in favor with my Order—maybe even a chance for advancement in candidacy to sorceress. No more chance of that now."

Aetria sat down in the chair beside her sister. "Do you really think you will be banned from your Order just because you were captured by the enemy?"

"As I said, I went after the source without orders. Magess Chalinee would hold that against me, even now that we are both no longer in the army."

"But doesn't Hermania need all the sorcerers they can get?"

"I am sure they do. With the losses we suffered, there will definitely be a shortage of sorcerers. The problem is, like with your Order I am sure, you can't practice magic without being a member of the Order. Chalinee would have a major say in my being allowed to find a job."

"Surely it can't be as bad as you think. Once we have solved my problem, we'll take on yours."

Coleni shrugged and murmured something about crossing the witch. She opened the source, a frown crossing her face. "Doesn't that discordance bother you?"

"Not very much; perhaps I don't feel it as strongly as you do. Until now, I thought I was the only one who sensed it at all. Neither my mentor nor Adept Loreana has sensed anything in the source. Coleni, forgive me the rudeness of my next words, but I think you suffer from a control problem."

"That's twice you've said I have control problems. What makes you think that?"

"You're saying that conjuring a major illusion like Rajii and then passing out is not a sure sign of a grid burnout caused by a lack of control? Has that kind of thing happened to you before?"

Coleni shifted uncomfortably in her chair, casting her eyes rapidly around the room, avoiding Aetria's gaze. "Yes, several times."

A thought suddenly came to Aetria. "During our first discussion, you said you knew I was a sorceress—by intuition, you said. Then you admitted you can sense my stored Power."

Coleni's discomfort increased visibly. "Yes, I can."

"And I can also. Did you develop this ability after your first burnout? Have you manifested any other kind of new spell behavior?"

Looking thoughtful, Coleni nodded her head. "Yes, I did. I didn't tell anyone or I would have been severely punished. Fortunately for me, I had developed a reputation for doing things I am not supposed to, so nobody had a good basis for comparing my abilities before or after the burnout. I can actually do spells I shouldn't be able to do. I even have a lightning spell I can use—a real Aggressor spell. Lornes taught it to me." Coleni's throat tightened with the surge of memory of her lover, and tears started to flow from her eyes.

Aetria watched her sister anxiously, afraid of a relapse. She got up to comfort Coleni, but was waved away. Taking a few deep breaths, Coleni whispered, "Give me a moment, and I'll be fine."

While giving Coleni time to collect herself, Aetria started pacing back and forth, tapping her forehead with her right index finger. This activity on her part distracted Coleni enough that she soon found herself staring at Aetria, who stopped and looked at her twin.

"It seems we have quite a bit in common. I have a well-known control problem. I have also suffered several grid burnouts. I sense stored energy as well, and I also have the ability to learn magical skills beyond my field. This is too much of a coincidence."

"I agree."

"Tell me, what do you know about grid burnout?"

Coleni sighed. "Not very much. The war has created such a shortage of sorcerers that our training lodges have had to shorten our courses to the minimum needed to control spells. When I first started in the lodge, it took four years to reach Novice status. Now it is a little over one year. We didn't have time to learn about such things. The lodge was told to train as many sorcerers as they could and get them into the field."

"How sad! We have had to shorten our courses some, but not that drastically. Let me tell you what I know."

Aetria gave Coleni the shortened lecture that Verdilan had given the Novices on the way to the army just a few months earlier. Coleni listened in rapt silence, impressed by the knowledge that the Delmathian Order gave to its sorcerers. When Aetria finished, Coleni cast down her eyes, a blush creeping up her cheeks.

"Coleni, is something wrong?"

"We are sisters, of the same age. I'm just a Novice, and you are a fully trained Sorceress. I feel so, so, ignorant."

Aetria sat beside her sister, taking her hand and lowering her head and until she could see into Coleni's eyes. When her sister looked at her, Aetria raised her own head until the two were facing each other, heads held high. "You are my sister, of the same age. But you are not ignorant, just not as trained. Let me tell you some of my life, and then you tell me some of yours. You may find my life has been terribly boring, and I may find yours has been very exciting, but I am sure our lives have been different for a purpose."

Coleni nodded in agreement.

"Like you, I don't know exactly how old I am. My foster mother, Valeria, believes I was about a year old when they adopted me. After my cycles began, I was tested for magic skills, and as a result of having potential, was asked if I would go into training. I accepted and was sent to Inhestia with the rest of that year's candidates. They were all between twelve and thirteen years of age.

"Our training back then lasted five years. I joined the army, along with Adept Pleates, in the first year of the war. One year later I suffered a grid burnout during a battle in the Saphradean campaign and was sent back to Inhestia for evaluation and further training. I spent the next four years training, the first two to reach Sorceress, then two beyond for Adept. My mentor refused to put me forward for candidacy until I had proven I could control the Power once again on the battlefield. Since rejoining the army three months ago, I had another grid burnout, killed Pleates, and found my sister. Your turn."

"I wouldn't exactly say your life has been boring, Aetria. I envy you those nine years of training and would trade you nine of mine very quickly. I was not what you would call a very nice girl growing up. My foster parents ran a small shop, selling pots and pans, some food produce. I could not stand to be cooped up inside, and as I grew older, spent much of my time away from our home.

"When my cycles began, I self-declared myself a woman and ran off with a trade caravan. I soon found out that while they were interested in trade, they were more interested in thievery. They accepted me into their guild, and after several years with them, I fell in love with the caravan's leader's son. I would have been happy to marry, but he wasn't.

"A year later, I left the caravan and took my new training alone on the road. I was caught stealing a merchant's purse and spent the next year in a penal camp. That experience badly shook me up, and I decided a life of crime was not how I wanted to live. In the camp I was allowed to assist the visiting Healer. She was impressed with my caring, and when she found out I had never been tested for magic, gave me the test."

Enthralled by Coleni's story, Aetria thought what an exciting and drastically different earlier life her sister had lived from hers. "Didn't she think you were too old to train by then?"

Smiling, Coleni said, "I guess my sincerity won her over. She convinced the Lodge Master at Wendelia to take me in. I did fine for a year, applying myself zealously. I guess I tried too hard because I managed to suffer my first grid burnout. The fact that I was doing so with an Aggressor spell displeased them greatly, seeing as I was supposed to be training as a Healer. I was cloistered for a year."

"What does that mean?" Aetria asked, even though she knew the answer. Loreana had warned Aetria not to say anything about what had been said under the trance. Someday she would tell Coleni, but not now.

"Oh! They lock you away by yourself and continuously lecture you on your failings. You do penitence, and look sorry, and they eventually forgive you. I was very angry with them for taking that year out of my life, but I managed to avoid getting tossed out for bad behavior. When they allowed me to restart my training, they would not let me continue as a Healer. My mentor feared I could not control Aggressor spells, as I had demonstrated with my burnout, so I became an Illusionist.

"I'm afraid my attitude had suffered during my cloistering, and I started doing things that I knew were not allowed. Within a year I had made great progress, and would have been allowed to graduate in another year since they were starting to shorten the training by then, but I seduced the son of my mentor. We got caught, I was branded incorrigible and cloistered for three years—this time alone in the mountains with my mentor's crazy mother."

Sitting very still, Aetria remembered that at this point in Coleni's trance, she had mysteriously broken the trance and stopped talking. Loreana had said that Coleni might reveal what happened on her own, when conscious and aware.

Dare I proceed? "How curious. What was this crazy woman's name?"

"Ulana. She was from Delmathia. Have you heard of her?"

Ulana! Now we know her fate. "Oh! Yes, she is well known at Inhestia. She was an Adept Healer who had a grid burnout and went crazy. She escaped my Order and disappeared into the Logathians. This is a

most exciting discovery. Loreana will be very interested in your story."

"Sorry, but a lot of my memories of that time are missing. Just thinking about it makes me upset. I've always thought she may have somehow cursed me, but that was easy for me to believe because she was always making my life miserable."

Don't push her. Let her tell Loreana the story and allow the Healer to ease the missing pieces out of her. "How sad for you, all those years of unhappiness. How did you escape Ulana?"

"She died and I was brought back into training. I graduated a year later and was forced into the army. The rest you know."

So close, Aetria thought, and so much more she would like to know about this fiercely independent sister of hers. They still had weeks to talk, but for now they had work to do.

* * * *

The journey to Inhestia would have been idyllic except for the ordeal of waiting. With no real duties to perform, other than attendance at formal dinners and parties, Aetria concentrated on her source, literally. After they left the encampment, with Coleni disguised as a new female aide-de-camp to the general, the two of them spent their free time absorbed in a study of Crusher's source. With less than two weeks now remaining before arrival for her hearing, Aetria's nervousness was growing daily, accented even more by their nearness to the Logathian Mountains.

"I don't know how long your Adepts take in their wilderness sabbatical, Aetria, but ours take several years after their training. You may have had that training, but you are trying to accomplish two years' work in a month. You are driving yourself too hard."

Coleni was used to Aetria's pacing by now, as Aetria was in constant motion when not staring into the source. She watched as Aetria marched from one corner of their tent to the other. Aetria stopped for a moment, rubbing her face, and groaned. "I feel like there is an answer, just out of my grasp. It's like a name you know and can't remember, right on the tip of your tongue ... Tongue ... Wait a minute, maybe that is it."

"I don't think you can taste the discord, Aetria."

"No, not that sense. I remember telling the general the discordance was like two people singing the same note, only one was slightly off key. Tongue, talking, singing—sound. Sound is one of those physical things the engineers talk about."

Coleni made a moue. "Your people don't like those people any more than ours do. They think they can explain the world with logic. If we hadn't burned their butts a couple of times with fireballs, they would have convinced our king we did things with smoke and mirrors."

Aetria laughed hysterically, as much from the image in her mind of engineers running around holding their pants as from the tension that it released within her.

"You're right there, Coleni," she said, gasping. "Perhaps we are more subtle in our relationships with them. But—" She stifled more giggles at the use of the word. "—they do have some useful knowledge. Let me see if I can get our Chief Engineer to come talk with us." Aetria disappeared out the door, all but running in her eagerness to pursue her sound theory.

Coleni returned her attention to the source and its odd but now very familiar discordance. She lost track of time but caught the heavy footfalls of a man approaching the tent entrance and quickly backed away from the source. Aetria entered with a heavy-set, short man following in her path.

"Colonel Strathos, Lieutenant Coleni, the general's new aide-de-camp. Lieutenant Coleni, Master Engineer Strathos, the general's Chief Engineer."

"Very pleased to meet you, Lieutenant. I have heard of your presence on the staff, but haven't seen you with the general except on the road. Of course, I haven't seen our Captain of Cavalry much either. You are both missing a number of very nice dining affairs."

Coleni could not help but glance down at the Chief's ample waist, but stopped the comment about his not missing them from passing her lips. "The general has asked that I use my legal training in preparation of Sorceress Aetria's defense. We have been very busy on it."

Aetria was impressed with her sister's ability to think on her feet, albeit with a lie. "Yes, Sir, she has been very helpful, but we are in need of your professional advice, as neither a lawyer nor a sorcerer can properly address the physical laws you understand so well."

"Sorceress Aetria, your sugar tongue and false flattery are not needed on me. Engineers don't like lawyers or sorcerers, but we do need each other. What are your questions?"

"This may be far reaching, but sound is one of your physical phenomena. Could it be that magical Power sources are also?"

"They exist in the world, Sorceress, so they must be. How you derive energy from them remains a mystery to us, but we think it must be somewhat like the healing power of sunlight or the warming effect of a good fire."

"Curious, both of those involve light. Light is a physical phenomenon then?"

Strathos smiled broadly at her. "You are a very quick learner, Sorceress. Light is indeed, and it has some very interesting properties." He pulled a triangular crystal attached to a slim gold chain out of his uniform shirt and laid it on the table. He moved a candle close to the crystal, and both women gasped in wonder at the tiny rainbow that appeared. He put his hand in front of the candle, and the rainbow disappeared. When he moved his hand, it came back.

"We believe the light we see is made up of many other colors that combine somehow into white light. Black is the absence of light, at least to our eyes. How we see things is the way they reflect light back to our eyes. Red things seem to absorb all the other colors but the red part of the white light. So we see just the red part. As for the..." Strathos stopped, staring at wonder at Aetria dancing around, clapping her hands excitedly.

She stopped suddenly, realizing her behavior, and walked over to the colonel.

"Oh, Sir, you have answered my question wonderfully."

"But I haven't yet begun to explain—"

Aetria ushered him toward the door of the tent, profusely thanking him for his wisdom. She kept up such a patter of conversation that he could not get a word in between and was packed off to the mess tent

before he knew it. She returned to Coleni and explained her idea.

"If two different musical notes are sung close enough you get a discordance. Light is made up of many different colors of light. What if the energy we get from a source is also made up of many different kinds of energy? Could not two of them interact and produce this discordance? We need to try to sense not the discordance, but that other energy."

Coleni frowned in concentration. "It makes sense, but why haven't sorcerers been able to find these other energies in the past?"

"Why are we the only ones that sense a discordance?" Aetria countered.

Her eyes growing large, Coleni spoke excitedly. "Our grid burnouts have changed our spell casting abilities; somehow they may have changed the way we absorb and use the energies. Oh, Aetria, you must be right. Hurry, let's test your theory."

* * * *

"Well, we found it, but what good does it do us?" Aetria said in anger.

She and Coleni had spent the early evening staring into the source. Discovering the new energy coming from the source had been an exhilarating experience, and done relatively quickly, like seeing a long-familiar scene in a whole new light. But trying to capture it in their mental grids had become a futile, frustrating exercise. It would not supply Power for their spells.

Coleni sat discouraged, her hands covering her face, rubbing her aching physical eyes, as she mentally rubbed her sorcerer's Power sensing "eyes." "Let's call it a night, Aetria. I'm exhausted."

Aetria sighed in agreement. "Well, we have made progress. We should feel better about this than we do."

Coleni reached out to close the lid of the source and stopped in mid-reach, her fingers touching the open lid. Her surprised look was mirrored in her twin sister's face. "What in the name of the Power—," Coleni began.

"That's how he did it, Coleni. The box does not hold in the new energy. I was carrying around an exposed source the whole time." Aetria gasped in sudden wonder. "Pleates must have been able to sense it, like we can. Since our ability seems to have come from having suffered grid burnouts, then Pleates must have also had a grid burnout!"

Coleni shook her head. "Not possible, it is fatal for Aggressors."

Again the image of Recanlin's shattered forehead entered Aetria's mind. She covered her eyes with her hand as the tears started to flow again. She wondered if that image would ever go away. Would she constantly have to feel the pain of his death?

Coleni put a hand on her arm. "Your young Novice Aggressor that died on the hill?"

Aetria nodded. After a few moments, she regained her composure and wiped the tears away with her fingers. "We have not yet solved the mystery of Adept Pleates. He was quite an extraordinary sorcerer; perhaps he was an exception to the rule. He must have been. The general will be very pleased to know how he found us."

"I am happy that the Conqueror of Hermania will be pleased."

Aetria was brought up short by Coleni's remark, forgetting that her sister, until recently, had been the enemy. She put her hand on Coleni's arm and squeezed it gently.

"Just how is this knowledge going to keep you," Coleni continued, "or for that matter, me, from being banished for life?"

Aetria stood up and went to her weapons rack, picked up her armor breastplate, and brought it over to the source. She piled the armor on top. "I can't think with that energy distracting me. What now? I can still sense it!"

Coleni contributed her armor to it which led to the two women moving practically everything in the tent onto a growing pile atop the source. Its energy was only slightly diminished.

"We have a problem, Aetria."

Her sister stared blankly at the pile in the middle of her tent, "Well, at least it only bothers us. Adepts Loreana and Cemaron can't sense it. Look, we can't block off the new energy with physical material, so we will have to try to shift our focus away from it."

"Return to the way we sensed it before, you mean."

"Yes, adjust our sight off the new energy and onto the old. Concentrate on that discordance. We'd better learn to switch our focus or we'll never get powered up again. Then we really won't have a future as sorcerers to worry about."

* * * *

Aetria rode briskly past the sentries at the camp's southern entrance. They gave her a cursory glance, then a respectful salute. They thought they had seen the general's new aide-de-camp leave since Aetria had taken the glamor used by Coleni in public. She had deliberately made her exit at dawn, in the early hours of the morning watch, knowing that much of the camp was still abed, and the sentries would be tired from having been awake for half the night.

She had complete faith in her disguise spell, but she did not want to risk a close inspection by anyone who might take an interest in getting to know the new aide-de-camp. Aetria's mannerisms were still her own, and someone might see past a wine-blurred vision and catch a movement familiar to them. She spurred her horse into a gallop as soon as she was clear of the sentries, as befitted one on the business of the general.

Aetria had convinced the general to make a show of sending her new aide-de-camp, Lieutenant Maetria, as she was now known, off on an errand to Inhestia. This would provide Aetria an excuse for her trek to the mountains. Coleni would assume the role of Aetria and sequester herself more than she had to make discovery of the switch even more difficult. Coleni had reluctantly cropped her hair to Aetria's length and assumed Aetria's role without the use of illusionary magic. To all appearances, the general was still escorting Aetria to her hearing. Thus Aetria found herself headed off on a journey to Hermania looking for something, somewhere in the Logathians.

She knew this road fairly well. It was the one her recruit company had traveled from Inhestia to the army's encampment a few months earlier. The general had ordered a halt the night before near the

western turn-off that would take Aetria into Hermania. She rode past the turn, seemingly headed for Inhestia.

Once well out of sight of the camp, she rode into the trees until she could not see the road behind her and dismounted. From her saddlebags she removed the set of Tierian merchant clothes she had brought from home and quickly changed into them, stowing her aide-de-camp uniform in the saddlebags. She did not expect to be received with open arms by the Hermanians in her guise as the conquering general's aide-de-camp, and she doubted seriously they would approve of any other Delmathian guise she could select.

She felt reasonably confident in her choice of disguise, knowing enough of the Tierian way to act the part. Aetria would use her Power to enhance any observer's belief that she was what she looked like. This included a glamor to change her facial features to more closely approximate the sunken eyes and hooked noses characteristic of her father's people. If the Hermanians were going to be suspicious of her, it would be because she was a known source of suspicion, not because she was a stranger in their land. They would leave her alone—or so she hoped.

Checking her disguise once more, Aetria remounted and rode west for another half-hour, hopefully parallel to the road heading towards Hermania. She then turned north to find the road. As she neared the tree line bordering the weed-overgrown road, she took a few minutes to ensure no traffic was moving on it before exiting the trees and continuing her journey west into Hermania. Coleni had told her that the road she was presently on would intersect a road running north and south. Turning south at that point, a two-hour horseback ride would put her at the site of that ill-fated battle where Lornes had died. Continuing south from there, Aetria would enter the Logathians. Aetria's plan was to reach the Logathian mountain range by evening, find an out-of-the-way inn to spend the night, and begin her search in the morning.

She reached the Hermanian encampment within the time specified by Coleni. She stopped her horse on the road and looked across the creek to the dilapidated farmhouse and the field beyond. A new growth of weeds and flowers grew atop a mound next to the house where the Hermanian troops killed by Pleates' fireballs were buried. She wondered if her Novices were there also. And Lieutenant Nemos? Aetria spurred her horse on, the desire to visit replaced with the unease of knowing Pleates had wanted her dead at this battle.

A chill was creeping into the air as the road she followed climbed higher and higher away from the little valley where the two sisters had lost people near to them. She pulled the brightly colored Tierian woolen shawl she wore more closely around her. The clapping of the horse's hooves seemed to punctuate the thoughts circulating in her mind.

A new energy. How was Crusher able to destroy sources? Long distance tracking of new energy. Why the Logathians?

Awakening from her semi-drowsy state, she wondered for a moment what had startled her, then realized she was sensing sorcerers ahead. Coleni had told her about the small town of Logatha that lay across the road to the Logathians, and that the Hermanian Order maintained a small lodge there. A glance at the sun overhead told Aetria she had several more hours left in the day, so at her current speed of travel, she would arrive at the town by dusk. That suited her well. The less she was seen in direct light, the better her disguise would hold. She returned to her mental puzzle as the horse followed the road on her own.

* * * *

Logatha was smaller than Aetria had expected. The buildings were of stone and wood, a resource

plentiful in this area. No building stood more than two stories, and all were box-shaped. Practical homes, big enough to house a family, but not pretentious to advertise wealth or status. The road ahead forked left and right; both branches had merchants' shops lining the sides of the road. Behind the shops were residences, large stables, and storage buildings or warehouses. This bespoke of transport industry or bulk item merchandise, dependent on the road for movement. She had seen similar building layouts on navigable rivers where canal boats did heavy hauling. Here, in this mountain pass, horse and wagon played that role.

The Hermanian Lodge sat near the center of town on the left branch, surrounded by a high wall, with neighbor houses standing a respectful dozen feet away. The intensity of the energy she sensed coming from the building disturbed her because it meant there was a sorcerer of Adept level or higher in residence. There were a number of sorcerers present, just how many she couldn't tell. This worried her even more. She had expected a simple healer community, maybe led by a sorcerer of Sorcerer level. She took the right branch to avoid the Lodge as much as possible.

At the outer edge of town, roughly a half mile from its center, she spotted an inn set back from the road, called the "Freighter's Rest." She turned in to the inn and rode toward the stable doors in the back of it. A man, presumably a groom, stepped out of the stables and watched her approach. She dismounted. The groom walked over to her, his hand out to take the horse's reins.

Removing the saddlebags and draping them over her left arm, Aetria turned over the reins of her horse to the groom and watched as he led the animal into the stable. He had not said a word to her since she had ridden up to the inn. Not that it mattered to her, since she could not speak Hermanian, but she wondered at what kind of greeting she would receive inside if the one she had gotten outside was so cold. As the groom disappeared through the wide doors of the stable, he glanced briefly at her and made a warding sign. She thought about following him to ensure her horse was well cared for, but decided not to cause trouble over what she knew to be a normal reaction to Tierians.

Her entrance into the main room was met with a soft Hermanian greeting from a tavern girl, who hurried off to get her mistress. Aetria dumped her saddlebags onto a table near the fireplace and sat down wearily. Staring into the fire, she heard the heavy footsteps of the inn's mistress approaching. Aetria looked up when the footsteps stopped, and asked for a room in Tierian. The woman shook her head and asked a question in Hermanian. Aetria in turn shook her head no, and asked in Delmathian. "Do you have a room available?"

The mistress nodded and replied in heavily accented Delmathian. "For you, a private room, but full price! No one share a room with Tieri."

"That suits me very well, Mistress."

"Not understand?"

"Fine. I'll take the room—full price."

The woman smiled broadly and sent the tavern girl running off to prepare the room. She walked over to the cupboard and ran a mug of wine for Aetria. Returning to the table, she asked, "You eat now or later? Now, no people. Later, many people."

Aetria sensed the woman's choice was now, so Aetria would not be a problem to work around later. She smiled sweetly at the mistress. "Later. Meet new people, become friends!"

The woman sighed. "Perhaps, perhaps not. When ready to go to room, call for Jarleni. She take you to there." The woman returned to the safety of her kitchen, murmuring to Jarleni as she passed her. Aetria guessed she had told the girl to watch Aetria and make sure she didn't steal anything. Aetria sat back in her chair and sipped the wine, finding it slightly warm and sweet. She tried to ignore Jarleni's eyes on her back as she let the warmth of the fire chase the chill of the trail from her exposed arms and legs, the wine warming her insides.

So far, so good.

* * * *

When she returned to the common room for dinner, her appearance caused a momentary pause in the buzz of conversation. A few heads turned in her direction, and several people made a warding sign. She walked to the farthest table from the fire and sat down opposite its two occupants. The Hermanian merchants decided to conduct their business elsewhere. Aetria shrugged and waved for Jarleni to bring her wine.

The young woman's memory of the tip received earlier made her quick to respond. While she waited, the sorceress tried to ignore the people around her, but was again conscious of their eyes on her. Within minutes, Aetria had food and wine on her table, and she focused her attention on the warm stew in front of her. The stew was excellent—warm, filling, spiced nicely to taste. The wine was cool, crisp, and slightly tart. She finished the bowl in a short time and looked up for Jarleni to ask for more.

Her eyes locked onto a group of four men sitting directly across the room who were staring back at her. They were dressed in Hermanian army uniforms, but void of insignia. Mercenaries of some kind, Aetria thought, and armed. One of them got up and walked quickly to the front door of the inn, disappearing into the night. Aetria kept her attention on the other three.

Jarleni brought more food and wine, giving Aetria a worried look as she noticed the men's attention on the Tierian woman. Jarleni headed quickly for the kitchen.

Staring at people does not lead to friendly relationships, Aetria reminded herself. She returned her attention to the refilled bowl and started eating again. This time she savored the food instead of wolfing it down. She was mopping up the last dregs of the stew with a morsel of bread when she sensed a source being opened nearby. The shock of energy was so strong she felt as if it were sitting in front of her. She quickly turned her head in the direction of the exposed source and found herself staring at the same four men, only this time they were standing and watching her.

When they saw her look up, one of them stepped forward and shouted angrily in Hermanian. "Gratha hidones, Coleni, sposuli kagh!"

Alarmed at his anger and aggressive posture, Aetria jumped to her feet and moved away from the table. The men put their hands on their sword hilts, and their leader started to draw his. She reacted, her right hand darting forward, and a dagger flashed across the distance between them, burying itself in the forearm of the leader. He grabbed his arm and yelled in pain and anger. The other ex-soldiers started to move forward, and Aetria underhanded another dagger into the thigh of the soldier on the left of the advancing group. He fell to the floor with an oath, crashing sideways into the panicking crowd. She was reaching for the knives in her belt sheaths when a low-pitched woman's voice cut through the noise of room with surprising command and authority. Everyone froze.

Aetria recognized the holding spell and started the counter, but decided against using it. If all in the room were immobile, then she was not in immediate danger, except from the speaker of the spell. Movement

was not impossible in a hold spell, but it was definitely slowed. She shifted her eyes to look at the source of the voice. A Hermanian Magess was watching her carefully. The woman was no longer middle-aged, but not ancient. Her long hair was more white than brown, the skin of her face starting to wrinkle in the cheeks, the corners of her eyes and mouth long etched. Her eyes were black pools, deep in their sockets.

By the Power, Aetria thought, a Tierian!*Is it really she, the sorceress Coleni is terrified of?*

The woman spoke, in Tierian. "Show and identify yourself."

Aetria dropped the glamor. Doing so did not necessarily expose her true self, as Tierians were known to practice elementary magic. Attempting to fool an actual Tierian would only make it harder for her to keep the truth from coming out. The woman's face did not register any emotion when Aetria's hooked nose and sunken eyes changed. Although she could not move, Aetria tried to project a haughty tone into her response. "I am Tierii Aetria Menhala v'Grelnes. And you are?"

A slight lift of an eyebrow was all the recognition Aetria got from her formal name.

"Tierii Chalinee Rhuhanii v'Nomeles."

CHAPTER 11

Aetria slowly bowed her head, as taught by her father, in recognition of respect for the ruling clan of Tieria.*Of all the Tieri I have to run across, why must it be Chalinee, the defeated commander of the Hermanian Sorcerer Corps!*

Chalinee countered her spell and spoke a series of orders rapidly in Hermanian. The crowd shifted in place but did not move, remaining quiet before the Magess. Chalinee pointed toward the wounded men, and several Healers moved from behind her to assist them. One knelt by the man on the floor and looked at Aetria's dagger embedded in the man's leg. He asked a question in Hermanian. The Tierian sorceress looked at Aetria. When she didn't respond, Chalinee asked in Tierian. "My Healer wants to know if the weapon is poisoned or trapped."

Aetria looked at the armed men staring angrily at her and said contemptuously, "I am not Kanchala or any of their spawn. My weapons are clean."

Chalinee spoke again to her Healers. They deftly removed the weapons from the wounds and handed them to Chalinee. With one weapon in each hand, clasping them by their hilts, she slowly moved toward Aetria and pushed them forward to her. By doing so, she was clearly returning them to Aetria, in the Tierian style. Holding them by the blades would have chanced a wrist flick and death to Aetria. The leader of the men shouted something in protest, but did not move to intercept. Aetria took her weapons back. The daggers disappeared back into her sleeves.

The Magess moved over to Aetria's table and sat down. The fear of exposure Aetria had felt at the beginning of this risky encounter began to subside. Caution, she chided herself. *This is the most feared woman in Hermania.*

Chalinee switched to Delmathian. "Your Tierian is less than adequate, Aetree, Daughter of Tieria, Issue of Grelnes, Clan of Menhala."

Aetria shot back angrily in the same language. "My name is Aetria, with the Delmathian 'a' ending, not Tierian 'ee.' I am Delmathian. My adoptive father was Tierian, and is now Delmathian. And yes, my Tierian is unused. My mother does not approve of its use." She was angrier with her own self for feeling inadequate to this true daughter of Tieria than she was angry with Chalinee.

"Grelnes will always be Tieri, whether he accepts that or not. You have a choice."

Puzzled by Chalinee's last remark, Aetria decided to push her offense, as respectfully as possible, of course. "Why was I attacked? I was not doing anything offensive to anyone. I was peacefully eating my dinner when—"

A slight smile on her lips, Chalinee cut her off. "If you insist on playing at Tieri, then you should expect our usual lot. You would have had your dinner disturbed even if you had not been mistaken for someone else. Your father should have taught you better."

"Perhaps that is why he sent me on this journey. What do you mean by mistaken for some one else?"

Chalinee looked away from her and back at the soldiers being tended by her Healers. The crowd was returning to their meals and studiously avoiding disturbing the Magess sorceress and her strange table partner. "I normally prefer to use my own people as guards. You would have not fared as well against Kanchala as you did with these former Hermanian Assassins. Although Kanchala trained, they lack the—how does one say—commitment. My fellow sorcerers and I were recently members of the Hermanian army. With our defeat, we were released from the army and returning to our lodge at Wendelia. We needed an escort. I hired our former Assassin guards. One of them thought they had found a traitorous sorceress by the name of Coleni."

"I am neither a sorceress nor a Hermanian, so I could not have been either. What makes them think I was such a person?"

Chalinee looked at her with slight disbelief. "Come now, Mistress Aetria, don't tell me that people in Delmathia don't occasionally use disguises—including Tieri who have been known to use illusionary magic to hide their true features."

"I do not have the skills to make myself truly different. For that, I would have to be a sorceress. I only enhanced my visage to look more like my adoptive people. You are saying I was trying to disguise myself?"

Chalinee smiled. "No, I would say more like misrepresenting yourself."

Aetria flushed angrily, "I am Tieri, I can wear the clothes I—"

The Magess stilled Aetria's retort with a hand wave. "Do you practice all the ways of our people? Can you speak with them without sounding like a child? For you, this is a façade. You have chosen to play Tieri for some reason, but at some time, you will have to pick and choose on which side of the fence you are going to stand. You cannot live a life of half-Delmathian, half-Tierian. Those people do not exist. But I am not saying this to force a decision; you will find that you will force yourself one day to do that. To answer your last question, you bear a striking resemblance to Coleni even with Tieri features."

Aetria looked and truly felt stunned. Whether it was due to being caught in the act of trying to pass herself off as Tieri, or the revelation she would at some point in her life have to choose between her adoptive parents' cultures, she was not sure. She made a quick decision to tell a partial truth to hide her

discomfort.

"You know, I am adopted," she weakly responded, "and I don't know anything about my birth. This Coleni could be related in some way. You said she was a sorceress. Is that why they opened a source nearby, to see if I would react? Don't they know Tieri practice magic skills?"

The Magess sorceress bent forward and spoke softly to Aetria. "The Hermanian people know as much about us as do the Delmathian people. Sergeant Ventler came to the lodge and told Sorcerer Tramontes, my assistant, that he had found a suspicious woman at the inn who looked a lot like our missing Coleni. He asked Tramontes for the loan of a source to use as you suggested. Tramontes gave him one, then reported to me.

"When I asked why Ventler had thought the woman suspicious, he said she was dressed as a Tierian. I came over as soon as I heard, to prevent any embarrassment for one of our women, as much as to meet her. I arrived a little late to prevent the incident you just experienced. I apologize for that. And I am glad to have met one of my sisters, even though a reluctant one. Tell me, why are you are traveling in Hermania?"

Aetria knew she had to be careful with her answer. She couldn't reveal her true position, because there was no likelihood of anyone cooperating with the chief advisor to the conquering general. The fact that she was seeking the reason why Pleates was so interested in the Logathians would invariably lead to a question of why she cared. Aetria didn't want it to be known she was defending herself against charges of being a wild sorceress, particularly in Hermania where their views about such things were even harsher than her Order's. Of all the people she had to end up talking to, the most powerful Mage in Hermania wasn't the one she wanted to get involved with. Coleni's fear of Chalinee was based on her experience with the woman.

How do you lie to one who is so knowledgeable and dangerous? Aetria knew she had to thread enough truth in with her stretches of the truth to make her answer seem believable to the Hermanian Magess.

"My father sent me on this journey." *Which is true.* "He convinced me to go as Tierian because, although in Delmathia I was accepted as a merchant's daughter, in Hermania I would be viewed as a conqueror taking advantage of the war. It made sense to me. I knew Hermania probably held the Tieri in as much disrespect as Delmathia, but at least they would tolerate me. The reason he gave for sending me here was to find a new trading market, but I now suspect he had another purpose: to introduce me to the difficulties faced daily by his people." Her father just might have had that as a reason, although she thought she already knew the difficulties he faced in Delmathia.

Chalinee gestured to her assistant and pointed to her throat. The sorcerer rushed over to Jarleni to order wine. Chalinee turned her attention back to Aetria. "A new trade market? What kind?"

Aetria leaned conspiratorially across the table and spoke as softly as she dared, forcing Chalinee to lean towards her to hear her response. "I think, gems or gold."

Chalinee burst out with a quick laugh. "Here, in the Logathian mountains? You have been sent on a false quest, my dear. What makes you think such a market exists?"

Looking at the crowd around them who seemed to be ignoring the seated women, Aetria looked back at the Magess, mistrust in her eyes. Chalinee sighed, then waved the crowd out of the room. The hurried rush to the door made it apparent they were only too glad to be gone. Only the two remaining escorts

and her accompanying sorcerer aides remained, seated now at a table farthest from the two women's, but within clear view still.

"Thank you," Aetria said. "What I now tell you is to be held in strict closeness. I believe the Tieri call it, 'Talupna Ani.'"

Shaking her head, Chalinee wagged a finger at Aetria. "You can not evoke Talupna Ani between Tieri unless there is a sworn alliance between the two parties. This is a very binding vow, Aetria, and does not fit this situation. I think you only meant that it should not be repeated outside the Tieri clan. Be careful what you ask, my dear. Telling me something I could take advantage of and cut you out of the trade, just because you thought you had a deal with me not to speak of it, will anger your father very much. Perhaps justifiably, for not educating his daughter better in the ways of our people."

Aetria clenched her teeth in frustration. She was getting tired of being reminded of her shaky status as a daughter of Tieri. "Forgive me my ignorance. It was a phrase my father and I shared when we didn't want my mother to know something we were planning. I didn't know it had a deeper meaning than that. Thank you for your warning. I guess I cannot tell you what I was going to."

Chalinee reached out and touched Aetria's hand, the first real contact between them. "Daughter of Grelnes, I am a Magess of the Hermanian Order. I have not followed the trade path of my people for most of my entire life. When I chose to accept Hermanian training, I put myself out of the race for fortune. My Rhuhanii people would only be amused if I tried to solicit their aid to capitalize on your information. I will hold your secret."

The touch bespoke familiarity, but it also conveyed kinship. Chalinee herself must have struggled with her choice of profession, exactly as her own father had—making a decision that separated herself from her people's way of life, as he had done to marry a Delmathian woman and settle down. No wonder she was trying to be helpful to an estranged adoptive Tierian woman. Aetria felt a flash of guilt for trying to keep the truth from Chalinee.

"Thank you, Chalinee. My father, like any good merchant during a time of war, was supplying food and potables to the Delmathian army. I was his chandler, accompanying our wagon trains to the army's encampment and negotiating further trade. I got to know a Provisioner Sorcerer named Meloses rather well. We worked out a special deal. For receipt of privileged information, I, umm..."

Chalinee frowned at Aetria. The corners of her mouth dipped low as she said, "Selling yourself along with your goods is never a 'good deal,' Aetria."

Taken aback, Aetria looked shocked. "Oh! You have that all wrong! The deal was he would pay me the full price of my bill, and hold back five percent for himself." Aetria wondered if Meloses would really have done that, and smiled at the thought that he would probably have. Chalinee's puzzled look brought her back sharply to reality.

"Not that I wasn't working another angle, you understand. Becoming the wife of a Provisioner sorcerer, who was creating a very nice 'retirement fund' for when the war ended, made a lot of sense to me. I didn't discourage him, but I did not allow the relationship to go to that point! He was rather portly, but sweet."

"You showed uncommon good sense, Aetria. So you traded a small amount of profit for information, for which you expected to gain more money. Very sensible, but five percent is perhaps too much."

Aetria gave her a sweet smile. "He was charging other traders that for no information—or misinformation at best. The things he told me over the years always turned out to be reasonably true, discounting rumors which always cloud the picture."

"So you developed a useful source. Was he the source of your Logathian mountain gems? If so, you may have bitten on a rumor."

"He was my source, but not of that information. We were 'exchanging pleasantries' a few months ago when he let slip that a major spy had been discovered in General Borlock's staff. I told him I had heard that rumor before and didn't think it would be of any value to me. He looked very gravely at me and said it was going to impact me greatly because, with the spy out of the way, the general would be able to end the campaign very soon. We would all be seeking another trade source. I was shocked and started to weep. Really I did; this was my family's major source of income. He became very solicitous."

Chalinee refilled her glass, offering Aetria some of the wine. Aetria took some gratefully. Her throat was getting dry.

"I am having trouble connecting your Provisioner with Logathian gems."

"I know I talk in circles. Bear with me for a few more moments. There is a connection." Aetria took a swallow of wine. "Perhaps because he had upset me, he offered a bit of information I might find useful.

He 'wondered aloud' as to why the spy, who turned out to be Adept Pleates, commander of the Delmathian Sorcerer Corps and his own superior, had chosen to help the Hermanians and turn traitor on his own people."

"Did he know the answer?"

Aetria threw caution to the wind, deciding to try to save Coleni from her traitorous status in the eyes of the Hermanian Order. "Yes, he did. They got the answer after torturing a Hermanian sorceress they had just captured. According to her forced answer, he did it for a landed estate in your Logathians. Now why would a smart man like the Adept trade his loyalty for an estate of worthless rock? Is it truly worthless? My father doesn't think so. He sent me to try to find out the real answer. It has to be gems, minerals, or gold."

"Good thinking, but not if you knew the man Pleates. He was not specifically interested in wealth. He wanted control—to rule."

Aetria caught her breath. At last, the information she was seeking! But Chalinee stopped.

"You met the man?" Aetria blurted, panicking.

Chalinee took a sip of wine, coolly looking at Aetria over the rim of the goblet. She lowered the wine to the table and folded her hands in her lap. Aetria tried desperately to think of something to say to draw the woman out, but her mind could not come up with anything. When Chalinee started talking again, Aetria almost missed what she was saying.

"He came to our Order's lodge six years ago with an offer of selling information to us about your army in return for a secluded valley in our mountains. The area he was asking for was known to us, and we knew there was no mineral of any value there, having been explored by our own miners. We were leery of his offer, as it did not make sense to us.

"Sensing our reluctance, he explained to us that he wanted to establish his own Order. The land he sought would support a lodge; it had water, and forests for furnishings and fire, quarries for buildings and fortifications. That, the land had. He said he wanted to be left alone. What did we care if he wanted to escape from the world and make his own little kingdom? We needed his help. If he became a problem later on, we could eliminate him if necessary."

Aetria's heart was pounding with excitement. Crusher had been spying the entire time he was in the army. That meant he must have turned against the lodge even before joining the army. *What had caused him to do that?* Aetria felt Chalinee's deep-set eyes on her, and she looked up at the woman. Aetria snatched a sip of wine, splashing some up onto her cheek and into her nose. Coughing, she wiped the wine off her face with her sleeve.

"Meloses said Pleates was a ruthless and mean spirited man, and very calculating. I think I see now why he turned traitor. I don't know that much about our sorcerers, but I don't think they would allow him to split off and form his own order. They are pretty clannish. His only hope would be if your side won. He would then be given his own estate and he could do what he wanted."

Chalinee's stare sent a chill down her spine. Had she gone too far? Had she exposed her true sorceress self? Why would a merchant be excited about the Delmathians' sorcerer lodge being torn asunder? The idea flashed into her mind and she hurriedly spoke it before the Hermanian Magess cut in. "To make an estate of any size he would have to have gold. Did he ask for gold?"

Chalinee shook her head.

"There, don't you see? He didn't ask for gold. He wasn't making gold off the war like some sorcerers I know. Delmathian sorcerers only take in what they need to survive, or so they tell us all the time. He couldn't borrow from family or friends. There has to be wealth in those mountains! How else could he have started his own Order?"

Holding her breath, Aetria waited for Chalinee's reaction to her ramblings. The Magess' initial response was a tight smile, then a quiet laugh.

"You are more the Tieri daughter than I thought. I detect a youthful enthusiasm that overrides fact. You are a dreamer, Aetria. Maybe Pleates had found gold in the Logathians, but if he had, his discovery probably died with him. Chase your dream, Aetria. I almost hope you find it."

Chalinee stood up, her entourage rising to their feet in response and moving forward. Orders in the Hermanian language flew from her lips, and they rushed to obey.

The Tierian woman turned to Aetria. "You will not be disturbed further this night. In the morning, I suggest you retrace your steps down the road and take the left fork, the road our lodge is on. The valley you seek is two day's ride away. You will come to a river after one day; follow it upstream until it narrows to become a brook. You will be where Pleates wanted to be. When you have exhausted yourself seeking needlessly, return to our lodge and they will give you an undisturbed night's sleep. Farewell, Daughter of Tieria, Issue of Grelnes, Clan of Menhala."

* * * *

Aetria sat in the cover of the trees at the base of the gorge that led into the mountain and stared at the hole in the mountain's side. Her horse was tethered behind her, deeper in the forest, out of view of anyone or thing watching from above her. The hole was not a natural cave, neither was it dug out of the solid rock like the entrance to a mineshaft. It wasn't very deep in the side of the mountain, more like a

gash than a hole. On the left side of the gorge, facing east, it sat at the bottom of a vertical cut in the wall of the mountain, as if a gigantic ax had clipped off part of the hillside, the rock chips hurled outward and down the slope.

The hole was thirty or forty feet in diameter and, from where she sat, Aetria couldn't see how deep. It was relatively new, as the plant life that covered the rest of the mountain was gone from in and around its outer edges. Judging by the growth of the plants that had started to reclaim the area, the hole must have been created within the last several years. Tucked as it was up a gorge, way off any path or trail, one would never have seen it unless one walked directly across it or sensed the energy coming from it. She had found the source.

She continued to study the area around the hole, searching with all her senses, non-magical and magical.

The strength of the new energy pouring forth from the hole made it hard to see any other magical emanations, but she felt confident there were no Powered sorcerers nearby. There were traces of discordance, but none of the Power generating energy of a true source. If there were guards posted, human or animal, she couldn't see them. It was time to move in. She decided to investigate the hole as she was with no disguise. Her Power level was such that she could not waste it, and if attacked would need it more for escaping than avoiding discovery. She emerged from the tree line at the foot of the mountain and started up the slope.

The relatively short journey uphill was certainly strenuous, and not without danger from slipping and falling, but she arrived safely, albeit hot, sweaty, and breathless. The "cave" was about thirty feet deep. The ridge opposite the entrance ensured that the sun never reached the perpetual shadows at the back of the space. The sun, overhead now, provided sufficient light to see clearly the smoky appearance of the rock making up the cave. As she searched inward, she discovered a black, dust-like substance coating the sides of the cave. She found a pocket of dust in the wall and collected a sample, wrapping it in a piece of cloth torn from the rag she used to maintain her weapons.

The further back she went, the closer the ceiling came down, the nearer the walls. She found black crystal flakes scattered about, and she stopped to examine one piece, a nagging familiarity about the crystal gnawing at her mind. She couldn't pin down the feeling. Not too surprising, though, with the flow of that new energy inside the cave a constant hum in all directions on her magical senses. She was able to orient on several very strong spots within the walls, the strongest coming from the rear, in that portion of the cave where darkness dwelt.

Aetria was forced to light the torch she had brought from her saddlebags. The torch flared into brightness, casting light into an area that had not seen the light of day since its creation. She was struck dumb by the myriad twinkling reflections bouncing off the black and blue crystalline structure of the rear wall. As she scanned the chamber, her mouth open in wonder, she wandered over to take a closer look at the wall and stepped with a snapping crunch onto the legs of a skeleton on the floor.

Her scream echoed back into her ears as her eyes locked onto the empty eye sockets of the fleshless skull staring back at her.

* * * *

Dismounting at the crest of the hill, Aetria looked down upon the familiar valley of her Order. Darkness had fallen and the lights of the Order's stronghold made it stand out starkly against the black plain surrounding it. The general's camp sat directly over the road, blocking entrance into the castle. She couldn't help but feel a sense of siege between the two. The castle was even better lit than she had seen it during festivals, with more than the usual number of Sorcerer Guards walking the walls. The army camp was laid out as it always was, but there was evidence of increased sentries. There was almost no traffic

within the camp, normal during a siege but abnormal with the continuous celebrations of the victory she had seen since the last battle. There was no flow of traffic between the army camp and the sorcerers. In a real way, this was a standoff.

Her “borrowed” horse was exhausted from the fast trot she had forced on the mare over the last leg of their return from the mountains. Aetria had had to pull rank on a messenger from the camp headed for the capital, switching horses to gain a fresh mount to catch the general. Close enough now to sense home, the horse lifted her head and looked impatiently at Aetria. Taking the cue, Aetria wearily remounted the horse and headed downhill.

Just before entering the camp, Aetria expended the last of her Power to put on Coleni's aide-de-camp disguise. She rode directly to the general's tent and handed her horse off to the waiting staff. The general was expecting her, having been alerted to her approach by the camp's sentries. She entered the tent and saluted the general. Coleni stood by the general's chair looking very Aetria-like. Sonja returned the salute and turned to the black-robed Magess beside her.

"Is this the Sorceress you are looking for?" Sonja asked politely.

Trelana looked at Aetria, a trace of a faraway look passing over the Magess' eyes as she looked past the glamor, and smiled warmly. "Oh! Yes, this is the one."

Aetria dropped her disguise.

Trelana moved forward and hugged Aetria, kissing her cheek. When Aetria did not respond, Trelana leaned back and looked into her eyes, puzzled by the lack of warmth from her protégée. "Aetria, have I offended you in some way?"

"You brought charges against me to the Council, Magess! Am I supposed to ignore that fact?"

While she still held onto Aetria, Trelana's face mirrored the confusion in her mind. "I brought no charges against you, Aetria. I am here to defend you! By the Power, child, what must you be thinking of me?"

It was Aetria's turn to be confused. "But if you weren't the one who reported me to the Council, then who was?"

Making a comforting sound, Trelana gave Aetria another hug. "Counselor Magess Corerilla preferred the charges, Little One, and she is also her own advocate."

"I'm doomed, Trelana. Corerilla is a heartless witch."

"Now, Aetria! Show respect for your betters." The sting of the rebuke was soothed by the smile with which Magess Trelana said it.

"Yes, Mentor, I hear and obey."

The anger in Aetria's face made her response an empty promise. Trelana's heart ached for her protégée, knowing how hard Aetria had worked to be a sorceress, and the problems she faced trying to be a good one.

Aetria broke eye contact and slipped out of the embrace of the older woman, turning to walk over to her sister and acknowledge her with a quick hug. Coleni gently wiped a tear from Aetria's eye.

Sonja watched the drama of the sorcerers with a confident smile on her face, directing all to sit down and relax. She suggested Aetria divest herself of her armor and make use of the water basin standing near the armor rack to wash off some of the road dirt. She had seen the tears as well.

"Is it not irregular for an accuser to prosecute her own case?" Sonja asked Trelana, as Aetria untied the leather corset.

Trelana nodded. "Yes, it is, but in this situation, she is not really prosecuting her own case. She is acting in her position of Council advocate, the actual accuser not being available. She made the charges for the accuser."

Coleni had been listening with a great deal of interest, the methods of her sister's Order being very different from her own. In hers, she would have been tortured until she confessed, then either banned or killed, depending on the severity of the charge. She spoke before the general could. "Then who is the accuser?"

Aetria looked up from washing her face, the water dripping off her chin and onto her underblouse. Her eyes were locked on Trelana's.

"Adept Pleates."

* * * *

The general was met with all the pomp and ceremony Mage Kelristo could put forth. Sorcerers did not believe in ostentatious or portentous displays, preferring to do things inconspicuously.

The student body was assembled to honor the presence of the general, and in a very practical sense, to give them the opportunity to see the Conqueror of Hermania. The Mage Council received Sonja in their chambers, and after the usual required nice things were said back and forth, they held a dinner in her honor.

Because Aetria was not invited, Magess Trelana chose to eat the evening meal with Aetria in the comfort of her own cottage. The general graciously accepted her apology, as she had told Trelana she would the night before. Aetria and her mentor needed the time to talk.

* * * *

"What a surprise for you, Aetria—a twin sister. She looks so very much like you, but I sense a tension in her you don't have. She seems angry at the world."

The page was off attending the festivities, so Aetria cleared the dishes from the dining table. She spoke as she worked.

"Coleni's life has been quite different from mine, Magess, and a lot harder. She is not as idealistic as I am. She is more practical. For a Hermanian, she is very flexible in her thinking and can be rash in her actions. I find she has most of the qualities I lack, and she tells me I have the ones she doesn't want. It is almost like we were a whole person once, then split in half. It has been an interesting six weeks living with her."

Trelana got up from the table and took a bottle of wine down from the storage rack in the cabinet next to the kitchen door. She gathered up two goblets from their shelf in the cabinet and walked into the study. Aetria met her there, accepting a glass of wine and sitting down in the hard student chair next to

her mentor's.

"The general has told me she wants Coleni's presence kept secret, Aetria. I will, of course, respect that as long as it does not become a problem for the Council later on. She will not be allowed to be in the hearing. Neither for that matter should the general, but Mage Meldoran has made an exception for General Sonja."

"That was very wise of the Council Leader, Magess."

Trelana sipped her wine and looked at her favorite. The shock of having to stand before the Council had made Aetria a little bitter towards her Order.

"Whatever Corerilla has planned, she is holding very closely to her own heart. I do know she had received a number of messages from Pleates and has not shared them all with the Council, saying the messages were between a Mentor and her student. I told the Council of your concerns about the projector weapons which upset Corerilla very much. I wonder if she is trying to punish you for casting doubt on Pleates? Well, we can only hear the charges, Aetria, answering them as honestly as we can."

"I intend to answer everything honestly, Magess, I just hope the Counselor does also."

* * * *

"Sorceress Aetria Menhala, please come forward and face the Council Leader," Magess Corerilla intoned, her words fading off into the vastness of the Council chambers.

The Council sat at the northern end of the huge rectangular room, occupying exactly half of it. They sat behind a table, the front and sides of which were covered with a thick, black cloth. The table stretched around the western, northern and eastern sides of their end of the room. The table and chairs of the Council sat on a platform several feet high. This allowed the members of the Council to look down into the square. The chairs they sat on were made of wood, high backed and ornately decorated.

In the middle of the square formed by the Council seats stood a table with three chairs. Seated at the table were Sonja and Trelana, who had preceded Aetria into the chambers. The southern end of the chamber was filled with row upon row of bench seats, presently unoccupied.

The room was familiar to all students of Inhestia because it was in the center of that square they stood to be tested by the Council—to demonstrate their abilities to become sorcerers. Their peers would sit silently on the benches and observe what it was like to come under the scrutiny of Delmathia's most senior sorcerers.

Aetria, wearing her bright red Sorceress robe, self-consciously marched up behind the empty center chair of the three and said in a loud, clear voice, "Let it be recorded correctly. I am Sorceress Tierii Aetria Menhala v'Grelnes, Captain of Cavalry."

"It is so recorded," Counselor Corerilla said coldly. "Since we have established your identity before the Council, Captain Grelnes, it is appropriate at this time to point out to you that you are now under the jurisdiction of the Mage Council and your duties as Chief Advisor to General Sonja Borlock are suspended."

Sonja stood, clad in her golden armor, her hand on her sword hilt. Head held high, she spoke commandingly. "This is not a Delmathian Court of Law, empowered by King Phyrllatus to pass judgment on the land's people. The Council does not have the power to suspend the duties of Captain Aetria." She

remained stiffly standing, eyes locked on Mage Meldoran, the Council Leader.

Meldoran looked around the table, his ancient eyes gauging the reaction of the Council members to the general's pronouncement. He saw defiance in some, pleading in others, and studied interest from a few. Magess Corerilla's cheeks were flushed with anger; her eyes mere slits with hatred for Sonja. She had argued vehemently to exclude the general, fearful of just this kind of interference.

Meldoran spoke, his voice raspy with age. "General Borlock, this sorcerer hearing is called to consider issues pertaining strictly to sorcerers. It is our usual practice to allow only sorcerers to attend, non-sorcerers being excluded. Because you are Sorceress Aetria's commanding officer, I have granted you special permission to be present. I would appreciate it if you would refrain from interfering with our proceedings.

"Now, you have made an excellent point and perhaps the Counselor phrased her opening statement incorrectly. Our intention at this point in the proceedings is to ensure that Sorceress Aetria's attention is focused on this hearing, and that she understands her future as a practitioner of Power use is the subject of this hearing.

"Nothing we can do will prevent her from remaining a Captain of Cavalry with all her attendant duties. However, she must realize that, as a result of this hearing, she may lose all duties associated with being a Sorceress. Have I made the Council's concerns clear, General?"

"Perfectly, Leader Meldoran," Sonja said, sitting down.

"Please continue, Counselor."

Corerilla moved stiffly past the center table, turning so her back was to Aetria, facing Mage Meldoran. As angry as she was, she spoke softly, without spite in her voice. "I may have gotten ahead of myself in my opening remarks, Mage Meldoran, and I thank you for making the Council's concerns clear to Sorceress Aetria, her mentor, Magess Trelana, and her commander, General Borlock. However, from the charges I am about to read, I believe the army's rule will stipulate my opening statement concerning her duties will be correct."

The Counselor turned abruptly and her eyes, steely with contempt, locked onto Aetria. Her voice was now loud, each word enunciated carefully. "Sorceress Aetria, you are charged with the improper use of the Power, disregarding sanctions placed on you by the Council and—" Her voice raised almost to a shout. "—High treason against King Phyrilatus." Dropping her voice to a near whisper, Corerilla spoke to Sonja. "The charge of treason will be deferred to the jurisdiction of General Borlock."

The word "treason" surged through Aetria, echoing in her mind. Her heart felt as if it had stopped. She became conscious of Trelana moving to her side and supporting her. She looked at her mentor, the shock of the last charge plainly etched in Trelana's face. The Magess faced the Council Leader, still supporting Aetria with an arm around her shoulders.

"Mage Meldoran, I was not aware of this final charge and am quite shocked it has been preferred without my being notified, both as the mentor of the accused and as a member of the Council. It has unsettled my student, and I request a stay in the hearing until I can fully understand the charge and its ramifications for Sorceress Aetria."

Corerilla cut in quickly. "I counsel no delay, Mage Meldora. The last charge has been deferred to the army. It will not be considered by the Council." The Counselor looked between Trelana and Meldoran,

willing the latter to rule for her.

The Council Leader sat frowning, wondering why his Counselor was not following the agreed-upon plan. Her dramatics had placed him in a position where he had to make a decision that would further the split between Council members favoring Sorceress Aetria and those favoring Corerilla. He had made the decision to defer Pleates' charge of treason against Aetria last night. Why bring it up now?

"Magess Trelana, Adept Pleates' preferring of that charge only came to my attention last night. As it was not a matter the Council need act on, I deferred it. You were made fully aware of the other charges, so I see no reason to delay the hearing, but I will do so for one hour to give Sorceress Aetria time to regain her composure. This hearing is recessed."

The Council members rose and left the room through a door in the north wall. Corerilla walked slowly past Aetria, her face set in stony indifference. She left the room by the same door as the rest of the Council, closing it firmly behind her with a thump.

"Treason?" Aetria asked at barely a whisper.

"I don't understand why Corerilla did that," Trelana said, turning to hug her distraught protégée.

"To get her way," Sonja said, unbuckling her sword and laying it on the table. "She knew I would exert myself when she tried to remove Aetria from my control. By formally adding the charge of treason, she has forced me to relieve Aetria of her duties, pending an army hearing on the charge."

Steering Aetria over to her chair, Trelana released her, insisting she sit down. "I must go see what Corerilla is up to, Aetria. This late maneuvering is typical of her, but I sense Meldoran is not part of it. But he knows something more than he is telling the Council, and I for one am tired of surprises."

For her age, Trelana fairly bustled out of the room, her black robe billowing out behind her as she sought her peers beyond the north door. Sonja shifted her chair over closer to Aetria getting the Sorceress' attention with a slap on her knee.

"Advisor, advise me."

"I have been relieved of those duties, General."

"Not yet, you haven't. Tell me, this hearing seems to be fairly informal. How is it supposed to proceed?"

Aetria forced her mind to focus on the general's question. She wanted now only to sink into oblivion, but duty called. "Corerilla presents the charges, then presents the evidence she has supporting the charges. Trelana presents a counter argument. Corerilla answers that. Trelana gives a final argument."

"And what are the rules of evidence?"

"Rules of evidence? I don't understand?"

Sonja shook her head in disbelief. "How can the evidence be submitted to the Council? Surely it is more than Corerilla saying you are guilty and your having to prove otherwise?"

"Magi aren't supposed to lie, General."

"Then it is her word against yours? That is a very uneven match, Sorceress."

"It is the way of the Council. We can't change that."

"This is a war of wits, Aetria, and I am still a general who is good at war. Corerilla has tried to cut me out of the picture once; she will try again. Here's what I intend to do."

* * * *

Aetria watched the Council members in their black Mage robes file back into the room, the Counselor entering first. She glanced at Trelana as her mentor put a steadying hand on her arm. Trelana had returned ahead of the rest of the Council to tell the general and her how the Council had reacted to the new charge of treason. She also confirmed the general's supposition of the Counselor's motives. Sonja barely had time to brief her plan to Trelana before the Council returned.

Taking her position in front of the Leader's table, Corerilla wore a smug smile on her face. When the members had all been seated, she stepped forward to speak, stopping abruptly when Sonja stood up to speak.

"Council Leader Meldoran, pardon my interference once again so soon after you have warned me not to do so, but your decision to defer the charge of high treason against Sorceress Aetria forces me to take the following action before her participation in this hearing can go any further. I must relieve Captain Aetria of her duties as my chief advisor pending a hearing on that charge. I will do so now."

The smile on Corerilla's face broadened. She had beaten the great general.

Mage Meldoran nodded, but said, "I appreciate your telling the Council that, but whether she is acting as your advisor or not does not affect this hearing—"

"I'm sorry, Council Leader. You misunderstood what I said. I said, 'I will do so now.' I meant I am calling a hearing on the charge of high treason."

"What?" screeched Corerilla.

Confusion reigned.

Meldoran stood up, igniting a palm flame that made Aetria's previous displays seem like a feeble candle flicker in comparison. By tradition, when the Council met formally for judgment, only the Council Leader was allowed to possess Power; all other sorcerers entered the room unPowered. This prevented what had occurred in the earliest years when arguments often ended in spell duels. Everyone in the room instantly stopped talking and shielded their eyes from the brightness. It had the desired effect of quieting the assembly.

"Magi, please calm yourself. General Borlock, please explain what you meant by your decision to convene a military hearing on the charge of high treason preferred against Sorceress Aetria."

The general moved from around her side of the table and stood next to Corerilla, giving the Counselor a perfunctory glance before addressing the Council leader.

"The charge of high treason against the king takes precedence over any other charge that can be brought against Sorceress Aetria, military or otherwise. As the Commanding General of the Armies of Delmathia, I have the authority granted to me by King Phyrlatus"—Sonja paused to ensure the Council heard her

invoke the king's name—"to pass judgment on crimes committed by military personnel under my command. Before I normally execute that authority, I like to hold a hearing to ascertain that the charges are valid and worthy of a trial being held. Does anyone here care to dispute I have the right to do this?"

The silence in the chamber was so intense the creaking of the wood roof adjusting to the heat of the midday sun could be heard.

"There being no dispute, I will continue. It seems to me the charges preferred by the traitor Pleates against Sorceress Aetria are all related. I propose that, rather than hold two separate hearings, one by your Council and one by me, that the efforts be combined into one. You will be free to take action on those 'charges' that concern strictly your Order, as they are not currently criminal charges under the king's Justice Code.

"I will be able to determine if Sorceress Aetria will stand judgment by me for the charge of high treason as your Council has deferred that charge to me. We can resolve all issues at the same hearing." Sonja turned and walked back to her seat behind the table. She stopped in the process of sitting down, stood erect again and looked at Corerilla. "Oh, I almost forgot. The hearing will, of course, be under the rules of the king's Justice Code. High treason is a very, very serious charge."

A murmur of disgruntled whispering between the members rose from the Council seats.

Corerilla spoke out angrily. "This is not acceptable, Council Leader. General Borlock has no right to tell us how we conduct our hearing. She has no jurisdiction over a sorcerer's violation of our laws—"

"The king's law is above all others in the land," Sonja said, cutting across the Counselor's protest, her own voice raised louder and with the full power of command behind it. "We can either hold my hearing now, here, with your cooperation, or I will hold it at the king's court, at my convenience, with or without you. I assure you the king will agree with whatever decision I make on this subject."

The tension between the two women filled the room. Each strong-willed, confident in her authority, sure of herself. One was going to win, and Aetria knew it would not be Corerilla. General Borlock, Conqueror of Hermania, Savior of the Land, was just too powerful in this war of wills. From the look of Meldoran's face, he thought so also. Having sat down during Sonja's explanation, he arose.

"General Borlock, I do not dispute your authority on this case and I know the charge of high treason takes precedence over our concerns. I do not wish to speak for the Council until we have had a chance to discuss your proposal. I know the Council will be concerned about discussing our affairs in the presence of non-sorcerers. By requiring us to use the king's Justice Code, you force us to do that."

Looking around the table at the angry faces of the Magi, defiant and resentful of her interference, Sonja put a smile on her face and relaxed her stiff posture, removing her hand from her sword where she had, by reflex, put it.

"I do not see that as a problem. I will accept as my court scribe Sorcerer Meloses from my staff. I see no need for any other parties. If I do, I will use sorcerers if at all possible. I reserve the right to hear the testimony of non-sorcerer witnesses, but I assume you would do that also. I think we can resolve any other issues just as easily. I await your decision on this matter."

Sonja started for the southern door, looking back over her shoulder at Aetria. "Captain, you are under military arrest. Please come with me."

The Magi watched their departure from the room, most wondering what in the name of the Power had just happened.

* * * *

Aetria paced nervously in the general's tent as she awaited Sonja's return. The Council had made their decision before the evening meal and requested the general's presence in their chambers. Aetria had not wanted Sonja to take this action, for it pushed her even farther in conflict with her Order, but the general insisted her Chief Advisor was not going to be led to the slaughter by that witch Corerilla.

The usual crashing of sword salutes by the Royal Guard announced Sonja's presence moments before she swept into her tent, tossing her helmet at Lieutenant Valetti and unbuckling her sword as she crossed over to her table. Valetti caught the tossed sword easily as Sonja's now free hand reached for the wine bottle.

"They've agreed—not that they had a choice. Corerilla wanted time to prepare her case of treason against you, but I told her this wasn't a trial, just a hearing. Present what she had and not try to convince me of your guilt. A court lawyer would be called to do that. That woman really despises me. I wonder if her hatred of me is driving her vendetta against you? Perhaps we shall find out tomorrow."

CHAPTER 12

The general was seated at a table below and directly in front of the Council Leader. Seated next to her was Sorcerer Meloses, acting as court scribe, and next to him was Novice Holendal, assisting. Aetria wondered who was the most nervous—herself or the Novice. The young Provisioner's hands were actually shaking, and noticing it, he set his pen down and clasped his hands in his lap.

Aetria sat at the same table she had before, but this time the table was pushed further back towards the bench seats to make room for the general's table. Trelana sat on her left, an empty chair on her right. That chair had been occupied by the general, but would now be used by the witnesses, as was the case in a court trial. Sonja had told her Meldoran had suggested the general sit next to him at the raised Mage Council table, but Sonja said she wanted to keep a clear distinction between the two hearing leaders. Privately, Sonja liked the idea of inserting herself between Corerilla and the Council Leader. This way the Counselor had to look at her instead of turning her back to the general, as she was wont to do.

It was time to start. Corerilla left her seat at the far left of the Council table and approached the center of the room. "I call Sorceress Brusilla to give testimony before this hearing."

Aetria turned to look at the southern door where the witnesses would enter. She had not seen her village's Healer in several years. When she had last seen her, Brusilla was quite old. She would have been retired years before, but Healers were needed for the war, and no replacement was available. She entered slowly through the door, using a cane in her left hand, her right arm supported by a tall, thin young man—Verdilan! The Healer Novice's attention was focused totally on the Sorceress Healer. Hearing a chair scraping back, Aetria turned to see Mage Kelristo leave his place at the Council table and scuffle quickly down past her, moving to assist Brusilla.

The smile Brusilla gave him lit up her face, showing the beauty she had once been, and as Kelristo saw her now. Verdilan gave up his place to the Mage Healer and retreated out the door. He gave Aetria a fleeting smile of recognition before the door closed behind him.

Aetria stood and pulled the chair back for Brusilla. The Healer gave Aetria a friendly hug and sat down.

Kelristo hovered by her side, asking if she was well and could he get her anything? Shooing Kelristo off with a little hand wave, she turned to Aetria.

"My, my. What a beautiful young woman you have become. You look so trim and strong, and not like the waif you used to be. I remember—"

"Sorceress Brusilla," Mage Meldoran broke in, getting the attention of the old woman. She had been a Novice when he had first arrived at Inhestia to begin his teaching career. Fifty years had passed since then.

"Yes, Meldo." Brusilla seemed a little confused by the interruption. Aetria could not stop the smile on her face upon hearing the Mage Council Leader called Meldo.

"Brusilla, you are here to give testimony before the Council."

"I know that! Why else would I travel for two long days to get here? You must think me senile."

The Council Leader was a patient man. "I meant, now is the time for you to give your testimony. Counselor Corerilla, please proceed."

Brusilla was Corerilla's witness, so the anger that teased around the corners of the Counselor's eyes could not be released. Calmly, in a clear voice, she asked Brusilla, "You are the Healer for the village Torrelon, are you not, Sorceress?"

"I am."

"About how big is the village's population, Brusilla?"

"Oh! It is quite large. Close to a thousand people, I'd say."

"That is a lot of people. A village that large must mean you don't get to know the people very well."

A look of indignation crossed the old Healer's face. "Of course not. I was at the birthing of almost all of the living at Torrelon, and if anyone has died without me being there, then they did so far away from their home. I cared for them all. I know them all."

"Then you know Sorceress Aetria well?"

Looking at Aetria, Brusilla gave her a soft smile and patted her hand affectionately. "Gave her the Test. No one has ever scored higher. Such a wild imagination she had."

"Was she a happy child, Brusilla?"

The Healer shook her head. A touch of melancholy entered her voice. "No, poor thing. Kept to herself. She was teased so badly because—"

Corerilla stepped closer to the Healer, "Because why, Brusilla?"

The Healer looked down for a moment, then glanced at Aetria out of the corner of her eye. "Because of him."

"Him?" Corerilla asked.

"Her father, I mean her foster father. He is one of them—a Tieri."

"She was persecuted by the other children because she was the daughter of a Wanderer? So she stayed away from them. What about school?"

"He taught her. Didn't want her to learn our ways. I finally got Valeria to send her for the last year. Valeria is her foster mother from our village. Aetria came in to school but left before it finished for the winter."

"Why did she leave?" Corerilla asked, staring at Aetria.

"She was..." Brusilla's voice dropped to a whisper.

"She was what, Sorceress Brusilla?"

"She was thrown out of school for cursing Ludreena."

The mention of her old enemy's name brought the memory of that sad incident back into Aetria's mind as if it had just happened. Ludreena had snatched her stuffed dragon Rajii away while Aetria had sat alone under a shade tree during a break in classes. Aetria gave chase and caught the girl by her apron strings. Ludreena was the biggest girl in the school, and a lot bigger than Aetria. That didn't stop Aetria. She lost the ensuing fight, but not by much. She got Rajii back. Ludreena kicked her while she was down, and Aetria foolishly yelled a Tierian obscenity at the older girl.

"That must have been a very hard school if they banished children for swearing, Sorceress," Corerilla said, a slight smile on her lips.

"Not swearing—cursing. She put a Tierian curse on Ludreena. At least her parents thought so. Ludreena got very ill after the fight, and the village believed it was due to Aetria's curse. I told them it was probably due to the fight, but they wouldn't listen."

"So Sorceress Aetria was shunned and treated badly by her own village as a child."

"Yes, but not by everyone. She—"

"Thank you, Sorceress Brusilla. Magess Trelana may want you to come back and testify again, so I hope your stay here at Inhestia is a pleasant one." Corerilla signaled for Verdilan to come and assist Brusilla.

Mage Kelristo got there first, and the two older sorcerers walked slowly to the southern door, heads bowed close to each other in a lively conversation Aetria wished she could have heard.

Where was Corerilla going with this information?

While Mage Kelristo finished escorting Brusilla out of the room and returned to his seat, Aetria asked Trelana the obvious question about the two.

"I had not yet started my teaching career at Inhestia when Ulana and Kelristo suffered their burnouts. I was told that when Ulana escaped from Inhestia, Kelristo's heart was broken by her loss. For a year he

was withdrawn and moody. Brusilla returned to Inhestia for her Sorceress training, and Kelristo's interest in life picked up the moment she was introduced as his newest student.

"They would have become lifemates, but Brusilla was dedicated to serving her village and would not give up her position. Neither would Kelristo. It has been a long-distance romance ever since. Maybe now that she can retire, she will come join him here. The Council hopes that is so. The very first available Healer went to Torrelon for that purpose."

"Novice Verdilan is her replacement?"

"You know him? Of course, he was one of your Novices, wasn't he?"

"Yes, a most serious and caring young man. He will make an excellent Healer for my village."

Corerilla did not wait for Kelristo to take his seat, calling out for the next witness the moment he reached his chair. "I call Sorceress Halista to give testimony before this hearing."

The name of her old commander and friend sent a surge of alarm through Aetria. As she feared, Halista entered through the southern door, looking as large as any pregnant woman Aetria had ever seen. Halista waved away her escort, an anxious-looking Novice Healer, and walked awkwardly to the waiting chair.

Sitting down heavily, she smiled at Corerilla. "You can have whatever time you need, Counselor, but I suggest you make it fast. General, Ma'am, surprised and pleased to see you."

Sonja returned her smile. "If we need to interrupt this hearing for a birthing, I can't think of any more qualified attendants than the Mage Healers present. I would, however, prefer that you did so in the comfort of your quarters."

"You and me both, Ma'am."

Watching the interplay, Corerilla knew she had to be very carefully with her witness. "Sorceress Halista, you were the commanding officer of Novice Aetria prior to her return to Inhestia."

"That is true. She was in my company for a year prior to the incident at the Battle of Saphradea."

"How would you characterize Sorceress, I mean, Novice Aetria's service at that time?"

"She was quite a handful," Halista said, looking at Aetria beside her. "I have never known a more enthusiastic and dedicated young officer. She volunteered for everything."

The friendship was obvious between the two Sorceresses.

"I have information that then-Novice Aetria even went out with the skirmishers at night—without your knowledge."

Halista looked sharply at Corerilla. She carefully considered her answer. "She went out once without my knowledge and permission. I corrected that breach in protocol as soon as she returned, as I did for every one of my Novices learning to be army sorcerers. She only required one time to get the message, unlike others."

"Are you saying that all of your sorcerers went out with skirmishers at night?"

"No, I said that all of my sorcerers went astray early in their service and required correction."

"But going out with night killers? Is that normal for sorcerers?"

Aetria was as puzzled by the path of Corerilla's questions as Halista looked. "No, but most sorcerers don't involve themselves totally in army life. Aetria had a passion for knowing what goes on in all facets of a campaign. She had a deep concern for how the common troops lived and fought. They trusted her more than any other sorcerer.

"The commander of the skirmishers came to me," Halista continued, "and asked specifically if I would release her for going out with them after the first time. They respected her skills and found her ability to terrorize the enemy with 'spell horrors,' as they called them, was very handy. I allowed her to do so for several months before we got too busy with the upcoming Saphradean campaign."

Corerilla paced away from her normal spot near the left of the general's table. She turned and looked at Halista, tilting her head ever so slightly. "You said, 'They respected her skills.' You mean her Power use or what?"

Halista responded carefully. "The skills they referred to were her ability to move silently in the night and blend in with their own movements. Her skills in illusions were beyond a doubt superb, but it was her defensive training that made her valuable to the skirmishers. We tried assigning other sorcerers to the same duty, as it was having a serious effect on the Hermanians' morale, but most could not keep up with the skirmishers."

"What defensive training do you refer to, Sorceress?"

"Her Tierian training."

"Oh! You mean the infamous Tierian Thief skills?"

"I didn't call it that."

"No, you did not, I did. So, for several months Novice Aetria ranged the battle lines at night unsupervised by a senior sorcerer, alone, in the company of non-sorcerer night killers."

Halista's rising anger could be heard in her voice. "I told you I allowed her to do so, and I also had Commander Pleates' permission. He was very interested in her work."

"Thank you for pointing that out. Adept Pleates was the commanding officer of the sorcerer regiment?"

"Yes, you know he was."

"Please calm yourself, Sorceress Halista. What I know and what you can substantiate might be two different things. The Council is seeking the truth here. Please tell us who recommended that Novice Aetria be given the task of covering the Kelrossian Lancers at the final battle with the Saphradeans."

"Adept Pleates designated her as the supporting Illusionist for the task of covering the diversionary feint. I told him Aetria had been under a lot of pressure for one so new to the regiment and suggested a more senior Sorcerer for the job. He disagreed with me and ordered that Aetria be given the job as he had originally planned."

Corerilla picked up a scroll from a small table she had placed near her and seemed to study it for a moment. "Please tell us what actions Adept Pleates ordered after Aetria's grid burnout—the one that occurred at the final battle."

Shifting in her chair, Halista tried to find a more comfortable position to ease the cramp in her back. Aetria's look of concern prompted Halista to murmur to her not to worry, it wasn't time.

"He ordered that Aetria be returned to Inhestia by the quickest means for evaluation of her condition by Mage Kelristo," the very pregnant Sorceress then said aloud. "He said he was concerned that the honor of the Order was at stake, and that it would appear one of our own had failed to carry out her orders.

He was going to assume responsibility for her 'mistake,' having placed her in the position where she could fail. He told the commanding general he had changed the plan at the last minute, so it would look like we ordered the 'elephant' charge."

"Thank you for your testimony, Sorceress. You can now return to your Healers' care, as it looks like you are not comfortable sitting in that chair. We may have need to call you again, but for your sake, I hope not."

Halista stood, gave Aetria an awkward hug and waddled from the room. Corerilla waited until the door thumped shut before she picked up a scroll from her table and walked over to the general's table. She handed the scroll to Novice Holendal.

"My next witness could not be present due to circumstances I'm sure you will understand. He has submitted a sworn affidavit in his place. I call General Amexis Parlinto to give testimony before this hearing. Please read the general's statement, Novice Holendal."

Holendal stood up, unrolled the scroll and looked at it. A look of panic crossed his face and he swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Counselor, but it is in Saphradean. I can't read—"

"The translation is on the next scroll, Novice."

Holendal's face burned red with embarrassment, his voice faltering in his confusion and shame. He coughed once and began again. "Here is my sworn testimony before the Mage Council of Delmathia concerning certain events that occurred during the final battle between the kingdom of Delmathia and the Principality of Saphradea.

"As Commander of the Center, I was informed the Delmathians were planning to mount an attack on our forces, and that I could expect a feint at my position by a squadron of Royal Guard 'Elephant' Cavalry. We knew that no such 'Elephant' squadron existed in the order of battle for Delmathia. I was to feign a panicked retreat and shift my forces to the real threat from the real Royal Guard on our right flank. When I asked the source of this information, I was told it came from within the Delmathian army.

"When the time of the attack came, I executed my orders and found, to my dismay, that the Heir had taken it upon himself to bring his royal party into my area of battle without notifying my staff or myself of his intention to do so. The fake Delmathian Royal Guard captured him while my forces were driving the real Royal Guard from the field. Sworn by me this day, Amexis Parlinto, General, Army of Saphradea."

Retrieving the scroll from the Novice Provisioner, Corerilla offered it to Mage Meldoran, who declined to take it, saying that General Borlock should see it first. As she handed it to Sonja, Corerilla asked, "General Parlinto did command the center at the battle, did he not, General?"

Sonja nodded, taking the scroll and reading the first page, in the original Saphradean. She handed the scroll back to the Counselor, making no comment. Corerilla gave it to Meldoran. She turned and looked at Trelana.

"I call Magess Trelana to give testimony before this hearing."

Trelana showed no surprise at the call. She awaited Corerilla's questions.

"After Aetria's return to Inhestia, did she tell you about any change in her spell casting ability?"

"Yes, she did," answered Trelana in a calm voice. "She said she seemed to sense an aura around sorcerers. I told her our concerns about changes in spell casters after a grid burnout and admonished her to keep me advised of this new sensing. Mage Kelristo and I discussed it, and he examined Aetria. It was our belief she was over-sensitized to the Power by her burnout, and that it would fade with time. It did."

Corerilla moved to stand in front of Aetria and looked hard at her, while asking Trelana, "You said it faded with time. How do you know this?"

Aetria's heart stopped.

"She said it faded the way we thought it would," Trelana answered. "During the next four years of intense study and exercises, I never saw a change in her spell casting or lack of control. I had no reason to doubt her word."

"No, you didn't. And when she returned several months ago after the death of Adept Pleates, had she not had another grid burnout?"

"Yes."

"Did she tell you about any change in her spell casting?"

Trelana's patience seemed infinite. Perhaps she was more used to Corerilla's method of questioning.

"She told me she sensed a buzzing associated with the use of a source. I did not sense the same, and she said my personal source gave her the same buzzing. It seemed to me it was a similar case of over-sensitization, and again, Mage Kelristo agreed with me. Aetria is one of the few sorcerers who has ever survived more than one grid burnout, so we had to believe this was an expected result."

"Did you tell her to keep you advised of any change, like the first time?"

"Of course I did," Trelana replied, a little testily.

"I am not doubting you, Magess, I just wanted to make sure she was warned. Has she said anything to you about changes in her abilities since then?"

Trelana looked at Aetria for a moment then returned her eyes to Corerilla. "No, she has not."

"Thank you, Trelana. I may have further questions for you later on. I call Sorceress Felora to give testimony before this hearing."

All eyes turned toward the door, watching the Provisioner Sorceress enter the room and take her seat next to Aetria. She gave Aetria a warm smile, her eyes filled with sympathy for her sister classmate. She sat perkily in her chair and gazed at the Council Counselor.

"Sorceress Felora, Sorceress Aetria and you were the women's student leaders until her departure for the Army with Adept Pleates last spring, were you not?"

"We were."

"Please tell us what you observed of Sorceress Aetria's mood a few weeks prior to her departure from Inhestia."

"Aetria was very unhappy. She spent several nights crying by herself in her room. I tried to help her, but she told me she had to handle it by herself."

Pacing slowly by Aetria's table, Corerilla placed herself next to Felora, looking over the petite woman at Aetria. "Did you know the true cause of Sorceress Aetria's unhappiness?"

Felora looked at Corerilla, and seeing her staring at Aetria, looked to her left at Aetria. Her classmate and fellow instructor was looking at her expectantly.

"She..she was not advanced to Adept candidacy by her Mentor, Magess Trelana."

"Did she say why she was not advanced?"

"She said the Magess wanted her to return to the army and prove herself capable of exercising control of her Power usage. That upset her very much."

"Returning to the army upset her?"

"Oh, no. She loved the army. Not being advanced was what upset her."

"Thank you, Sorceress Felora. You may be recalled by Magess Trelana for questions later on."

Felora stood to her feet quickly, happy to be released by the Council. She stepped over to Aetria, putting her arms out for a hug. Aetria stood and embraced her former colleague. Felora whispered to her that she had told the truth, hadn't she? Aetria told her that she had and not to worry. The small woman hurried from the Council chambers.

"I call Novice Fernonia, Lieutenant of Sorcerer Guards, to give testimony before this hearing," Corerilla intoned.

A Guard Lieutenant? Aetria thought.

The beautiful young woman marched into the room, stunning in her tight fitting black leather armor. Where sorcerer robes tended to hide the wearer's body contours, armor accentuated it. Fernonia filled out her armor well. Her officer rank sash held a stripe of Novice gray running down its length, something Aetria had never seen in a Sorcerer Guard, who were until this time strictly non-sorcerers. The Council did not seem to be disturbed by that fact. Fernonia stood by the witness chair instead of sitting.

"Please be seated, Lieutenant."

"I prefer to stand, Ma'am."

"I prefer you sit, Novice Fernonia," Meldoran said.

She sat down stiffly at the edge of her chair, her back rigid. She did not look at Aetria. Aetria noticed that Fernonia's hair, which had been so long and beautiful before being singed off by the explosions, had grown back to the length of her own. It had been recently trimmed, so Fernonia was adopting a different hairstyle since becoming a guard.

"Lieutenant, you were a classmate of Novice Recanlin's, were you not?"

Aetria wondered why Corerilla always made a statement into a question.

"Yes, I was."

That's why, Aetria thought. You always get a positive answer.

"One night, when your recruit company was on the way to join the army, an incident occurred involving Novice Recanlin. I believe you were relieved from guard duty that night by Recanlin. Do you recall the night I am speaking of?"

"Yes, vividly."

"Did you talk with Novice Recanlin about what he did that night that caused him to leave his guard post, subsequently to be found by Sorceress Aetria?"

"All of the Aggressors did. After hearing about his dumb mistake, we ganged up on him for making us look foolish. We asked him why he did it."

"And he said, what?"

"He said he was thinking about the new meditation techniques Sorceress Aetria was teaching us. Reckless always wandered aimlessly when he was thinking. He did it here at Inhestia all the time. We should have foreseen it and taken care of the problem before he embarrassed the Aggressors in front of the Adept."

"Reckless is?"

"Sorry, Novice Recanlin."

"Then he wasn't practicing Aggressor spells being taught by Adept Pleates?"

Fernonia looked prettily confused. "Don't know what spells you are talking about, Ma'am. The training Adept Pleates was giving us had to do with the projectors. He didn't have one with him."

"So, according to what he told you, he was wandering around thinking."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Thank you for making that clear. Now, I know you submitted a report of the battle you had with the Hermanian sorcerers, but would you give us your personal observation of what happened that morning?"

Fernonia took a short breath and puffed it out. Aetria got the impression the Novice was about to recite a lesson, as if she had practiced her presentation for hours before. She caught Fernonia darting a nervous glance in her direction. Why was Fernonia so afraid of her?

"I was really busy directing fireballs at the infantry trying to form up below us on the field. Adept Pleates had pointed out our targets and told us to fire slowly, being careful not to interject too much Power into the projectors. When the fireballs hit us, I was knocked down and almost lost consciousness."

Corerilla broke in. "Are you sure they were fireballs?"

"Ma'am, you are an Aggressor, and I am an Aggressor. We both know fireballs. Those were fireballs."

"Yes, Lieutenant, I know fireballs, but I wasn't there. You were. What happened next?"

"The commander directed fire against the troops rushing our position, then ordered our retreat. He got us off the hill and back to our staging area. It is all in my report, Ma'am."

"Thank you, Lieutenant," Corerilla said, turning to the Council Leader and looking at him. "All the Council members have read your report. I am sure General Borlock has read it as well."

Sonja nodded. She was not being as difficult about the hearing as Corerilla feared.

The Counselor turned back to the guard lieutenant. "Please resume your guard duties, but be ready to provide further testimony if needed."

Fernonia jumped to her feet and marched from the room. The silence that remained in the room after the slam of the door was deep. Aetria suppressed a desire to squirm in her seat.

In the silence, Corerilla walked slowly over to her little table and picked up another of her carefully arranged scrolls in her left hand, tapping it in her right hand as she slowly proceeded to the general's table. Handing the scroll to Holendal, she turned to look at Trelana and Aetria.

"Adept Pleates, who is my main witness, and also the one who made the charges against Sorceress Aetria, is dead. The only witness he can make is his written word. There are three sources of his testimony. The first comes from the reports he wrote as commander of the sorcerer regiment. He was tasked by the Council to provide a weekly report of the activities of the Regiment.

"Secondly, in the spring of this year, he proposed the development of a Power projector weapon. He was authorized by the Council to do so and to send daily reports of his progress. The Council members have read both sets of these reports and are familiar with them.

"The final source of his written testimony is his correspondence with his mentor—with me. Like any communication between mentor and student, these are privileged, and not shared unless agreed upon by student and mentor."

The Council members, mentors all, nodded their heads at the Counselor's last words. Trelana had told Aetria she was going to have a hard time getting information from those letters since she, even as advocate for Aetria, would not be allowed to read them.

"The volumes of reports and letters Adept Pleates left would take one person weeks to read, and for all members of this hearing to read them would take months. I have taken the liberty of condensing the answers to the questions I would have asked the commander if I could have called him as a witness to this hearing.

Corerilla held up her left hand. "This first scroll contains excerpts from Adept Pleates' daily reports to the Council concerning the weapons project. He sent us a morning and evening report. To make it easier for us all to follow, I have put them in chronological order, using Day 1 as the day he arrived at Inhestia last spring to accept the recruit company into the sorcerer regiment. Novice Holendal will read these momentarily, but before he does, I want to make the point that, except for letters of private correspondence, I will provide the appropriate report with each answer. I believe this is in keeping with the king's Justice Code."

Sonja turned and looked at Corerilla who had returned to her table. "Almost, Counselor. I reserve the right to call for private correspondence as well. You have the right to refuse. If you refuse, I can, and may, put the issue before a King's Justice to decide if I can read them or not. I realize this is a very sensitive point between the Council and the king, but being sensitive does not mean I won't broach it."

"Understood," Meldoran said, cutting off the retort he knew would come from his Counselor. The pained look on her face told him he was right in stepping in, although he worried it would cost him later on. Time would tell. He nodded to the young Provisioner. "Proceed, Novice Holendal."

Holendal stood and read:

"Day 1 (evening): I am concerned that, during the Oath taking, Aetria was not paying attention to the Oath. Perhaps she did not think she had to, having taken it once before. A small thing perhaps, but troublesome. Mage Kelristo noticed my concern and misunderstood, assuring me Aetria is under full control of her spell casting. I should hope so, but what about her loyalty to the regiment?"

Trelana put a restraining hand on Aetria's arm as she started to rise out of her chair. "Later, Aetria. We can rebut this later. Do not react to everything you are going to hear. I told you that Pleates said bad things about you. Prepare to hear worse."

Corerilla watched the exchange between mentor and student with a grim smile on her lips.

"Day 2 (morning): Aetria's showing a great deal more fire and zeal since we left Inhestia. This is the sorceress I remember from four years ago. A little insubordinate, but normal for a new Sub-Commander feeling her way into command. The young always think they know better than their elders do.

"Day 6 (morning): Lieutenant Nemos reported that one of the Novices left his sentry post last night. He had told Aetria about the disappearance, and she took it upon herself to find the missing youngster. She is very protective of her Novices. He then said a most disturbing thing. He said she went to the deserted guard post, and with no effort to scout for the trail of the Novice, headed out in the direction that later proved to be where he went. Nemos asked me if sorcerers had a spell to track with. I told him no, but that there was a logical answer to what she did. I believe she did, in fact, find his trail where Nemos could not. I must watch him, and her, more carefully."

Holendal paused and took a sip of water from his goblet on the table. Reading in a loud voice was a strain.

"Day 6 (evening): Lieutenant Nemos reported to me this evening that he had asked Aetria how she tracked Recanlin. She said Recanlin had been practicing spells, so she sensed the Power use. I told Nemos that there was indeed a logical explanation for how she did it. He did not look convinced. I will ask Recanlin tonight during our special training what he was doing out there.

"Day 7 (morning): I have removed Recanlin from the special training. I can't have an Aggressor wielding the weapon if he can't keep his mind on his business. He says he walked off his post because he was worrying about his performance during my training. He thinks the other Aggressors are picking on him. I can't abide such immaturity.

"Day 7 (evening): A most distressing day this has been. Aetria came to me at midday and said she had sensed a source off to our west. I had sensed nothing. We turned to that direction and I finally sensed a source nearly three hours later. Remembering what I had heard about Aetria's strange Power sensing after her burnout, I am concerned when she is sensing Power even a Mage candidate like myself can't. Is she somehow dealing in wild magic? She was very strident during our staff meeting and opposed my decision to investigate the source. I had to be blunt with her.

"Day 10 (evening): Nemos returned with his scouting report. He was very adamant we could take the source. He says there are very few sorcerers, none above the level of Sorcerer. I made the decision to attack the enemy sorcerer camp and take the source. I believe it will be a perfect opportunity to prove the value of the projectors. Aetria again opposed my decision. She complained about the danger of grid burnout for my Novices. I told her they were not going to spell fireballs of any great size, so they were safe. I am losing my patience with this young officer. She even objected to my stopping Recanlin's participation in the weapons project. She is meddling in Aggressor business.

"Day 13 (evening): Have dispatched a report to you and the general about our failed mission. I take the failure upon myself for trusting too much in my senior staff, whose performance led to our defeat. I met with Aetria this evening to go over my report. When I told Aetria that Nemos had incorrectly gauged the strength of the Hermanian sorcerers, whose counter-attack nearly killed us all, she tried to defend him, implying his estimate of their numbers was correct. I was tired of her doubting my word and was perhaps a little blunt when I told her she started her attack too early and alerted the Hermanians to counter-attack. She flew into a rage. I told her she had the right to submit a report along with mine, but she scornfully refused to do so. I told her I was submitting a copy to the Council, and she had the audacity to question my right to communicate with them. I dismissed her with a warning not to discuss this business with anyone. Thank the Power I will be rid of her tomorrow. I will order her into a position where she can hurt no one else."

Holendal lowered the scroll, glancing at Aetria with a look of shame, before sitting down.

"I have one more written statement from Adept Pleates to present, but before I do, I intend to call as a witness the man who delivered Pleates' last correspondence to me. I call Assassin Sergeant Ventler to give testimony before this hearing."

Now where have I heard that name before? She turned to see who was now entering the room.

The man used a crutch to help himself as he painfully limped towards her. The look of pure hate she saw on his face brought back with a rush, the memory of the fight in the Hermanian tavern, and her knife embedded in the man's leg. The Sergeant reached the chair next to Aetria, and with one hand moved it as far to his right as he could before slamming it to the ground and falling heavily into it. He held the crutch upright, close against his left side, like a grounded spear, as if to ward Aetria off.

"Please identify yourself to the Council," Corerilla said in Hermanian.

The man replied in the same language, his voice deep and gravelly. "I am Sergeant Horates Ventler of the Hermanian Assassin Corps, retired, temporarily." He said the last with a glare at Aetria.

The Counselor translated his words. Aetria sensed his coming out of retirement might lead to her demise shortly thereafter.

"Sergeant Ventler brought me a letter hastily written by Commander Pleates. He wrote the letter as he was searching for the general, as you will see, to save his life."

Aetria looked in shock at Sonja. The general's expression did not change, except for a slight smile that appeared momentarily on her lips. The Council members' reactions were much stronger, the outpouring of questions filling the room. Meldoran raised his hands for silence but did not use a hand flare. The room quieted.

Aetria noticed Ventler was looking around with amusement at all the commotion that had just gone on. She wondered if he knew what Corerilla had said to upset this crowd.

"Please proceed, Counselor," the Council Leader said.

"Sergeant Ventler, please describe how Adept Pleates met you and gave you the letter to send to me. I will translate as best I can. My Hermanian is not as good as I would hope, but it will have to do."

The sergeant told his story in short sentences, waiting after every two or three to allow Corerilla to translate. His delivery of his statement sounded practiced, as Aetria was sure it had been.

"I was a common Assassin at that time, being promoted to sergeant a few weeks later. My squad of Assassins was in pursuit of General Mythrian. Being in Delmathian territory, we disguised ourselves as a band of rowdy young men out for a lark and a drunk. Pleates met us in a tavern. He was disguised as a whore and certainly fooled the lot of us!

"Since we needed to have some women with us to make our party believable, we took in several, including Pleates. We were hitting all the taverns and inns along the road, looking for the general. It was just after dark when we approached the inn where the general was. As we dismounted and were getting ready to go in, Pleates pulled me aside. I thought 'she' was going to try to get me to bed her. I was quite taken aback when he said he was a man.

"He told me he was on a special mission, and he didn't think he was going to survive. He had a letter he wanted delivered to a place called Inhestia. Said I would be paid very handsomely for my efforts. He didn't know who I was or he would not have left the letter in my hands. He said the people he was trying to find were in that tavern, and there might be a fight. I told him I would deliver his letter. I stayed outside with our horses.

"The man Pleates was right; there was a fight. He died, along with my lieutenant and two others. Sergeant Graner ran out of the inn and told me to ride as fast as I could to tell the Magess the general was dead. He would follow with the remains of the squad, several of whom were injured. I left immediately after getting my orders."

After translating the sergeant's last words, Corerilla walked over to her table and looked at a scroll she had opened there. "The Hermanians had many assassins out looking for the general," she said, looking

back at Ventler. "How were you able to find her?"

"We were told we would find them in that area because our sorcerers were sensing a source being opened."

Sonja sat upright suddenly. All eyes fixed on her. "Who told you there was a source being opened?" she asked in Hermanian, as fluent as Corerilla's.

Corerilla objected to Meldoran. "This is my witness, Leader, and my time for presentations. This is most irregular."

The Council Leader sighed. "But it is also General Borlock's hearing, so she can ask questions when she wants. What did she ask the witness?"

"She asked him to name the person who told him a source was being opened," Corerilla answered.

The sergeant had been following the interplay between the two Magi and the female general. He sensed an answer was expected. "Our attached sorcerer told us. Her name was Coleni," he said.

Coleni? How could that be? Aetria glanced at the general to catch her reaction. *The man has to be lying .*

"Where is this Coleni now, Sergeant? I would like to hear her testimony," Sonja said, nary a hint in her voice that she knew the name intimately.

"Sorry, General, but she died several months ago, tortured to death by your inquisitors."

"How inconvenient," Sonja said, sitting back in her chair and crossing her arms on her chest.

Finishing her translation, Corerilla asked the general if she could continue her part of the hearing. Sonja gave her a quick nod in response.

"Sergeant Ventler, have you ever seen Sorceress Aetria before?"

"Yes, I have," the man said, rubbing his injured leg, "and quite recently."

"Where and when, Sergeant?"

Ventler glared at Aetria, then pointed a long finger at her accusingly. "I saw her talking with my superior, the Magess Chalinee, commander of the Hermanian Sorcerer Corps, not more than a week ago," he declared loudly. "She was in the Freighter's Rest, an inn in the village of Logatha, in the foothills of the Logathian Mountains, Hermania. And they were talking very friendly like—for once being enemies."

Now the center of attention in the room, Aetria alternately wanted to flee and fight. Trelana's steady hand on her arm signaled not to do either.

"Thank you, Sergeant Ventler. I'm sure Magess Trelana will have questions for you. Perhaps, while you are waiting, one of our Healers can look at your leg."

Fighting erect, the Sergeant shook his head angrily, glared once more at Aetria, and limped out of the room.

"My last piece of testimony is that delivered letter from Adept Pleates. It only arrived yesterday, so I will pass it around to the members as soon as Novice Holendal has read it. It is by the commander's hand, as you will be able to see. Novice Holendal, please read the letter."

The parchment had been folded over onto itself many times like a well-used map. The Novice finally opened it up and began to read.

"I have doomed General Mythrian. Yesterday, all the sorcerers in the world must have sensed Aetria's expenditure of Power. She has sent a beacon to the enemy to come and find her. As if she didn't think that enough, she has opened my source. I write this as I am preparing to go after her alone. I cannot tell Commander Preldones why I must leave to stop Aetria without disclosing her dishonoring the Order and the regiment. Besides, only a sorcerer can find her now. I must stop her before she succeeds in getting the general captured, or worse. Why is she doing this? Can she be so stupid she doesn't know it will draw the enemy? No, not after her last battle. She is doing this deliberately. By the Power, I hope I can reach her before the Hermanians. If I fail, bring justice to her swiftly."

The room erupted in angry shouting. Aetria lowered her head and sobbed. "It's all a lie!"

Corerilla's shrill voice cut across the din. "I have more, fellow Magi. Please hear me out. I call General Sonja Borlock to give testimony before this hearing!"

If Sonja was shocked by the summons, she didn't show it at all. She stood to walk to the witness chair, but Meldoran stopped her, saying she could testify where she was—formality be damned. Sonja sat back in her chair and looked at Corerilla.

"General Borlock, the Council and I have read your report concerning your journey north to join the king's army, and we are truly amazed with Sorceress Aetria's miraculous illusion spell that saved you from the Hermanian assassins the first time. All the members of the Council are curious how you managed to evade the pursuit of all the Hermanian units converging on your position. As you pointed out so clearly in your report, the expenditure of that much Power could be detected, but you did not say how you avoided capture."

The general looked briefly at Aetria, whose facial expression conveyed pleading denial, and then looked back to Corerilla's defiant glare. "Aetria told me she could detect stored Power in sorcerers," Sonja said matter-of-factly. "I was able to use that skill to avoid the Hermanian sorcerers and their assassins."

"She told you she could detect stored Power?" Corerilla shouted, disbelief and joy in her face.

"That is what I said, Counselor. I am not in a habit of repeating myself to people. Do you have any more questions?"

The silence that followed Sonja's voice crashed down around the room as the Magi stared in shock at the general. Did she realize she had just proven the charges against her captain? Aetria had gone numb. Through the ringing in her ears she dimly heard Corerilla cough, then say, "Yes, I have several more. Were you aware Sorceress Aetria was using the source given to her?"

"How would I know that? I am not a sorcerer, so I couldn't sense a source being opened. I never saw her open the source or even get it out. I am aware that two sorcerers have said she did, but they are both believed dead."

Why is Sonja doing this to me? She condemns me, then defends me in the next breath?

"One last question for you, General. In the fight at the tavern, at whom was Pleates' dagger thrown? If he was after General Mythrian, he could have killed Mythrian before being 'kissed' by him as you reported."

"That's true, he could have. He was throwing at Aetria. I stepped in front of her thinking I could deflect it. I couldn't."

"Thank you, General. I have no more questions."

"Well, I have a lot more statements I could make," Sonja said, looking at Corerilla as if to challenge her into asking more questions.

"I will let my esteemed colleague Magess Trelana use those statements for her defense. You have been most helpful, General."

"I only seek the truth, Counselor, the whole truth."

The two women's eyes never broke contact during their last exchange.

Yes, a challenge has been delivered, but too late for me.

"Leader Meldoran, I have no more witnesses to call. I am prepared to give my summary."

"I would have a short recess before you do, Counselor. Some of our younger members need to stretch their legs after sitting for so long. We will reconvene in a half hour."

The Magi quickly filed out of the room, leaving Aetria sitting alone facing Sonja. Neither spoke for several minutes. Aetria daubed her eyes. She knew the general was on her side, at least she thought Sonja was.

"She was going to call you as a witness, Sorceress—" Sonja's voice was quiet; sounding almost lost in the now-deserted room. "And she would have asked you if you could sense stored Power. She would not be allowed to call you as a witness in the King's Code, as you cannot be made to incriminate yourself. Under your Council rules, she could have. You would have confessed, wouldn't you?"

Nodding her head, Aetria choked back a sob.

"You must reach down in yourself and find that sorceress who rode for three days straight with no rest, then threw a dagger into the throat of my most dangerous enemy. Ask her if she is the same woman about to be destroyed by Corerilla before her masters. I don't think she is. You must bide your time, allow the witch to take her cut at you, but do not worry that the wound will be fatal. It will be only if you let it. Now, where in this building can a woman relieve herself?"

* * * *

"I will start by reminding the Council of the three charges Adept Pleates has made against Sorceress Aetria: improper use of the Power, disregarding sanctions placed on her by the Council, and high treason. We have the testimony of General Borlock that Aetria confessed to her that she could sense stored Power in sorcerers and demonstrated that ability by avoiding capture from numerous sorcerer-led assassin units searching for them.

"We have the testimony from Magess Trelana that her student, Aetria, could sense an aura of Power after her first grid burnout. The belief was that it would fade. Aetria was warned to report any changes in her spell casting which Trelana said Aetria never did. Aetria lied to her mentor when she told Trelana the aura sensing had faded as she was told it would. I believe the first two charges have been proven to be valid by what we have heard from the witnesses."

Without hearing my view of the charges, I guess you are right, Aetria thought.

Corerilla had stopped to review her notes on that scroll. Aetria didn't think the Counselor needed that aid; she was just pausing for the dramatic effect.

"On the last charge, I took you back to Aetria's early childhood to prepare my case for her actions. You heard how Aetria was a persecuted little girl, shunned by her village, at odds with the people. I would suggest to you that she grew up hating her villagers and plotting revenge. She volunteered to join the Delmathian army and was, in fact, one of the earliest sorcerers to do so. She went out amongst the enemy without the permission of her commanding officer, and later, realizing her error, convinced her commander to continue to allow her to do so.

"This gave her the opportunity to establish contact with the enemy. We have heard from the Saphradean commander that he was expecting the elephant attack, having been warned by someone in the Delmathian army. If General Borlock had not saved the day with her usual brilliant tactics, the Royal Guard would have been crushed and Delmathia would probably have lost the day, if not the war."

Now I see where she was going with those questions, Aetria thought in astonishment. She looked at Sonja, hoping to see disbelief in her General's eyes. She saw intense interest.

Corerilla began to pick up speed, the story building on itself. "Commander Pleates felt sorry for the girl, and risking his career, took responsibility for her 'mistake' which was not at all what it was. He sent her to Inhestia. She has developed an untested ability, and hides it, for four years. She gets turned down for candidacy for Adept and gets very angry and upset. She is sent back into the army. She thwarts the orders of her commander, opposes him before his staff, and by his own words, starts the assault on the Hermanian sorcerers too early.

"She tries to blame his project for the death of his Aggressors, a project that we all have seen in demonstration and find to be a stunning success. He orders her into the safest, most obscure job he can. Her hatred of him builds. He continues to try to salvage her, and believing her to be his best Illusionist, sends her with the general on a very critical mission. She betrays their position, draws the enemy to the general at the last moment, and when Adept Pleates shows up to stop her—which he would have done if the general had not stepped in the way—she kills him. The general believes her spy was Adept Pleates, when all along, it was the viper she had taken to her heart.

"On her way back to Inhestia, Sorceress Aetria has a fellow conspirator take her place with the general's staff, covering her absence from General Borlock's meetings while she rides to Hermania and meets with the commander of the Hermanian Sorcerer Corps—for what purpose we can only guess at. She did not know Adept Pleates had taken the time to document her foibles, and expected her powerful friend, General Borlock, to protect her.

"But there she sits, condemned by the very words of the general on two of the charges against her, and condemned by the witnesses whose testimony you have heard today. I ask for what Adept Pleates has already asked for, swift justice."

CHAPTER 13

Aetria sat on her favorite spot overlooking Inhestia on a small grassy knoll located halfway up the hill rising from the rear of the training lodge's protective walls. She could see over the front gate into the army encampment, watching the steady flow of riders in and out of the camp. Aetria traced the path of the road leading from the front gate, through the camp, and up the hill to the north. She scanned the crest of the hill, watching for the approach of the mystery witness Sonja had sent Lieutenant Valetti hurrying after a week ago. The late summer day's sun was setting; shadows were beginning to cover the training lodge. The air was cooling fast, and soon it would be chilly at night. Right now, it was pleasant to just sit and think. She turned over in her mind the rush of activities that had occurred over the past week.

After Corerilla's impassioned plea for Aetria's head, Council Leader Meldoran was prepared to start Trelana's defense the very next day. Sonja had once again asserted her will over the Council. She had demanded and received a week's stay, pointing out that the charge of high treason had been made with no advance notice to Aetria's advocate. She said the Magess would need the time to develop a defense. The two of them next spent a day meeting alone in the general's quarters, telling Aetria to spend some time resting and not thinking of the progress of the hearing. A lot easier said than done.

She still saw no movement on the horizon. It had to be soon because the witness was due today. The hearing would reconvene in the morning. The mounting excitement made this waiting so hard. Aetria thought again with pride of the work Coleni and she had done over the last several days. Now Trelana knew of Aetria's new abilities, she had a Mage source of information about spell creation available to answer her questions.

But Trelana was as baffled by the new energy as they were! Aetria smiled when she remembered her despair of ever getting an answer. How easily deterred she was. Trelana, thank the Power, was not. She arranged for Aetria and her sister to secretly visit Engineer Aristes. Aetria could have done so openly, for other than generating a lot of interest by Corerilla in why she was doing so, she was not confined in any way by the general or the Council. Coleni was the problem. They were trying to conceal her identity until the time to reveal it came. They met with the engineer at night, in his home.

* * * *

"Lieutenant Maetria is here to ensure I don't run away, Engineer Aristes. Not that I would, but still..."

"I understand, Aetria. Now, Magess Trelana said you wanted to get some background on sources. Where do I start?"

They were seated in his workshop, perched on stools near a large table that held scattered bits of rock, sheets of soft metal, and several pick-like tools. Delica, Aristes' lifemate of many years, had shown them into the workshop with the grace of a woman used to guests at all hours of the night.

Aetria picked up a piece of stone off the workbench, looking at it with interest.

"How about here? I have seen this kind of rock before but can't remember where."

Aristes glanced into her open hand, seeing the black stone resting in her palm. "You probably remember that from your student visit to our source mine. It is what we use to line your source boxes with. Here, let me show you."

He opened a small chest on the corner of the table and removed a small square box, no bigger than the length of a little finger across the edges. The box was very similar to the one that enclosed Pleates' source. Aristes opened it and tipped the box so the two women could see inside.

"Here you see the shield stone, as we call it, that has been crushed and pressed into place inside the box. We glue the powder in place, then cover it with soft leather. The leather is what you normally see around the source. The shield stone is what keeps the Power from leaving the box unless you open it."

"How did you ever figure that out?" Aetria said in wonder.

"We didn't have to really." Aristes reached into the chest again and removed a black stone about the size of an eye. He placed the stone in a small vise and locked it in. "Brace yourself, Aetria, I am going to chip off a piece of this raw source."

He picked up a small hammer from the table and struck the edge of the rock. A black chip flew off the stone, exposing the bright green of a source. Aristes noticed both women flinched with the Power that streamed from the source.

"Here." Aristes picked up the flake from the table and handed it to Aetria. She turned it over and over in her fingers. There was a trace of green on the inside of the chip, and she could faintly feel the Power it gave off. She could also feel the new energy streaming from the chipped source in the vise. Catching Coleni's eye, she saw her sister also felt the new energy. Aetria handed the black chip to Coleni.

"More often than not we find sources completely covered by the shield material. We have to chip away the black stone to expose the source. We save the chips and crush them into powder. So you can see we didn't have to discover how the shield material works. Now, here is something even more interesting."

Aristes searched around the top of the workbench until he found the tool he needed. It looked like a small ax. He placed the blade on the rock, moving it back and forth until he had positioned it exactly where he wanted it. He then struck the back of the ax with a hammer. The rock split, the two pieces falling onto the table. The two women shrieked and fell backwards away from the table. Aristes looked on stunned.

The women rolled away and stood up almost simultaneously, looking at each other in total surprise.

"Are you all right?" Aristes asked anxiously.

Aetria laughed nervously, brushing the dust and dirt from her robe. She pointed at the source. "What is that?" Both women edged slowly in to see it better.

"Lieutenant Maetria is a sorceress, isn't she?" Aristes asked Aetria. She nodded.

"I saw her flinch when I exposed the source material, but I don't understand why you both reacted to splitting the source."

"Neither do I, Engineer. What is that red rock?" The new energy was streaming from the red rock. *The red rock is the reason!* Aetria thought. When the engineer split the source, the shock of the energy was what startled them so badly.

"We call it core material. It is always at the center of a source. It is softer than any of the three kinds of materials we have found with the sources. Let me put these away." He put the split rock into the small

chest and closed the lid. The women returned to their previous positions.

"We have found that, after splitting the source, if we heat the pieces in a furnace, the red stone melts and flows away from the source. We recover the source pieces and traditionally have thrown the red sludge away. We then break the source material up and glue it together in a solid ball. The bigger the source, the more source material we use to make the ball. All sources are made that way."

"All sources?" Aetria asked, remembering the strength of the new energy coming from student sources.

"No, I guess you are right. I don't consider student sources as real sources since their Power is so weak. For student sources we use the smallest source modules we find. We do not split the source and melt out the red stone. We just chip off the shield material to expose the source."

Glancing at Coleni, Aetria received a nod from her sister and looked back at Aristes. "Do you have a student source available? I'd like to see it if you do, Engineer."

Aristes got up from his stool and walked over to a larger chest by the far wall of his workshop. He opened the lid and rummaged around inside the deep chest. The two sisters could sense the Power when he opened a shielded box and pulled out a student source. He presented it to Aetria. She took it tentatively, as if it would bite her.

I could never wear one of these again with that new energy constantly buzzing in my mind.

She handed it over to Coleni, who gave it a quick glance and returned it to Aetria.

"Magess Trelana told me Pleates' Adept spell was the destruction of sources. She said he exploded one for the Council, but that no other Aggressor could duplicate it. Do you have any reason why that is so?" Aetria asked the engineer.

"I, myself, saw him do it at least three times. He would give his Aggressor audience a long-winded explanation about speed of Power release, intensity of spell, paths between grid and natural senses—the usual sorcerer discussion, then he would put a source into a shallow hole in the ground and ask one of them try to explode the source. Nobody could. He would toss in a small fireball and the source would blow."

Aetria rubbed her forehead as if that would help make sense of what she had just heard. "I don't understand how he could do it and others couldn't. I have another question. You said 'traditionally have thrown the red sludge away.' What has changed your mind about tossing it?"

"Adept Pleates wanted the red sludge for his projector weapons."

"Tell me about the projector. What is in that box at the end?"

Putting the piece of source back into the chest, Aristes hesitated to answer. Aetria wondered if she had pushed the engineer too far.

"The box is lined with shield material. In the center is a ball of red core material. There is a hole in the bottom of the box through which the Aggressor sends a spell. There is a hole in the top of the box where the spell exits. It is a very simple design."

"Trelana told me several months ago that Pleates had done something to the weapons after you had

made them. Have you been able to figure out what it was?" Aetria asked the engineer.

The older man rubbed his eyes with one large hand. "Not until we got into the weapons brought back by the Novices. After the battle, I built several more projectors to Pleates' original design. The Aggressor Novices he had trained then tried to make the new projectors work. They couldn't. They spelled in a fireball and nothing came out. I got permission to dismantle one of the projectors and discovered he had placed a thin sheet of source material across the inside of the bottom hole. He mixed in some of the red sludge with it. I guess I have not been able to make it in the correct proportions yet because the few projectors I tried to make using his modifications have exploded violently."

"Exploded—just like I said happened on the hill. Anyone hurt?"

"No. Lieutenant Fernonia was shielded by armor plating. She spelled in the fireball and ducked. A few moments later, it exploded."

"Yet her weapon still works?" Aetria asked.

"Both hers and my son's work fine."

"And how is Novice Belanar these days?"

"Lieutenant Belanar is doing very well. Like Fernonia, he has been promoted to lieutenant in the Sorcerer Guard. Unlike Fernonia, with the war ended, he is talking about leaving the guard and returning to work with me. She is going to stay in the guards."

Aetria took a stool next to the engineer, looking into his eyes. He had something to tell her but she did not know what to say to give him the chance. "Recanlin wanted very much to work with you. He died saving our lives."

"I heard about his death and am still grieving for the lad," Aristes said, a slight catch in his voice. He reached out and took Aetria's right hand, his large hand engulfing hers.

"Aristes, why does Corerilla hate me so much? What have I done to her?" The questions seemed to flow unbidden from Aetria.

"You killed our son, Aetria. I know you did it to save the general," the older man swallowed and said very softly while patting her hand gently, "but she does not accept it."

"Pleates was your son!" Aetria said in shock, disbelief filling her eyes.

The engineer nodded. "Corerilla and I met when her Novice group visited the mines. I wish I could say it was love that drove us together, but it wasn't. The overbearing, spiteful, vicious woman you know today was a beautiful free spirit back then. She had discovered the joys of mating and shared them with a young engineer who was all too willing to oblige. After a few months, Corerilla found a new interest. She had graduated by then and was hired to protect a far-off lord's domain.

"When she returned to Inhestia for her Sorceress training several years later, she matter-of-factly told me of the birth of our son, and how she had him fostered off before he interfered with her career. Just as matter-of-factly she suggested we continue our mating as she was bored with the lord she had taken to bed and did not intend to return to him. Her total lack of interest in the life we had created appalled me and was reason enough not to want to accept her offer. The better reason was I had taken Delica as my

lifemate by then. Corerilla dropped me from her life and has not made any further attempt to relate to me except as a member of the Council. She loves to give orders, that woman."

He lowered his gray-haired head and laughed quietly before continuing his story in the same soft, deep voice.

"When Pleates arrived for training at Inhestia, Corerilla became very interested in him, but not because he was her son. She saw a way to use him to further her power in the Council. She pushed him unmercifully. I tried to give him a father's support, something he had never had even in his foster home, but he wanted his relationship to me to remain secret. The boy was brilliant! He took in everything Corerilla taught him about spells, as well as all I could teach him about engineering. He advanced faster than any Novice I have known did.

"When the war broke out, the two of them were ecstatic. Why the dying of so many should be a cause for joy is beyond me, but it fit their plan. In the end, it may have been him using Corerilla instead of the other way around. I don't know, Aetria, whether she hates you because you killed her son, or because you stopped her plans. Either way, the results are the same."

"And you, Aristes, do you hate me?" Aetria asked quietly.

Patting her hand, then wiping the tear from his jowl, Aristes sighed. "Not in the least, child. I saw Pleates grow into the male image of his mother and knew his heart was not with the people or the land—only for himself. I don't believe the charges against you are true and will do all I can to prove them false. This is just another plot of Corerilla's, and she must be stopped."

"Thank you, Engineer. I really do need your help. If I can prove the weapons exploded on that hill like I said, that is one less lie that can be used against me. I am curious about the Novices' weapons. Are they different in any way from the original designs?"

"No, I don't think so." He paused suddenly. "Wait a moment! Pleates sent me the design and ordered eight of the weapons made at least two weeks before he came to Inhestia in person to pick them up. When he arrived, I had four of them completely ready to go, but had run short of shield material and was in the process of gathering more. I told him I would need another week before I could finish the last four. He was very unhappy with the delay. He said he couldn't wait that long. He told me to decrease the thickness of the shield material and to make at least three more by morning. I did so with the remaining material I had."

Aetria was up and pacing. Coleni knew her sister was thinking hard and waited for her to speak her idea aloud.

"Are Belanar's and Fernonia's weapons from the first four or the last three?" she said excitedly.

"I don't know, Aetria, but I will find out. Why?"

"You said yourself that you had duplicated Pleates' design with his modifications of the shield material, and the weapons exploded. Did you use the full thickness of shield material or not?"

Aristes jumped up. Now he was excited. "I used his original measurements. If Fernonia's is one of the thinned out ones—"

"Then the cause of the explosion is the shield thickness. Engineer, please find out for me. But don't ask

Fernonia; she'll go right to Corerilla. Use Belanar. Experiment as you must, but I need you to be able to demonstrate what we believe is the cause of the explosions I know I saw."

"I'll start tonight."

"One last thing. Was the source Pleates used in his demonstrations a normal source or a red core one?"

"A green one. We didn't know about his use for the red core at that time."

Aetria looked around the workshop and saw the armor-plated wall Aristes used in his experiment. She hurried over to it and looked at the deep hole on the other side where the projector weapon would be put before spelling in a fireball. Tossing the student source in the pit, she waved Coleni over to the wall.

"Engineer, what you are about to see must never be told to anyone. Do you promise?"

"I promise, Aetria."

"Use your bolt on it, Lieutenant Maetria," Aetria said to Coleni.

Coleni zapped the student source. The explosion was spectacular.

The three of them coughed out the heavy dust, sucking in deep drafts of the cool night air outside the engineer's house. The dust was drifting away in the breeze, having billowed out in great volume from the workshop windows. The engineer's distant neighbors were used to loud noises coming from his quarters and did not venture out into the night to discover why he was once again disturbing their sleep.

"I guess I won't start tonight, Sorceress. I'll have to repair my workshop first."

"I apologize for that, Engineer. I had no idea it would be that powerful." Aetria coughed again. The wall had protected them from the heat and fragments, but the wind of the explosion had knocked them both down.

"What did she do that other Aggressors couldn't?" Aristes asked with a puzzled frown.

"I don't think she did anything they couldn't. You said the projectors didn't work until you put in the thin green source piece Pleates inserted on his own. Then they exploded. My guess was that the green source material does something to the spell as it passes through. The red core increases the spell. Now we know that, unless the conditions are just right, the spell will go into an explosion. I begin to wonder if you sent a fireball into a source, would it explode? But why would it?"

"A normal source has no red core. A student source does. Pleates must have switched the source in the hole after the other Aggressors had tried. He substituted a student source for the normal source, then blew it up. He kept his secret intact. The Council was convinced only he could do it. This is our secret for now. Please figure out how the projectors exploded. Perhaps our little experiment tonight will help.

Goodnight, Engineer."

* * * *

Three days later, the engineer was still experimenting, but had confirmed Fernonia's and his son's weapons were indeed the thin-walled projectors. Aetria scanned the hilltop once again, and her heart jumped. Three riders were cresting the hill and riding at a gallop for the camp. Aetria stood and brushed the grass off her bottom, then headed downhill as fast as she could without breaking her neck.

Arriving at her tent, Aetria rushed inside, thinking to switch into her armor for a meeting with Sonja. She found Coleni pacing back and forth, wringing her hands and moaning to herself.

"Coleni, sister, what is wrong?" Aetria asked.

"Oh, Aetria, I know who the mystery witness is," Coleni sobbed, fear and unhappiness in her face.

"You saw who it was? All I could see was a heavily cloaked rider."

"No, no. But I sensed an aura at Mage level. I watched the rider dismount. Not armored, light weight. I looked at the boot print; it's a woman's. Power, Aetria, the witness is Chalinee, I'm sure."

Putting her arm around her sister, Aetria walked her over to a chair and made her sit. "Calm yourself, Coleni. Did she see you?"

Shaking her head, Coleni sat pressing her hands into her lap. "When I sensed her approach, I hid myself so I could see who it was and not be seen. Oh! Why did the general bring her here?"

Aetria brought over a glass of wine and handed it to Coleni. "You know the answer to that. Chalinee told me she personally interviewed Pleates and can swear he was their spy. I'm shocked the general could even get her to leave Hermania for an ex-enemy. I just wonder what she will say when she recognizes me and remembers the half-truths I told her. This could turn on the general."

A call at Aetria's tent door announced Lieutenant Valetti. Aetria gave him permission to enter.

"Good, you're both here. The general wants to see you."

"Is..is the witness who rode in with you there?" Coleni asked.

"Wasn't when I left, but I can't say about now."

"Who is it?" Aetria asked.

"The general did not give me permission to say, Captain."

"Let me change and I'll be right there." Aetria said.

"The general said come as you are. Lieutenant Maetria, of course, needs to come as her normal self."

The sisters were ushered into the general's presence. She was alone except for Magess Trelana. The two were seated side-by-side, talking quietly, their heads nearly touching. Sonja pointed to several chairs across from their own, and the sisters sat down.

"—therefore I'm changing the way we present witnesses. I want our two mystery witnesses to hear everything said during Aetria's defense," the general said.

"That would mean admitting the first two charges, Sonja." Trelana said, reaching for her glass of wine on the low table between them.

The general nodded. She looked at the sisters. "We are discussing tomorrow. I am changing the way the

hearing is going to be done. I will proceed as I would if this were an army hearing by taking an active role in the questioning. I can do this if I choose to ignore the first two charges. It is not my intention to concede your guilt, Aetria, but I will concentrate on the treason charge. I believe clearing you of the treason charge will put you into better circumstances to justify your breaking the rules of your Order."

"I understand. If I may, who are the mystery witnesses you were speaking of?" Aetria asked.

Sonja looked at Coleni and smiled. "Coleni and Chalinee. Poetic, isn't it?"

* * * *

Looking around the cavernous Council chambers, Aetria sensed the subtle change that had come over the proceedings. Corerilla sat in her normal place at the Council table, a grim smile on her lips. Aetria had been surprised the Counselor had not put up more of a fuss when the general had announced her proposed changes. It was just her way to be annoying at every turn. There was a definite air of expectation from the Council members. Perhaps the row of tables set up on the eastern wall had something to do with that. When the Council members had entered from their northern door, their eyes immediately locked onto the tables and their guards.

Sonja had been true to her words about respecting the "sorcerer only" rule. She had impressed two Novices into service as guards over the two tables. Aetria recognized Welendor and Jalista from her novice company. The spears in their hands looked very out of place, but the grim looks on their faces showed their determination to do their jobs.

Both tables were covered with black cloths, the contents underneath causing little hills and valleys all over the surfaces of the table. The two tables had been pushed together end-to-end, a guard at each opposing end. The general was not in her seat beneath Meldoran, but was now standing over in front of the tables. She had made her announcement of the proceeding changes from there. Council Leader Meldoran had had his normally rigidly followed procedures so overturned in the last week that he only nodded his approval, apparently weary of any confrontation. Sonja had told him beforehand of her two mystery witnesses who were now receiving as many stares as the contents of the tables.

Aetria glanced behind her at the two black-robed figures, with cowls and face veils covering their heads, seated in chairs where the first rows of benches had been, now removed to make way for the tables and their seats. Coleni was pressed as far away in her seat as she could separate herself from the tall, silent Chalinee sitting next to her. Chalinee did not know who was next to her, or if she did, she had given no sign of recognition. When Trelana had gathered their official party in the general's tent before proceeding in total silence to the Council chambers, Chalinee had said only one word to her.

"Sorceress."

Sonja was dressed in her gold armor, looking very impressive. She turned to Meldoran. "I call Mage Kelristo to give testimony before this hearing."

The Healer moved down from his place at the Council table and took the chair next to Aetria. He gave her a warm smile and a pat on her shoulder. Sonja pulled off the black cloth from the first table, revealing a skeleton lying on the table, a student's robe folded beside it.

"Mage Kelristo, I asked you to examine this skeleton and give me an evaluation of how the person died. Would you please repeat your findings to the Council?"

"Gladly, General. This is a most interesting case. I would have preferred to examine the body where it

was found. You lose a lot of information moving the body from its resting position. But, from this evidence, I have determined the body is that of a woman between the age of seventeen and twenty-five years who had enjoyed a reasonably healthy and injury-free life until just before her death.

"From the condition of the bones, I would say she has been dead for five to ten years. Within a few months of her death she had broken her left arm, was healed by a Healer, but was still mending. The bones had been disturbed by nature, some broken, some gnawed, but that was done after death. From the amount of blood on her robe, at least I assumed she was wearing the robe presented with the bone, I believe the cause of death was her throat being cut. By the way, the robe is one of our student robes. She could have been a student at Inhestia, but then again she could have gotten the robe in any manner of ways. These are matters for the law officers to determine."

"Thank you, Mage Kelristo."

While the old man returned to his seat, Sonja covered the morbid evidence with the black cloth. She turned and spoke to the Council members. "I will explain where this unfortunate woman's body was found shortly. I recall Sorceress Brusilla to give testimony before this hearing."

As the old Sorceress made her way back to the witness seat, she stopped a moment to look at the mystery witnesses. Kelristo had made his appearance for assistance again, and she asked him who they were. He said he didn't know and tried to move her on to her seat. She said she wanted to meet them first and held out her hand in greeting. Each shook her hand silently.

Brusilla looked at Kelristo and said, "Polite young women, but they don't say much."

The two witnesses looked at each other.

"Sorceress Brusilla, how long have you been the Healer of Torrelon?" Sonja asked.

"Thirty-five years, General, dear."

"I would like you to call me Sonja, Brusilla. Please think back thirty years ago and tell me what happened on Summer Fest day."

The question shocked Aetria. Was Sonja trying to make fun of the old Healer by showing her failing memory? Was she trying to discredit Brusilla? Aetria gave Sonja an angry glance.

"Thirty years? Let's see, I was—" Brusilla stopped speaking aloud for a moment. "No need for you to know that—my business, my age. What happened thirty years ago on Summer Fest? Oh! Yes, he came to visit me."

"He?" Sonja asked.

"Let me finish, young woman. General or not, a little respect for age."

"Yes, Ma'am."

"He is Grelnes Menhala."

Aetria twitched at her foster father's Delmathian name. She heard Chalinee stir behind her.

"Why would he come to visit you, Brusilla?"

"It's the law. All Tierian caravans must seek out the Healer of the village they intend to do business with. That way, we will be prepared to counter the confusion they cause amongst our villagers with their charms and potions and other nonsense. Grelnes, as leader of the caravan, came to see me."

"What usually happens when Tierians visit a village?"

"Oh, they try to trick people into buying worthless trinkets, spin a lot of strange stories to entertain the young, chase the women and have their way with them, and get into fights with the men as a result. Then they leave after a few weeks or when our gold runs out."

"Did Grelnes do as you thought?"

"Do what?"

"Chase women?"

"Yes, he did. He's a charmer."

"He charmed you, didn't he, Brusilla?"

"Yes."

"And, after having his way with you, he left."

"Yes! No," Brusilla said in a whisper.

"He left you, Brusilla, but not the village. His caravan left, but he stayed behind. Why?"

"He fell in love with her." The old woman wiped a tear from her eye with her robe hem.

"The 'her' you say is Valeria, Aetria's foster mother?" Sonja asked.

The Healer nodded, looking down at her lap.

The general approached the Council table, looking at each Mage as she told a story.

"He stayed and opened a business in Torrelon. Tieri do not settle down. They are wanderers. He forsook his people for the love of a Delmathian woman. He was not accepted into the village as a husband of a village daughter usually is. He was sometimes ignored at best, often abused, and never welcomed. But he stayed for thirty years. They were childless until a night five years later when a child appeared in their home—Aetria. He is still there with his wife and his family.

"I could bring in dozens of villagers he has helped through the years, but I won't. I can tell you I have dealt with him for the past five years as a supplier of army provisions, and he is not a cheat, his prices are fair, and his goods are of excellent quality. He did not raise Aetria to hate her village, her king, or her Order. He may have been rejected by the Delmathian people, but he has never rejected them."

Aetria eyes were now overflowing, and she joined Brusilla in wiping tears away. She glanced behind her and saw Chalinee was sitting taller than she had been.

"Sorceress Brusilla, I believe you have been telling the truth, but you have not been allowed to tell the whole truth. Do you believe Aetria could betray her people?"

Taking a calming breath, Brusilla, said, "No, and I am sorry if my jealousy led me to imply that she could."

"Thank you, Brusilla. You may leave now."

The smile on Corerilla's lips became a grim line across the bottom of her face. *Score one for the general*, Aetria thought.

"I recall Sorceress Felora to give testimony before this hearing."

Is Sonja going to rebut every one of Corerilla's witnesses? Aetria wondered, as Felora walked into the room and took the familiar chair.

"Sorceress Felora, do you remember a classmate by the name of Alicia?" the general asked.

"Alicia? Of course I do. We were in Novice Healer training together."

"What happened to her?"

Felora looked around, confused. "Why, I don't know. She disappeared in our final year."

Sonja walked over to the first table and stood by the end where Novice Welendor stood guard. He glanced at her, wondering if she was going to rip the cloth off the table. She didn't.

"Please tell what you observed of Alicia's mood prior to her departure from Inhestia."

Why is the general using Corerilla's exact question from before, only using Alicia's name?

"She was very happy. She had trouble paying attention to her meditations, and she was..." Felora hesitated.

"Sneaking out?" Sonja asked.

Felora nodded.

"Did you know the true cause of Alicia's happiness?"

Felora winced. Perhaps she was remembering a week before, Aetria thought.

"She was in love with someone."

"Who?"

"I don't know. She refused to say who or even give hints the way we all did when we had our secret loves. She was very serious about him and protective."

Leaning up against the table, Sonja crossed her arms across her breastplate. "Protective? Is it forbidden

to have a lover at Inhestia?"

The question brought a murmur of responses from the Magi. Felora flushed at the question.

"It ... Well, it is not considered proper for students to divert their attention from their studies and is discouraged."

"Good answer," Aetria whispered to her friend.

"But not forbidden, as in other Orders." Sonja glanced at her two mystery witnesses.

"No, it is not forbidden."

"Then why was Alicia 'protective' of her lover?"

"I am not sure. All I know is that she returned one time from visiting him and he had hurt himself in some way. The injury was far beyond what she could help with, but she could not bring him in for our instructors to help and couldn't take a Healer to where he was. She was frantic with concern, so frantic she did not know she had broken her left arm in trying to pull him into shelter. I fixed it as best I could, but she would not report it to the Mage because he would ask where it happened, and..." Felora looked guiltily at Kelristo.

"What happened to her lover?"

"He apparently healed, whether from her efforts or not, I don't know. Two months later, she disappeared. She did not take any of her things, so we don't think she ran away. The guards searched everywhere, but she was never found and we have never heard of her again."

The general stood up and walked to the opposite end of the table. Reaching under the cloth, she pulled out a pendant and folded it into her hand. She approached Felora and dropped it out of her hand, holding the end with her forefinger and thumb.

"Have you ever seen this, Sorceress?"

"Power," Felora cried. "This is Alicia's. She won it for her singing in the First Year spring fair. Where did you find it?"

Sonja asked for the pendant, and Felora reluctantly returned it. The general put it back under the cloth. Aetria mentally thanked Sonja for not exposing Alicia's bones to Felora.

"The pendant was found with the remains of a woman's body, dressed in an Inhestia student's robe, in a hole blown in the side of a Logathian mountain. According to Mage Kelristo, she was murdered, her throat cut. The woman had a broken left arm, recently healed. I believe Alicia has been found. The question is, why did she die?"

"No, General, the question is who found her?" Corerilla cut in.

"It is not time for your rebuttal, Counselor, but it is a good question and I will answer it. Sorceress Aetria found the remains and brought Alicia home." Sonja held up her right palm and stopped Corerilla from talking. "You will have your chance later to protest, but I remind you this is a hearing, not a trial. A Court Counselor would object that the body could have come from anywhere, that the accused provided the

evidence, and dozens of other legal concerns. Let them argue the fine points. I am gathering the pieces of this mystery together and trying to make sense of what has been presented. Any objections, Council Leader Meldoran?"

He signaled none by waving the fingers of his right hand, which had been rubbing his eyes.

"I call Engineer Aristes to give testimony before this hearing."

As the tall older man walked up the aisle to take his seat, Aetria noticed the weariness in his face and the tired way he moved. She knew Aristes had been working night and day on the projector weapons, at her request.

"Engineer Aristes, I have here a copy of Adept Pleates' report to the Council concerning the 'Battle of the Novices,' as I call it in which five Aggressor Novices died—four by enemy fireballs and one by grid burnout. Have you read it?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I have."

"Did it in any way suggest a problem with the projector weapons?"

"No, Ma'am, it did not. Pleates said the opposite, that before the counter-attack, the weapons were working extremely well."

"Council Leader, to avoid digging through your archives and finding the notes of a certain Council meeting, I would like to ask Magess Trelana to summarize what she said to the Council concerning Sorceress Aetria's concern that the weapon's performance was misrepresented."

Meldoran nodded at Trelana. The Magess stood. "I told the Council that Aetria had seen the explosions of the projector weapons and was sure the explosions were not caused by Hermanian Aggressor spells, but by the weapons themselves."

"Thank you, Magess. Engineer Aristes, what were you tasked to do after the Council had heard Aetria's concern?"

"Nothing, General. The existing weapons were working just fine. What I was asked to do was find out what Pleates had done to the weapons after I had made them to get them to work the way they did. I found he had added a piece of source material just behind the spell entry hole, but my attempts to duplicate his design only led to the weapon exploding. I reported my attempts to the Council and was instructed to keep trying."

Sonja walked over to Welendor. "You were there. Did you see the explosions?"

"No, Ma'am, I was covering the guard's charge."

Sonja wheeled and looked toward the far end of the two tables at Jalista. "You were there. Did you see the explosions?"

"No, Ma'am, I was covering Recanlin's fireballs."

Sonja marched over to Corerilla, looked up at her and said, "You weren't there, but you know fireballs."

Corerilla gave the general a frown in return. Sonja turned and walked to where Coleni sat. "You were there. Did you see the explosions?"

Coleni silently shook her head. Whispering arose from the Council seats. Chalinee's hooded head once again turned to look at her fellow mystery witness.

"Well, the only one who was there and saw the explosions was Aetria, and she says they were not fireballs. Wait! Engineer Aristes, when the projector weapons you tried to duplicate exploded, did the explosions look like fireballs?"

"No, Ma'am. The bursting fireball was too intense."

"How did you know that? You are not a sorcerer."

"You are correct there, General, but I have been around sorcerers for a long time and seen their work. I know it wasn't. However, a sorcerer told me that the explosion was too intense."

"Who was that, Engineer?"

"Lieutenant Novice Fernonia."

Sonja wheeled back toward the Council table. "But she said, and I quote, 'I am an Aggressor. We both know fireballs. Those were fireballs.' Someone is lying, either Sorceress Aetria or Novice Fernonia. Engineer Aristes, how many projector weapons did you make for Adept Pleates?"

"I made seven weapons for him."

"Were all seven weapons made exactly the same?"

"No, Ma'am. Four were made to his original requirements; three were not. He made a change because I was running out of shielding material."

"You have two working weapons left, I believe. Are these weapons from the same group? If so, which one?"

"They are both from the changed group."

The general was pacing back and forth. Aetria knew this was not her normal behavior. Sonja was doing this for a reason. Perhaps the reason was that every person in the room had their eyes on her.

"Now, I am a simple soldier, Engineer. I don't understand much of anything you do, neither do I understand anything these sorcerers do with the thing they call 'The Power.' I understand metal against metal. I understand blood flowing from wounds, and I know"—Sonja turned to look at Corerilla—"death. But it seems to me, Engineer, that four of those original weapons did not survive the 'Battle of the Novices.' You, yourself, have made additional weapons that matched the original design of Pleates, and they failed. Is it not reasonable to say that the four made first failed also?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it does."

"But why did they fail, Engineer? The Novices practiced with them for a week before the battle. They should have exploded the first time if the design were faulty. Why not?"

Aristes rubbed his lips with the back of his hand, then took a deep breath before replying. "I think you understand more of my profession than you say, General. I won't try to make this explanation too simple, but if I begin to not make sense, stop me."

"You can be sure I will, Engineer."

"It all comes down to speed. The weapon only works with Aggressor spells of fireballs and lightning strokes. These spells are the closest spells to pure Power that exist. To make these spells, the sorcerers must draw Power from their grids as rapidly as they can, and do so as intensely as they can. You could say these are the fastest spells sorcerers do."

Sonja stopped pacing and looked at the engineer. Aetria knew what the engineer was talking about, and she could see the Magi understood, but Sonja looked confused. This was for effect because Aetria had given Sonja the same explanation Verdilan had given the Novices that day so long ago, and she had understood perfectly. Sonja turned and looked at the Council members.

"I can see you understand what he said, so I will take on faith that it is correct. Aggressor fireball spells are the most rapid expenditure of your 'Power' there is."

Council Leader Meldoran nodded in agreement.

"Very well, Engineer, what difference does that make?"

"Spells that don't have a very rapid change in their production, and are not intense, don't seem to excite the core material in the projector box. Nothing happens. Yet, when the Aggressor spells in a fireball, the core material erupts with more Power, in the same form. The spell gets more powerful. Now here is the interesting part, General. The spell is trapped in the projector box by the shield material. It reflects back into the core, which erupts again! The spell builds even more. In a very short period of time, the spell becomes very powerful but has nowhere to go. I see it as bouncing around inside the box, getting bigger and bigger. At some point it escapes out the hole in the front of the box. If it doesn't, it builds up too fast and explodes."

Frowning, Sonja made a tight, circular motion with her right forefinger in front of her chest, as if tracing the path of the spell in the box. "What controls the time of this bouncing around? It seems that you would be counting on luck to have the spell escape before it gets too big and explodes."

"To be honest, I don't know exactly. I have been working with my son, Lieutenant Novice Belanar, who I have trained extensively in engineer principles, and who is an Aggressor. We made a copy of the original design weapon, and he spelled various sizes of fireballs into it, starting from the smallest he could make and increasing until the weapon exploded. It didn't take too many variations in the size of the spell going in before it exploded.

"He told me when they were practicing before the battle, they had to be very careful in releasing the Power because they were near the Hermanian camp and the Power might be detected. Pleates had warned them repeatedly not to try to make the weapon do more than it could."

"So, are you saying that both the group of four and the group of three weapons worked with small fireballs?"

"Yes, Ma'am. The difference in the two weapons is the amount of shielding material and how it is placed

in the box. The last three weapons were made with half the material of the first four. Since I did not have as much material to work with, I put slightly more in the back side, behind which is the sorcerer, and made all of the walls thinner than before. I think this causes the change in time. Not all of the Power that erupts from the core the first time gets reflected back into the core. It takes more time for the spell to build. It also seems the increased wall thickness in the back may cause the bouncing to go to the front faster. Thus, you can spell in a lot bigger fireball, and still get it out before the weapon explodes."

"Thank you, Engineer. No, don't leave. I have a few more questions for you. Magess Trelana, at that same Council meeting I asked about earlier, you voiced Aetria's concern Pleates endangered the Novices by increasing their risk of grid burnout. Please summarize your remarks."

The Magess said, "Aetria felt that the Novices were not ready for combat in any form and made her objections clear to Pleates. Aggressor Novice casualties had been so high over the last five years because the demand placed on them in the midst of a battle was such that they would lose control and suffer a fatal grid burnout. The army's approach was for them to gain experience slowly, building the Novices' confidence and introducing them to the pressures of spell warfare gradually. This approach was not being followed by Pleates."

"Adept Loreana has spent a lot of time trying to explain this grid burnout problem to me, Magess Trelana, since it is central to the charges against Aetria. I must confess it is very difficult to understand, but even I believe that the four Novices who died on that hill did not suffer grid burnout."

"That is true."

Sonja walked over by her own desk and looked down her notes. "According to Pleates in his Day 10 report, he said, 'I told her they were not going to spell fireballs of any great size, so they were safe.' That sounds reasonable to me, except for one thing. Engineer Aristes' son Belanar said they were warned not to put too much Power into the projectors. There was a danger there."

Leaving her table, the general walked slowly over by the evidence table, looking at Welendor first, then Jalista. She stopped briefly by the two mystery witnesses, passed by with a glance at Aetria, and stopped at her table again, staring at Novice Holendal for a moment, then finally at Meloses. She looked up at Meldoran.

"It is ironic that the Mage Council, who have never served in the army or been in battle, believe they have the power to judge those that have. I speak for the eight of us in this room who have been in combat and faced death. We all know the surge of emotions that race through your heart and mind when you close the enemy. We have experienced them, some more than others, but all can remember their first battle.

"I remember being so scared that my knees were shaking and I thought I would fall down. When the enemy in front of me slashed downward with his sword, it hammered my shield back into my face and cut my lips. It hurt, and I got mad. I smashed him back with my shield and slashed at him. My sword cut off his ear, and he screamed in shock. I screamed back and knocked him to the ground, thrusting my sword into his exposed throat and killing him. My blood was hot. I jerked my sword clear and ran looking for another enemy."

There was no sound in the room. Aetria snapped out of her own memory of her first fight and glanced quickly around the room. Her fellow army sorcerers were staring past Sonja in their own remembrances; the Magi looked shocked and uncomfortable.

Sonja's voice startled everyone when she spoke loudly. "What is my point, you ask yourselves? Those Novices experienced their first battle on that hill. They fired in anger at the enemy, and the enemy took terrible casualties. They fired again and again. They sensed victory, and in their eagerness, they attacked with more vigor. Not enough to cause that dreaded grid burnout. Not like poor Recanlin who gave his all because he had nothing else to protect his friends with.

"No, they spelled in bigger fireballs, and it killed them. Their weapons exploded in their faces. Pleates knew of the danger, but he forgot about emotions of war. Was he trying to blame his failure to see the risk Aetria had warned him of, or did he truly believe he was defeated by a superior force of enemy sorcerers? We may never know what he was thinking, but we may find out the truth anyway."

CHAPTER 14

Aetria looked over at Corerilla, whose hands were pale white from clutching the arms of her chair so hard. Score another one for the general, Aetria thought.

Sonja walked over to the far right-hand side of the two covered tables and pulled something out from underneath the cloth. "Engineer Aristes, one of the many jobs you do here for the sorcerers is to make their sources, is it not?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Are you the only one or do other engineers make sources also?"

"I make them all, General."

"I have here a source in a box. As I understand it, a student source is a bare source, small in strength, but always exposed. A source in a box is usually a personal source, so you would make that source for an individual sorcerer, would you not?"

"Yes, I would. I like to personalize their source, since it will be theirs for life."

"Then you can recognize a source and tell us who you made the source for?"

"Yes, I can."

"Whose source is this?" Sonja asked, handing the source to Aristes.

The engineer took the source, turned it over in his hands, then looked up at the general. "This is Adept Pleates' source."

"Without looking at the source, you can say that?" Sonja asked.

"In most cases I can, because I vary the art work on the outside of the box. Pleates was a very special student for me, because I taught him all I could about mining; he didn't have to learn anything about the subject if he had not wanted to. I know this source well."

"I know that exposing a source gets the attention of every sorcerer in Inhestia; something I didn't know until recently, by the way, but please take a careful look at the source and tell me what you see."

Opening the box, Aristes took a casual look at the source, then stopped and moved the source closer to his face, staring intently into the box. Aetria and Coleni felt the now-familiar buzz, and having been warned by Sonja of the box being opened, made no outward sign of feeling it. The engineer pried back the leather lining of the interior. He closed the source and handed it back to Sonja. "The shield material has been changed. There is a thin layer of core material between the inside of the box and the shield material. Other than that, it is as I made it."

Sonja gave the source back to the engineer. "Magess Trelana, please take Sorceress Aetria out of the room, and before returning when I ask, cover her eyes with a blindfold."

As the two women walked from the room, the general turned to the Council members. "I am going to have Engineer Aristes place Pleates' source on this table," she pointed to the far right one, "and ask Aetria to find it for me."

When she signaled Jalista, the Novice removed the cloth, revealing the top of the table, which was covered with sources of all description. Aristes walked over to the table and looked down, moving several sources from their places as he found a spot to put Pleates' source. Sonja assisted Jalista in placing the cloth back over the table. The engineer returned to his seat.

"Council Leader Meldoran, would you like to pick out Pleates' source for us?" Sonja asked.

"It is highly unlikely that I could, General. Only by pure luck would I find it, even knowing where Aristes put it on the table. There must be twenty-five sources on that table."

"Forty-two, to be precise, Council Leader. Bring in Sorceress Aetria, please."

Trelana guided Aetria into the Council chamber and up the aisle. The Magess led her over to the far right table and stopped her at its edge.

"Please find Pleates' source," Sonja said.

Aetria stood with her hands down by her side; with her face covered, it was hard for anyone to tell what she was doing, but the sorcerers all knew she was putting herself into a light trance to sense better. After a few moments, Aetria turned and walked toward Aristes. She only put her hand out during the last five feet of her short walk, stopping herself when she touched the older engineer.

"Engineer Aristes has the source; it is not on the table," Aetria said. The engineer nodded and pulled the source out of his vest pocket.

A few of the Magi made skeptical sounds; primary amongst them was Corerilla. That did not surprise Sonja very much. She walked over to Aristes and took the source from him. "Counselor, would you like to hide the source? You can go anywhere in Inhestia that you like, but I prefer it not take too long to prove again Aetria's ability to sense the source."

"It will not take long at all, General Borlock. Magess Trelana, please remove Sorceress Aetria from the room, block her hearing as well as her vision, and when you have done that, have Lieutenant Fernonia return her to this room. You may observe from a distance; I would not want anyone saying you influenced your student."

While Aetria was being led out one more time, Corerilla walked over to the far-left corner of the chamber and sat down on a bench. She motioned for Aetria to be brought back. As she entered through

the southern door, Aetria stopped, oriented on Corerilla, and pointed at the Counselor. Corerilla arose silently and walked slowly across the room. Aetria followed her with her pointing finger. Corerilla placed the source in front of Meldoran as she walked by, not stopping to do so. Aetria stop pointing at her and remained pointing at the source. Corerilla took her place once more.

"So, General, you have proven once more the charge that she has developed an improper use of the Power. I don't see the relevance to the treason charge."

Sonja looked at Fernonia. "Remove the covering from Sorceress Aetria's eyes and ears, please, Lieutenant. You may leave when you are done. Thank you, Engineer Aristes, you may also leave."

More than a few moments passed before Aetria and Trelana were back in their seats. The general had used the time to look at her notes while seated in her usual chair. She looked up from her notes when Meldoran cleared his throat.

"Are you ready to proceed, General?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. I call Magess Tierii Chalinee Rhuhani v'Nomeles to give testimony before this hearing."

As Aetria expected, the calling of the commander of the Hermanian Sorcerer Regiment caused gasps to erupt from the Council members, setting off a major commotion within their membership.

Chalinee stood and removed her hooded robe, shaking out her long, white-streaked brown hair. She wore the plain black robe of a Mage, with no other insignia to show her station in life. She dropped the hooded robe to the floor and walked past the witness chair, approaching the Council table. As soon as she started to move, a silence fell upon the room, as if she had cast a spell on the occupants.

Aetria glanced at Coleni. Her sister was still sitting in her chair. If Coleni had not been warned of Chalinee's presence by Sonja, Aetria was convinced her sister would have fled the room, fainted, or both.

"You are Magess Corerilla, Aggressor master, Council Counselor. I have heard much of you. And you are Mage Kelristo, Master of Healing, Headmaster of Inhestia. You are well regarded by my Order. And you are—" Chalinee walked along the interior of the Council table, naming each Mage, giving his or her discipline, and sometimes faint praise.

Aetria doubted if any of them could name the Hermanian Coven Magi; she knew she couldn't. What a remarkable woman, Aetria thought.

When Chalinee had walked past the last Mage, she approached the general's table, skipping over Sonja.

"The young Novice Provisioner I do not know, but I believe I know you, Sorcerer Meloses." The Provisioner looked startled, glancing at Aetria with a question in his eyes, as if asking, why me. "Your reputation for providing for your army is known to me."

She turned and walked to where Trelana sat. "Magess Trelana, Master of Illusion, mentor of my daughter."

Aetria jerked back as if struck. *What did she mean by that?*

The Hermanian Magess walked by Aetria to Coleni and stood looking down at her. "You know me, and I am certain I will know you when it comes time for the general to lift your veil of secrecy. Until then,

I will respect your anonymity."

Chalinee returned to the witness chair and sat down. She looked at Aetria and spoke softly in Tierian. "You did not tell me the whole truth, daughter of Tieria, and I will judge you for that at the correct time. Do you understand?"

Aetria nodded. *When in my immediate future will I stop being judged by the world?*

"Magess Chalinee, thank you for coming to give testimony—" Sonja started.

"I would not have come at all if this matter concerned anyone but my daughter," Chalinee said, cutting off the general.

Sonja looked at Chalinee with a puzzled frown. "Your daughter?"

"She is Tierii Aetria Menhala v'Grelnes. Her name translated means 'Issue of Grelnes, of the Menhala Clan, Daughter of Tieria.' I am of the Ruling Clan; she is one of mine. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am, I believe I do."

"Good, now proceed."

"Magess, until the defeat of the Hermanian army and its surrender, you were the commander of the sorcerer regiment, were you not?"

"I was."

"The Saphradean Order of sorcerers refused to join their army, and the Hermanian sorcerers had to cover the Saphradean forces. Were you at the final battle between Delmathia and Saphradea?"

"I was. You almost captured me, then-Sergeant Borlock, so you know that."

"Do you know General Amexis Parlinto?"

"That slug. I wish I didn't. He's as hated a man as exists in Saphradea. He has spent the last five years blaming everyone and anybody for his failure. I was there. I saw him leading the charge of his men by fleeing as fast as he could away from your Lancers."

"I couldn't agree with you more in your judgment of his character, but he has raised the question of whether or not you knew of our attack. He implies he was told of the feint, and asked where the information came from. He wrote, 'I was told it came from within the Delmathian army.' Did you, in fact, know of the feint?"

"Yes, we did."

"Who told you?" Sonja asked.

Chalinee turned and looked at Aetria. Aetria's heart stopped. *Power, she's going to say I did!*

"The man she killed—Pleates. He told us about the feint and the charge of the real Royal Guard. He said he was going to use a Novice to spell the disguise on the Lancers, so not to expect much. We were very

disappointed in his choice of sorcerers. That spell cost us very dearly."

Aetria watched the faces of the Council. Hearing the confirmation that the real traitor was Pleates seemed to change no one's expression, except Corerilla's. She smiled a grim smile.

"So are you saying Pleates was the traitor, not Aetria?" Sonja asked.

"Pleates came to us before your Order entered the war. He said he would assist us in any way he could if we would give him an estate located in Hermania's Logathian Mountains. We agreed to that. After the Saphradean battle, Pleates had to be very careful in assisting us. That idiot Amexis was telling his story to anyone who would listen and had put Pleates in a very touchy position. Several years went by with Pleates giving us minimal help. He spent that time working on his own plans."

"What plans were those, Magess?"

"He said he was developing a new weapon that would solve the problem of limited Power availability, but he was very protective of his project. He said he would perfect the weapon, then turn it over to us. We could do little but wait for him to succeed."

"Thank you, Magess. I will have more questions for you shortly; please take your seat by my other 'mystery' witness."

Chalinee stood and walked back to her chair.

The general got up from her chair and walked over to stand beside the source table. She stared at the sources as if trying to collect her thoughts. She slowly turned and faced the Council members.

"I am having trouble sorting out the pieces of this story that Counselor Corerilla has asked us to believe.

Was Pleates the traitor, or is the traitor Aetria? Maybe Aetria and Magess Chalinee are acting in collusion. We have a report of their meeting. They are both members of a folk that all the people of the land suspect. Is Magess Chalinee trying to protect her daughter? I am sure Magess Corerilla will be asking these kinds of questions in her rebuttal. My next witness may be able to answer some of these questions before then, but she will raise a whole lot more than she can answer. I call Novice Coleni to give testimony before this hearing."

Coleni stood. Chalinee said something rapidly in Hermanian to Coleni, who nodded meekly, then removed her hooded robe and dropped it to the floor, to stand before the Council in the dark gray robe of a Hermanian Novice. Pandemonium broke out. Lieutenant Fernonia and a half dozen Sorcerer Guards rushed in to see what the noise was all about.

Aetria stood and held out her hand to her sister, who stepped up beside her twin. Together they faced the Council Leader, who was trying to regain control of his members. He finally resorted to a hand flame, which worked once more to bring silence to the room. He waved for the guards to leave. Fernonia looked to Corerilla, who gave her a slight nod in the direction of the door. The lieutenant ordered her guards out, casting a long, hard look at the sisters.

"Please be seated, both of you," Sonja said. The sisters sat.

"Coleni and Aetria are, in all likelihood, twin sisters. Both were fostered as babies, one in Hermania, and one in Delmathia. Neither knew the other existed until two months ago when I captured Novice Coleni. Novice Coleni, you were at the 'Battle of the Novices,' were you not?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Why were you there?"

"We were a Novice recruit company under the command of Sorceress Marteli, traveling to our army encampment."

"I believe you were acting as the Sub-commander of that unit. How many Novices did you have in your company?"

"Counting myself, ten."

"How long had you been at that site?"

"A week. Sorceress Marteli told us we were waiting for another company to join us from the north. That didn't make a lot of sense because we were heading north. I suggested we continue north to meet them. She told me to mind my own business. So I did."

"On the morning of the battle, where were you?" Sonja asked.

Coleni hesitated a moment before answering. Aetria wondered if she would tell all, as she had in her trance. Aetria doubted that.

"I was on guard duty near the foot of the southern hill."

"It was my understanding that Hermanian sorcerers are normally heavily guarded by regular troops. Why were you standing guard duty?"

"It was part of our training. Our regular guards were also standing watch just beyond our position. The Novices stood watch in pairs. We spent a lot of time watching our guards."

"Then what happened?"

"Novice Lornes heard a commotion in the bushes near us. Out of the semi-dark of dawn, a body flew into our post knocking us both down. It was one of our guards. His throat had been cut. We struggled to get up from the ground. A figure in black kicked Novice Lornes in the stomach and put a knife to his throat. I thought I was next. The man laughed at us and ran off into the dark. I saw people on the hill above us and went to warn them of the man in black. I sent Lornes to warn the camp."

"The figure in black was one of our Sorcerer Guards," the general told the Council members. "The people on the hill were Sorceress Aetria's group of Illusionist Novices and Novice Aggressor Recanlin. What happened next, Coleni?"

"A group of sorcerers on the northern hill starting hurling fireballs into the camp. Horses erupted out of the brush line and started a charge at the camp. The other group of sorcerers on the hill above began to fire fireballs into the camp. Realizing they were the enemy and not my people, I retreated back to my camp."

"So you are saying the sorcerers on the northern hill fired first?"

"Yes, they did."

"I have already asked if you saw the explosions on the northern hill. You shook your head, meaning no. After the explosions, what did your guards do?"

"They rushed the hills. A sorcerer in the northern group fired a fireball of at least Adept level, if not higher, into the troops advancing on that hill. It stopped the charge of those guards. The Aggressor on the southern hill fired a less powerful fireball which slowed the reserve guard's advance, but did not stop them. When they reached the hill, they found one Sorcerer Guard officer attacking a Hermanian Novice and killed him. The rest of the Delmathian troops had retreated."

"Then what did you do?"

"Nothing. Sorceress Marteli ordered the guard to secure the area around the camp and not to pursue the enemy."

"Was that normal procedure for your troops not to follow up a victory?" Sonja asked Coleni, glancing at Chalinee.

"No, it is not. I was distraught over the death of my fellow Novice Lornes and wanted blood in revenge. Marteli told me the enemy was too powerful and she did not want to lose any more troops."

"Did your Novices attack the northern hill with fireballs?"

"No. I asked them why they had not at least attempted a counterattack. There were four Aggressor Novices other than Lornes. They said Marteli ordered them to retreat to safety, afraid the charging horsemen would kill them."

"So no sorcerers, even Sorceress Marteli, took offensive action against the Delmathians?"

"That is correct," Coleni stated.

"Why is that, Novice Coleni?" Sonja asked.

"She wouldn't know the answer to your question, General Borlock. She was just a recruit Novice." Chalinee said.

"And you would, Magess?"

"Of course. I ordered that no action be taken against the attackers."

"You were there?"

"Were you in every battle your army ever fought, General? No, I wasn't there. It was a small skirmish and not worthy of my leadership. Pleates wanted a battle to demonstrate his weapon. I agreed to let him capture a source, but under the condition that no sorcerers were to be hurt or killed. Marteli's orders were to encamp, expose her source, and wait for the attack. She was to allow the source to be captured and not counterattack with her sorcerers. She was obeying my orders."

Coleni's cheeks were flushed, and Aetria saw her sister's fists clenched. Coleni jumped up and turned toward Chalinee. Aetria reached out to touch Coleni but was not able to stop her from angrily saying, "A

lot of good it did Novice Lornes!"

The response in a low-voiced growl in Hermanian made Coleni stiffen, then bow from the waist in submission, tears dripping from her eyes. Chalinee spoke again, and Coleni stood straight, wiping the tears hastily with her robe sleeve. Sonja looked away as if not to see the Hermanian commander rebuking her Novice. Corerilla seemed to be straining to hear what had been said, but she was too far away to hear the exchange.

"Please sit down, Novice Coleni. I have more questions for you," Sonja said.

Coleni sat down stiffly, fighting to gain control of her emotions.

The general continued. "Pleates' diversion to tour the western boundary instead of returning directly to the army after swearing in the new Novices at Inhestia was a ploy to find the Hermanian camp, attack it with his new weapon, grab the source, and make a daring withdrawal. His plan went awry when his weapons exploded, killing four Aggressors. He has blamed the failure, in his official report to me, on Aetria's starting her attack too early. Yet we have heard it was his group of Novices that started the battle, as it was planned to do. It appears he may have lied about what happened at the 'Battle of the Novices.'

"But Magess Corerilla will point out that Magess Chalinee would lie to protect her 'daughter,' and Aetria's sister Coleni would do the same. Are we any nearer to the truth? I suspect I could call as witnesses some of those Hermanian troops who survived being sacrificed to Pleates' weapons to say who fired and when, but then they are ex-enemies and their word suspect also. There is truth here somewhere, but we need to search a bit more."

Sonja looked at Coleni to ensure she had control of herself and then glanced at Aetria. Aetria gave the general a nod, indicating she thought it was all right to continue. Aetria knew the next round of questions was going to be hardest on her sister, and Coleni knew what could happen when she answered them.

"Novice Coleni, I am going to ask you some questions which might be considered detrimental to your welfare. A Mage of your Order will hear your answers, and she is not bound by the Delmathian Order's rules concerning conduct of spell casters. She is subject to our Delmathian laws, as Hermania agreed to in their suit for peace, so your life cannot be threatened. However, our laws cannot protect you from being banned from your profession. Do you understand?"

Coleni said calmly, and with emphasis, "I understand."

Looking at Chalinee, the general asked Coleni, "Have you ever experienced this condition called grid burnout?"

"Yes, three times. Once in my Novice training; once when I was cloistered; and the last time when I was captured." Her matter-of-fact delivery of the answer belied the horror Aetria knew Coleni must feel in condemning herself before Chalinee. A quick glance at Chalinee showed the only reaction from the Magess was a tightening at the corners of her lips.

"After your first burnout, did you experience any change in your spell abilities?"

"Not after the first," Coleni answered. "I think because I was a first year student, I was not dealing with that much Power. It horrified my teachers that I had suffered it, and I was treated accordingly, but I didn't notice any change. After the second burnout, I ... I..." She hesitated. She had no choice now but to

say she knew she had changed and had not told anyone. "I, like Aetria, could sense an aura of stored Power in sorcerers. I also found I was sensitive to a new energy present in sources that I couldn't perceive before. I know I should have told my mentor, but I was being punished by my Order, and I had no one to talk to, and I was angry at being cut off from my friends and training, and I ... Well, I didn't tell anyone."

"So you can sense the same strange energy coming from Pleates' source as Aetria can?"

"Yes."

Sonja turned to look at the Magi. "Even for a non-sorcerer like me, it seems remarkable that these two women have experienced the same ability to sense something different in sources and to see stored Power. It could be because they are twins, but I have a deep-seated feeling this is not the case. Mage Kelristo, you are the Master of Healing here. What do you think?"

Aetria looked at the Mage. He had been twitching in his chair as if he could not contain his interest in what he had just heard, and the general was quick to bring him into her argument.

"This is very interesting and I must have an opportunity to examine these two women. You may be right, General. The burnouts may have changed their perception of Power and allowed them to see it in a way different from the rest of us. Now I can set up an experiment—"

Corerilla cut him off harshly. "The Council is not here to discuss the possibilities of wild aberrations of Power, Mage Kelristo, but to condemn its use in our one sorcerer, Aetria. The other perpetrator, Coleni, will be left to her own people to handle."

"Thank you for focusing us on our purpose here, Counselor," retorted the general, "but you only did so for two of the charges. I believe that such a discussion is needed for me to determine the validity of the third, and highest precedence, charge of high treason. A charge, I submit, that applies as well to Adept Pleates and anyone else who supported him in his efforts."

Aetria's mouth opened in surprise. She quickly shut it, looking at Coleni to see if her sister had understood what the general was saying. She did. Coleni whispered to Aetria, "Sonja has just accused your entire Mage Council of treason!"

Aetria nodded numbly. From the shocked looks of all the people in the room, except Sonja, they all understood.

"General Borlock, are you saying this Council should be charged with treason?" Meldoran asked, his voice quivering with indignation.

Looking hard at the old Mage, Sonja answered. "Maybe so, maybe not. You approved his developing a weapon that neither the king, myself, nor anyone else in the army knew anything about until it killed four of my soldiers! But I am digressing from my point and wish to return to it now. Something happens to sorcerers who experience, and survive, grid burnout. You don't know what it is because you declare it wild magic and terminate its use.

"The fact Aetria uses it to track Power, in whatever form it appears, has been proven. Coleni says she can, and I believe her. The source they have specifically pointed out as being the one that made them aware of this strange new Power is Pleates'. Why Pleates' source? Aristes made it for him and says the Adept added something. Why? This is not hard to answer. It is because Pleates could sense the new

Power also. How was he able to do that? Because he suffered grid burnout, survived, and found the new Power. Don't you all see that?"

Silence, stunned silence. Corerilla did not look stunned to Aetria. *Corerilla knew what the general said was true. Is she protecting her son?*

"Who was Alicia's lover? I say he was Pleates. Why had he suffered an injury that no sorcerer could be told about? He suffered grid burnout. Why did he suddenly leave his studies and head for the mountains? He found he could track a new Power, a Power that came from source material," stated the general looking at the Magi.

"Why did he offer to sell out his country and his Order for a mountain valley that no one wanted? Because he found a mountain filled with source mineral, which would make him wealthy beyond anyone's dreams and give him more Power than any Order in the world. Why did he take such an active interest in a red sludge that your engineers had been throwing away for hundreds of years because it had no value? That sludge powers a weapon that would make him invincible to all of our armies. And he would have succeeded except for one thing."

I should know what she is going to say, but I don't know!

Sonja was beside Corerilla, looking at the Counselor as if the woman would give the answer. She didn't.

"The grid burnout that mysteriously gave him the ability to sense the new Power was not unique to him. He knew of one other who had experienced a grid burnout—Aetria. She mysteriously tracks down an errant Novice. She senses an exposed source long before he could. She must sense things differently; she is a danger to him. She doesn't sense the red Power yet, so if she can be gotten rid of, then he is safe.

"You have not yet heard of his setting a trap with your own Sorcerer Guards that should have ended with her death. I can call your Lieutenant Maneles to testify to it. The trap fails. Upon his return to the army camp, I spring my own surprise move and he must react to aid the Hermanians. He cleverly lines his own source with the red sludge so he could track Aetria, whom he had assigned to go with me. The Hermanians do not succeed in capturing me, so he has to try himself. He fails and dies."

Corerilla stood up and stepped down onto the chamber floor. She walked up to Meldoran. "A nice summation. A little before its allotted time, but since we are throwing away protocols, let me add some thoughts." She continued before the Council Leader could say yes or no.

"The general has been good enough to present most of my objections to her witnesses. For brevity, I will say they are relatives, ex-enemies of our country, or confused old women, easily led. I am very pleased to hear Engineer Aristes has solved the problem with our weapon. The only hard evidence General Borlock has presented has only proven the charges against Aetria. As for the skeleton, the possible discovery of what happened to Alicia remains a matter for the law officers. A Court of Land must judge whoever cut that poor, unfortunate woman's throat.

"I, on the other hand, have presented written evidence predating this hearing and reflecting an historical perspective of events that could be judged to be treasonous on the part of Sorceress Aetria. I admit some of my witnesses' testimony comes from former enemies of our people. If we throw away *all* the testimony from Hermania and Saphradea, then I submit I still have enough testimony to charge Aetria."

"Very reasonable, Counselor Corerilla. It lives up to your reputation for quickness of thought and use of the spoken word, but..." Chalinee stood and walked behind her chair, picking a long, cloth-wrapped

object off the floor. She carried it to Corerilla and thrust it at her. The Counselor took it, almost in self-defense.

"Whether you believe me, or not, I don't care—except for the insult to my professional integrity it presents. A matter we will discuss in the future. I present this 'hard evidence' to you, telling you it was given to me by the person who owned it, Adept Pleates."

Corerilla removed the cloth's bindings, exposing a projector weapon.

"There were seven made, according to Engineer Aristes. Four blew up on the hill. Two came back to you here at Inhestia with their Aggressor Novice users. I find it curious no one has asked where the seventh was. All know Pleates had it. He took it with him when he went out with the 'fake' general. He gave it to me, telling me that if he failed to return, his part of our bargain was fulfilled. Would you like to comment on that, Counselor?"

Corerilla walked over and put the projector weapon on the nearest cloth-covered table, the one holding Alicia's remains. She turned to face Chalinee. "Pleates had to travel through your occupied territory. It is quite likely you captured it from him or took it from his possessions when you removed the bodies from the tavern. There are many ways you could have gotten hold of this weapon."

"Maybe your own witness can answer how I got the weapon. General, I suggest you recall ex-Sergeant Ventler."

While Sonja called for the Hermanian assassin, Chalinee returned to her seat and sat down. As the limping man came down the aisle, Sonja moved the witness chair further away from Aetria, then walked over to stand by the evidence tables. When Ventler came abreast of the two Hermanian women, he recognized his former superior with an awkward bow. The look he gave Coleni was surprise mixed with hate. He glanced over at Aetria and back to Coleni, then looked at Chalinee as if to say, "I told you so." He clumped over to the witness chair and sat down.

"Rather than burden Counselor Corerilla with the task of translating for us, as she did previously, I will ask Novice Coleni to do that task. Counselor Corerilla and I will know if she is not translating properly," stated the general.

Coleni spoke rapidly in Hermanian, explaining to Ventler what the general had said. He eyed Coleni nervously, glancing between her and his Magess.

The general reached over and picked up the projector weapon from the evidence table and walked over by Ventler. "Have you ever seen one of these before, Sergeant?"

Ventler looked at the weapon in Sonja's hands briefly and said, "It is a Sorcerer Guard weapon. I've seen two of their officers carrying them."

"Have you seen the weapons anywhere else, other than here at Inhestia?"

"No."

Sonja looked at Corerilla, but the Counselor showed no change in her expression. Sonja turned her attention back to the assassin.

"You said in your earlier testimony that your squad was sent in pursuit of General Mythrian. When asked

how you were able to find the general, you said your attached sorcerer told you where to find him. When asked who that was, you said Coleni. I asked you where Coleni was, and you told me she had been tortured to death by my inquisitors. It appears Coleni survived my inquisitors' torture."

Ventler was noticeably uncomfortable. His eyes kept shifting from Sonja, to the Council Leader, to Corerilla, and back again to Sonja. Aetria could see the tension building in the man and worried that he might do something if pushed too far.

"Novice Coleni, was Sergeant Ventler ever a member of your attached Assassin squad?"

"At the time of Pleates' death, I did not have an attached Assassin squad, as I was temporarily working at my Company's headquarters. When I was eventually assigned a squad, Sergeant Ventler was not in it."

Coleni had to hastily translate the general's question to her, answer it, then translate her answer back to Ventler.

"Then whose squad was he attached to, Novice Coleni?"

"You keep asking the wrong person for information, General Borlock," Chalinee cut in. Ventler all but broke his neck swiveling his head around to stare at the Magess.

"Sergeant Ventler was attached to my Regimental Headquarters Company." Coleni's translations were making the Assassin more and more restless. He looked like a trapped animal now.

"Then, Magess Chalinee, you told him where to find the general."

"I did no such thing. I assigned that squad to Pleates when he came through my headquarters. Pleates already knew how to find you."

"Magess Chalinee, when did you first hear about the death of Alenso Mythrian, then believed to be the commanding general of the combined armies of King Phyrllatus?"

"As we were retreating from our defeat at the battle where you first appeared as your true self. I was confident Pleates would have killed General Mythrian and was quite shocked to find out otherwise."

"But Sergeant Ventler said Sergeant Graner ordered him to ride as fast as he could to tell you that the general was dead." While Coleni translated Sonja's last statement, Ventler turned to look at Chalinee, as if appealing with his eyes for her to back his story.

"What nonsense! Assassin Ventler did not return to my Headquarters until nearly a month later, with a harrowing tale of dodging your troops who had been hunting him furiously. That is why I promoted him to sergeant, and Sergeant Graner to lieutenant. Graner backed up his story."

Sonja's eyes snapped back to Ventler's and saw the fear in his eyes as Coleni translated. The man was sweating profusely.

"So, Sergeant Ventler, you have been lying to me and this Council. Would you like to tell us the truth for once?"

Ventler seemed to explode out of his chair. For someone so injured, he moved with surprising agility. Aetria had only a moment to jump clear, falling backwards into a flip and landing on her feet. His target

vanishing before his face, Ventler continued his charge, grabbing the old Magess who had been sitting next to his nemesis. Where the knife came from, Aetria did not see, but it was now poised over Trelana's throat.

"Move, woman dies!" he said in broken Delmathian.

The Council members froze in place. A Magess was in the hands of a maniac, and they were all unPowered except Meldoran. The general's sword was drawn, but she could not save Trelana. The older woman groaned; the heavily muscled arm across her chest held her in a crushing embrace against the assassin's body. The southern door flew open, and Fernonia jumped into the room, a projector weapon in her hand. Ventler whirled to put Trelana's body in between his and the deadly weapon.

Aetria felt the release of the Power before she saw Meldoran gesture. A Grand Master of Illusion, he put a glamor on Trelana that made her into a huge serpent.

A writhing venomous snake's head appearing before his face broke Ventler's focus on the guard lieutenant. With a terrible hiss, the snake bared its long fangs and started to lunge at his head. He shifted the arm holding the snake against his body and grabbed at the head of the snake.

When the snake glamor enveloped Trelana, Aetria had only a moment to react. Ventler's release of the Magess cleared her throat from the man's knife, and Aetria cast simultaneously. Her knife, thrown from only a few feet away, buried itself almost completely in the left eye of the assassin. The man crashed over backwards, dead before he hit the ground. Aetria rushed to help her mentor, gasping for breath on the floor in front of her. The Council members quickly joined her, Kelristo moving her gently aside as he knelt to aid his colleague. The rigidly formal hearing dissolved into confusion and chaos.

CHAPTER 15

"What was it that Chalinee said to you that made you cry?" Aetria asked Coleni when they were alone in her tent.

The hearing had been recessed for the rest of the day while the injured were cared for and the deceased removed. It was now late in the evening, and the sisters were finished restoring their Power grids. If the hearing resumed in the morning as planned, they would have to deplete their grids again, but no sorcerer liked being Powerless for any period of time.

"She told me that if I hadn't been rutting in the bushes with Lornes, and had been standing a proper sentry watch, he might have been alive today. She did not want to dishonor Hermania by arguing the issue in front of Delmathians."

Aetria saw the sting of that rebuke relive itself in Coleni's face and was sorry she had brought the subject up again.

"There is no way of ever knowing what would, or would not, have happened if any of us had done anything different that morning. This comment comes from a woman willing to sacrifice a hundred soldiers to make Pleates look good. You can't let that kind of talk hurt you."

Coleni did not look convinced. She had taken her novice robe off and switched back to her lieutenant field uniform earlier in the evening, and now glanced at the robe lying folded on her sleeping pallet.

"You are right, but you are not the one whose country has been defeated, your profession ended, and who has no future to look forward to amongst her own people. I did not want to dishonor my people in front of you, so I meekly obeyed her command. How can she still have such a hold on me, when I know I can never be part of her Order again?"

"You don't know that, Coleni. And you can't say my profession is not ended. I am an admitted wild sorcerer, and my future as a sorcerer is as bleak as yours, but we still have a place in the general's staff. It's a start!"

A figure dressed in black slipped through the door curtain, its face covered by a veil. Aetria's knife was in her hand faster than Coleni's sword cleared its scabbard, but the figure raised its hands above the waist, no weapon visible. It carefully removed the face veil, signaling the women to be quiet.

"Belanar?" Aetria whispered. "What—"

"I only have a moment, Sorceress. Magess Corerilla has summoned Fernonia and me. She wants us in her quarters right now! Fernonia came to tell me to get my butt over there immediately. She said Corerilla was terribly angry tonight, ranting against the general and her Hermanian lap dog, Chalinee. I have to go!" He ducked through the door veil and was gone.

Coleni returned her sword to its scabbard and reached for her helmet. Aetria, still wearing her Sorceress uniform, needed nothing to get ready. "You had better assume your Lieutenant Maetria glamor or the Royal Guard will stop us," Aetria told her sister as Coleni put on her helmet. A moment later they ran from their tent.

The Royal Guard watched the sisters' approach with concern, for the Chief Advisor and aide did not normally run at them. The sentries called for Lieutenant Valetti, who appeared almost instantly from his adjutant's desk just inside the entrance.

"Valetti, where is the general?" Aetria asked, arriving slightly out of breath.

"She is having dinner with Magess Trelana at the Magess' home. Why, Captain?"

"Did you send any Royal Guard with her?"

"No, of course not. She is in the protection of the Sorcerer Guards."

The two sisters looked sharply at each other then back to Valetti. Aetria spoke hurriedly. "Call out the guard and follow us. Corerilla may be after the general." The women headed for the front gate as fast as they could run.

The gate guards watched them run past, and seeing a pursuing squad of Royal Guard, hesitated a moment. Their loyalty to the sorcerer came first, but why was a Royal Guard officer running with her? One of them tripped the portcullis' switch and the gate crashed down in front of Lieutenant Valetti and his men. The shouting match that followed brought Lieutenant Hamilto out of his quarters, blinking sleepily at the commotion.

Aetria and Coleni raced across the commons, the shouting voices of the men diminishing behind them as they neared the Magess' cottage. Without knocking, Aetria crashed through the front door and rushed into the dining area of her mentor. Sitting at the table were Sonja and Trelana, sipping at their wine. They looked up at the panting sisters.

"Is there a problem, Captain?" Sonja asked.

"We were just warned that Corerilla may be up to something. I don't know what, but I alerted the guard to come and protect you. You are badly exposed here with no protection."

"Why, Aetria dear, she has four officers of the Sorcerer Guard protecting her," Corerilla said from the door behind her. Fernonia and Belanar were close by her side, their projector weapons leveled at the four women. Two other men stood in the darkness behind Corerilla.

"What is the meaning of this, Counselor?" Sonja said angrily, starting to rise from her chair.

"Just protecting you from this wild sorceress, General Borlock. It's too bad I was too late." Corerilla zapped Coleni with a small lightning bolt, knocking her flying into the dinner table and scattering dishes all over the floor with a crash.

"Kill the Sorceress," Corerilla ordered Fernonia, who spelled a lightning bolt into her weapon.

"No!" Belanar yelled. He swung his weapon underneath Fernonia's and knocked it upwards, the killing bolt exiting the front of the weapon and crashing into the ceiling of the dining room, scattering energy back down into the room. Fernonia swung the butt of her weapon upwards and struck Belanar across the face, knocking him out.

Aetria took part of the scattered lightning bolt and slumped over stunned, hitting the ground face first.

She willed her arms to move but they wouldn't. She heard the yelling of the guard from outside the cottage and watched as Corerilla scattered the approaching men with a fireball. Corerilla ordered the two men to grab Coleni, and while they hoisted her limp form off the table, Corerilla blew out the study window with a smaller fireball. Shoving them in the direction of the window, she whispered something to Fernonia, and the young woman jumped after the men.

"Let's see you get out of this one, Aetria," was the last thing Aetria heard before something slammed into the back of her head and she passed out.

* * * *

"Lie still, Aetria. It is I, Loreana. Relax. Listen to my voice and concentrate on it. You have been hit by a lightning bolt, and you have a lump on the back of your head that I suspect did not happen when you fell forward. I have covered your eyes with a damp cloth. I am going to remove it now."

A flickering candle cast a feeble light around the room. Aetria's eyes tried to focus on her surroundings, her mind trying to figure out where she was. The rough covering of the pallet under her back was not hers, the padding sparse and under-stuffed. Wooden beams above her. Not a tent! Turning her head slowly to her right, she saw Loreana sitting beside her, a soft smile on her face, concern in her eyes. Looking beyond the Healer, she saw a heavy wooden door with a barred window. She was in a cell!

"Easy, dear. You could have a concussion, but I am not sure, with that hard head of yours. Corerilla had you locked up after she said you tried to kill the general and Trelana at dinner. None of us who know you believe her, but the Council does not have any witnesses who can say otherwise."

"The general?" Aetria asked worriedly. "Was she..."

"Killed? No, no one was killed. Whoever fired that lightning bolt into the ceiling, the charge bounced

back into the room and rebounded off the walls. Sonja was standing and got hit numerous times before she fell over. She has several burns because of her armor, but the most serious injury was to her head. She must have hit it on the table when she fell. Kelristo is worried, but he thinks she will come through all right."

Aetria tried to sit up, but Loreana put a hand on her chest and held her down. "Stay down, Aetria, standing will only make your head hurt worse. I didn't want to wake you until morning, but I think something is decidedly wrong with Corerilla's story about the attack on the general. I need to have someone's account besides the Counselor's."

Putting a hand to her head to feel the lump, Aetria suddenly remembered something and anxiously said to Loreana, "Coleni is in danger! Corerilla hit her with a small lightning bolt to deliberately stun her. The witch then ordered Fernonia to kill me. Belanar knocked Fern's weapon up at the last second, but I was stunned by the back blast off the ceiling. I remember Corerilla blowing out the window and ordering two male guards to pick Coleni up and escape through the window with her."

"Coleni is missing. Corerilla said Coleni aided you in the attack. She said she tried to hit Coleni with a fireball but missed, breaking the window instead. When Coleni saw you fall, she jumped through the window and escaped. You say two guardsmen helped her? That may explain why the guard is not trying very hard to find Coleni. I wonder how many other of the guard are supporting Corerilla?"

Aetria's mind was racing over the memories of what had happened. *What is Corerilla up to?* It was the question she kept asking herself.

"Trelana? Power, what happened to Trelana?" Aetria asked in a panic.

"Calm yourself, Aetria. Remember, no one was killed. Trelana is a pretty tough old woman. She was hit by the same bolts as the general but did not suffer the burns or a head wound. I have not tried to awaken her; she has had enough trauma this day."

"What a terrible mess this all is," Aetria moaned.

Loreana nodded. "Lieutenant Valetti and his men arrived at the cottage to find Corerilla bending over you, a projector in her hand. There was a lot of confusion going on, with more Sorcerer Guards showing up and no one knowing who did what to whom. Corerilla told Valetti she had disarmed you and ordered you be trussed and gagged for safety. She took complete charge of the scene. Although Corerilla had sent for Healers, Valetti made the wise decision to send for me to attend the general. I arrived at Trelana's quarters just before Council Leader Meldoran showed up to find out what had just happened.

"Corerilla told him you had disabled Belanar, grabbed his weapon, and used it to attack the general. I said I couldn't believe that was what happened at all. I told Meldoran that, as I understood the operation of the weapon, the user has to project in an Aggressor spell to make it work. Illusionists don't know Aggressor spells. Corerilla dismissed my argument saying you are a wild sorceress and who knows what you know. She could be right about your knowing spells outside your discipline, for you have learned Healing spells from me, but at that point, I decided to keep my mouth shut and try to find out on my own what happened.

"What made me suspicious of her story was the fact Belanar's jaw was badly broken. I know your style of defense and I don't think you could have done that with your hands or feet. The bruising suggests a club or staff. Belanar could not attest to what had happened because he was incoherent, being in a great deal of pain and his face badly swollen. I've had to put him out."

"So here I lie, locked up and accused of trying to assassinate the general, my sister missing, with Corerilla running loose, and the Sorcerer Guard acting under her orders," Aetria said bitterly.

"Not all of the guard, Sorceress." Lieutenant Maneles had slipped silently into the room, the two women unaware of his presence.

Loreana, startled by the whispered voice, gave a little gasp. Aetria twisted around to see who had spoken, groaning at the stab of pain that shot from the back of her head.

"Please be quiet, my ladies. My presence here is known by only a few. You are right to wonder how many of the guard are supporting Corerilla, Adept Loreana. I don't know for sure, but I would say about half. Fortunately for you, the half that doesn't contains the staff of the holding cells. They told me of Sorceress Aetria's being locked up, and I came as soon as I had determined the real reason for her being held."

"And the reason is what, Lieutenant?" Loreana asked.

Maneles crouched down beside the two sorceresses, lowering his voice even more. "She didn't have time to kill Captain Aetria. Lieutenant Hamilto was coming through the door and saw her swing the butt of a projector weapon at someone lying on the floor. Who knows how many times she would have hit you, Sorceress? It was a good thing she did not have a blade, or you would be in a different room in Inhestia—the morgue."

Aetria sat slowly up, warding off Loreana's hand. "And where is my nemesis now, Lieutenant?"

"Gone. So is Lieutenant Fernonia. They were seen riding north with a third horse carrying a body draped over it. I think it was your Lieutenant Maetria."

"Coleni? Was she dead?" The fear was strong in Aetria's voice.

"I don't see why they would gag a dead person. Her feet and hands were bound. One of the guard who brought the horses to them is on our side; that is what he saw. I believe she is alive."

"What time is it now?" Aetria asked.

"A few hours before dawn. They left over six hours ago."

"Loreana, you must tell Valetti to alert the Royal Guard and ride after them!"

The Healer's face saddened, and she shook her head. "The Royal Guard has been ordered to guard the general against both you and your sister. I don't think I can convince them to go after Corerilla until Sonja wakes up."

The Sorceress looked at Maneles, her eyes asking for his help. Before she could ask, he said, "Moving against Corerilla at this time is very risky. It could start a fight amongst the guard that would delay a pursuit even more. We need time to sound out loyalties, time your sister cannot afford. I can, however, guarantee you six hours."

Loreana looked at the Lieutenant sharply, her voice rising for a moment before she finished in a hiss. "Surely you are not asking Aetria to ride in her condition. She'll collapse before she gets out the gate."

"I think she's tougher than you give her credit for, Ma'am. Aetria escaping buys us the time we need to consolidate our forces. We could waste a lot of time searching for her trail, for no one would expect her to take out after Corerilla. When we do figure that out, I will make sure I am on the pursuing force. If we're lucky, I will be commanding it, but going after her we must do. I will buy her as much time as I can."

Rising fully to her feet, Aetria steadied herself on the cold stone wall of the cell. The world started to spin, and she closed her eyes to make it stop. Loreana spoke a spell, and the pain eased, her head clearing a little. The Healer could have put her on her back again with another spell, but she didn't. Perhaps she saw the right in what Aetria had to do.

"I will need a horse."

"Taken care of. You will find your armor and weapons with the horse. I will guide you away from Inhestia so the Sorcerer Guard or army will not see you. We must leave now!"

"Goodbye, Loreana. Explain to the general what has happened, and tell her I am sorry I brought this down on her."

The two women hugged, then Loreana handed Aetria a capped bottle, giving her whispered instructions on what to do with it. Aetria turned to the straw-filled pallet she had recently been lying on and spelled a glamor of herself asleep on the pallet. Loreana nodded her approval and said one last goodbye as Aetria slipped out the door behind the disappearing lieutenant.

* * * *

Coleni ducked a low-hanging branch and took the opportunity to look back at Corerilla riding behind her, last in their column of three. The Magess was watching her very closely. Coleni felt again the near miss of the lightning bolt that had sizzled past her ear earlier that morning when Corerilla thought she had made a move to escape. Riding through the heavy brush and trees of this forest was her best chance, but Corerilla was being very careful not to allow the opportunity. When Fernonia heard the bolt let go, she whirled her mount around and had her projector leveled on Coleni before she could move five feet further. The young Aggressor woman had been leading their little group through the trees ever since they had turned west off the northern running road.

When she was finally untied and allowed to sit up on the horse she had been draped over, Coleni had recognized the road on which the general's entourage had moved south to Inhestia. Heading west meant that they were riding into Hermania.

Facing forward in the saddle, Coleni stared morosely at the back of the Sorcerer Guard lieutenant as Fernonia guided her horse through the trees. She thought back over the things that had happened to her in the last day and wondered where she could have gained control of any of those events. Her last memory of Aetria was when she looked at her sister after Corerilla had said, "—I was too late," and saw Aetria's eyes suddenly open with fright.

Her next memory was this morning when she had awakened to the bouncing of her stomach on the saddle of a horse, her head encased in a hood so she could not see, her feet and hands tied. She tried yelling, but found she was also gagged. Her struggles to free herself must have alerted the two women she was awake, for the horse stopped, and her hood was pulled roughly off. Her first view was of the world upside down, and filling her vision were the black-leather-encased ample breasts of Fernonia.

"She's awake, Magess. Do you want to talk to her now?"

Corerilla must have nodded her response; Coleni did not hear anything. The lieutenant walked around to Coleni's feet, untied them, then came back in front of her and, grabbing her by the shoulders, shoved her up and over the saddle. Coleni's weight dropped her off the other side, and she staggered, trying to stay erect without the benefit of her arms for balance. She failed and fell, fortunately landing on her rear.

Fernonia drew her sword and walked behind Coleni.

"Don't move or you will lose some fingers, Novice." The lieutenant cut loose the leathers binding Coleni's wrists.

The Magess' voice came from high above Coleni, and to her right. Looking in that direction, she squinted against the rising sun to see Corerilla. "You have a simple choice, Novice Coleni. You can guide me to the source mine your sister found, or you can die here."

Rubbing her wrists, Coleni said, "Then kill me."

"Tired of rutting in the bushes with Lornes, Novice?"

Cursing, Coleni jumped to her feet and would have rushed the Magess, but her feet had been tied too long and did not want to go in the direction she willed. She staggered against her horse, grabbing onto the saddle to keep from falling. Fernonia moved quickly between Coleni and Corerilla, her sword up and ready.

"My Hermanian is good enough to know what Chalinee said to you, dear Coleni, and if she felt you dishonored her country, I would not want to be in your place when you return to Hermania. But you don't have that choice right now. I will give you another choice. Guide me to where I want to go, or I will have your 'sister' killed. She is in a cell in Inhestia, charged with killing General Borlock and her mentor. All that stands between her and the executioner's sword is my force of will with the Council. What say you now?"

Sonja and Trelana dead? Is that what she meant about being too late? Corerilla killed them and blamed Aetria! Her mind was filled with anxiety for the only friends and family she had. Something in her said Corerilla was lying because the general was too hard to kill, but she believed Aetria was in the clutches of this horrible woman.

"Answer me, Hermanian. I am a busy woman. I have a source mine to find, or I have a trial to finish—with bothersome twin sisters to bury. One here, one in Inhestia."

"What guarantee do I have you won't kill me when I find your mine for you?" Coleni asked.

"Interesting question, Coleni. Killing you would not put me in danger from retaliation from Hermania, for they probably want you dead anyhow. My Order would not condone the death of a wild sorceress unless you threatened them, but they would not move against me either. You have no friends in the world, so killing you would appear not to be a risk to me.

"Yet there is a risk, Novice, a very big risk. If you can find Pleates' source mine, then you could find others. Your guarantee is I would not want to lose such a valuable asset. If you don't find it, I lose nothing but valuable time which will be compensated for when I do find it. I'm sure someone in Hermania knows where this mysterious valley is."

A valuable asset? Me! "And the life of my sister? What is her guarantee?"

"Your cooperation will guarantee her survival, but you only have my word on that. Why would I risk losing your talents by killing your sister? Only if you tried to cross me. Find that mine."

Coleni did not see an alternative. Her death would end this nightmare, but she didn't want Aetria to die because of her. At some point on this journey she might be able to escape and get Aetria out of Inhestia, to safety somewhere. *Where?* She couldn't say.

"I will find the mine, Magess."

That had been four days ago. Every evening her hands and feet were tied after the three women had eaten their sparse travel rations. At first light, she was awakened to wash, relieve herself, and eat, always guarded by an alert Fernonia or Magess. The two Delmathian women talked with each other, but after her initial discussion with Corerilla, neither of the women had anything to say to her except for tersely issued orders.

Coleni noticed the trees beginning to thin out, and she forced herself to focus on what was happening around her. Fernonia had stopped her horse and was turned in her saddle, staring at Coleni, a wicked grin on her face.

"Remember this place, Novice?"

The two hills, a dilapidated farm house across the field from where they sat ahorse. Coleni returned Fernonia's stare, saying matter-of-factly, "Oh, yes. The 'Battle of the Novices' site where Hermania soundly defeated Delmathia's newest sorcerers. Would you care to see where we buried your dead? Wasn't much to bury, except the arrow-filled body of your lieutenant and a few charred bones."

Fernonia spurred her horse around and galloped at Coleni's position. Coleni could not escape the swinging butt of the projector in time and she took the blow on her right shoulder. It knocked her off her mount and she crashed into the brush. She slowly got up, conscious of the deadly black hole of the projector pointing at her. She hurt from the blow and the fall but would not give the angry young woman the satisfaction of seeing her in pain. Fernonia would pay for this. Someday she would pay.

"If you children are through annoying each other, I suggest we continue on. We should be able to make the Logathian Mountains by tonight. Fernonia, please take more care in disciplining our guide. We don't want to incapacitate her now, do we?"

"No, Magess. I apologize for my over-reaction. Mount up, Novice. You and I will finish this at a later date."

* * * *

Aetria jerked awake, for what cause she didn't know. The stab of pain in her head caused stars before her eyes, and she groaned aloud. Her horse turned his head and looked at his rider, then returned his eyes to the road ahead and continued his northerly plod. *How long was I asleep this time?* Aetria removed her water bottle from its place near her saddlebags and took a long drink.

The three days' ride to get around the Hermanian outpost had taught her how far she could drive herself when led by a superb leader like the general. She found she could push herself even more with fear for her family. It was now four days since departing Inhestia, and she had not collapsed as Loreana had predicted. Not that she wasn't ready to, but using her anger at Corerilla, she burned away the utter

fatigue that constantly intruded on her mind, and she kept on going.

The water helped clear the fuzz from her mind, and she took a moment to look around her, trying to guess where she was. Lieutenant Maneles had led her out of Inhestia and around a series of paths that eventually put her on the northern road out of the training lodge. That was the direction Corerilla had been headed when last seen. Aetria told him to tell Loreana and the general when she awoke, that Aetria believed Corerilla was headed for the source mine. Why else would the Counselor kidnap Coleni? She needed a guide to the mine, and there were only two people alive who could track the new energy.

Aetria sketched out a map on how to get there and gave it to the lieutenant.

"I owe you, Lieutenant," she said as he started back to Inhestia.

"No, Ma'am, you don't. The debt is on the guard for aligning ourselves with the wrong sorcerers. There is still much to pay before we are free. Be careful, Sorceress."

She was nearing the place where the company had turned to approach the Hermanian source. She did not sense the new energy, so she knew she was still not very close to Corerilla. Perhaps the Magess was clever enough not to have taken a projector with her, but Aetria doubted it. After all, Fernonia was with her, and the lieutenant would not want to be without her weapon. The red core material that made the projector possible was unshielded by the normal green source. She should be able to sense it within a day's march or more. It was the only advantage she had over the two sorceresses.

Now, how does an Illusionist defeat two Aggressors? Good question!

* * * *

The wind that blew around the campfire was bitterly cold. Coleni sat as close to the fire as she dared. With her hands and feet tied, if a spark flew off the fire and landed on her, the most she could do was roll out of the blankets covering her to avoid being burned.

This is not the time to be visiting the Logathians.

She looked at her captors. They were huddled as close as she was, and looking as miserable. Corerilla was not young, and the rapid change in temperature must have caused her joints to ache and burn, for she was rubbing them with annoyance at the pain. Coleni thought to offer Corerilla relief by using the healing skills she had learned in the penal camp, but dismissed the thought as foolish. The kindness would be lost on the witch.

"I hope Pleates' valley is warmer than this," Corerilla complained.

"It is not. This is the lowest elevation of the Logathians we will cross. It might be wise to stop in the next village to acquire winter clothes and snow equipment."

"We will not be in Hermania that long, Novice."

"And how long will that be, Magess?" Coleni asked, pulling her feet closer to her body.

"Long enough to confirm the mine's existence and location. If it is as rich as Pleates believed, I should be able to mine enough red source material to outfit a hundred projectors very quickly. With that many weapons, I will be invincible to any army close enough to try to stop me. I will take and hold that valley, consolidate my gains, and recruit more troops to be ready to begin a campaign in the spring."

Coleni was amazed by the brashness of the Magess. "You talk like you have been a general all your life. Is this military wisdom coming from the Novice lieutenant sitting by your side? If so, I might point out some problems with your plan."

The lieutenant by Corerilla's side glared at Coleni and reached for the staff of the projector. Corerilla stopped the guard's hand movement with a murmured word.

"Are you telling me you have an interest in your future beyond finding the mine? You would improve my plan for me! Go ahead and point out my problems."

"For starters, it takes time to mine the material. For that, you need engineers and miners. I don't think there are any among the three of us. From Aetria's description of what she saw, the material is not lying around waiting to be picked up."

"Your thinking is sound, Coleni, but I have an answer for that. I will wait to tell you until you are finished."

Corerilla is actually enjoying this. "Once you have the material, you will have to manufacture the weapons, melt the material into shape and size, and assemble the projectors. This will take a lot of time, engineers, and craftsmen."

"Go on," Corerilla said, smiling. Fernonia was smiling as well, as if the two of them shared a joke. Coleni wondered if she was the punch line.

"Then, assuming you have the weapons, you need weaponeers. There are not a hundred Aggressors in the Hermanian and Delmathian armies combined, let alone that many in either of the two countries. Where are you going to get the Aggressors?"

"For someone of your limited training and experience, Novice Coleni, you show a very good grasp of the situation. It is somewhat arrogant of you to think I would not have considered these problems and not thought of the solutions already. My plan is more mature than you give it credit for. I find that comforting, Lieutenant Fernonia! If Novice Coleni doesn't believe in it, then it is likely none of her superiors would either."

"You make a most excellent point, Magess," Fernonia said.

"I cannot speak for your superiors, Counselor Corerilla, but if I were you, I would still worry a lot about Magess Chalinee."

Corerilla laughed, Fernonia joining in quickly. "Magess Chalinee will not be a problem for long, if she is not dead already. You don't think I would allow her to return to Hermania with what she heard at the hearing—a source mine in her own country waiting to be tapped! You are not as clever as I thought, Novice."

Let her underestimate Chalinee. Who is the one being arrogant here, now?

"As for your mining concerns, I have a complete cadre of engineers and miners waiting for my call. I won't need them to mine the initial material because Lieutenant Fernonia here will blast away enough of the rock to expose all the core material we will need. The weapons are already made, Novice. Engineer Aristes may have thought he had the only design available, but he was wrong—the way his thinking has been most of his life. My cadre has over a hundred weapons ready for the core material, and thanks to

your help, the new weapons are being modified according to Aristes' latest discoveries."

The shock of Corerilla's revelations took Coleni's breath away. *By the Power, the world is in trouble.*

"So you have the projectors. You don't have the Aggressor operators."

"That is a true statement. I don't have the Aggressors I need, because I don't need them. Oh, yes, I need Aggressor sorcerers to help me rule my dominion. I will train them, like I have Fernonia and others. But I don't need fully trained Aggressors to work the weapons."

"What? That is impossible," Coleni said. "Only an Aggressor can spell in the fireball or lightning bolt to start the process. Only a sorcerer can control the Power to do that."

Fernonia broke out with a loud laugh. Even with her feet tied, Coleni wanted to lash out and kick Fernonia, but she was across the campfire from her and the young sorceress couldn't reach the sniggering lieutenant.

"Now, Lieutenant, forgive our ignorant country Novice for believing what her Order teaches her. Many of our own Order still think that way. Only a few of us know the truth."

"The truth?" Coleni asked.

"The truth is that all people can control the Power to some extent. It just happens that we sorcerers have a lot more ability than our unfortunate, underdeveloped relatives do. The test we give is to find the few that can control the Power the best, not to find the ones that can control it at all.

"Haven't you wondered about all the people who don't quite make the cut-off score? I did. I found enough that I have a hundred men and women who can inject enough Power into the projectors to make them work. They don't understand how. They can't do anything more with the Power than the little they can do. They are not sorcerers, but they can make the weapons work. That is all I need them to do. I have my army, Novice. I will succeed."

* * * *

Aetria remembered falling. Her training saved her from breaking her neck, for she hooked her arm around the saddle horn, and it pulled her upright enough that she almost landed on her feet. Then her arm slipped, and she hit the rocky ground. It was cold and hard. She didn't want to move, and couldn't, so she didn't. Now she was warm, and she didn't want to move, but she opened her eyes.

Across a crackling fire from her was a Tierian man, his deep-set eyes watching her. He grunted when he saw her awake, and lifted the lid on the small pot resting in the hot coal bed next to the burning logs, ladling out a thick stew into a bowl. The smell that wafted over to her from the pot made her mouth water; her stomach seemed to jump for joy at the prospect of a hot meal. She watched as the man tore a chunk of bread from a loaf warming by the fire, and as he walked around the fire to hand it to her, she struggled upright.

"Your head! Is it better?" he said in Tierian.

Aetria touched the back of her head and surprised herself by not causing the lump there to ache by her touch. In fact, the lump seemed to be smaller. She slowly twisted her head side to side, and up and down, waiting for the stab of pain that always brought. No pain? A sigh of relief escaped her lips.

She smiled at the man and said in Tierian, "Much better. Thank you. Your work?"

The man switched to Delmathian. "If you keep your eyes and mind open, you can learn many things in this life. There are many curious things to know. Such as why a Delmathian Captain of Cavalry travels in Hermania almost dead from exhaustion and a serious head wound, and speaks Tierian, albeit poorly."

The stew was warm, not hot. It seemed to flow through her mouth and into her stomach, and she couldn't stop shoveling it in. Swallowing a large mouthful, she started to speak and belched instead. The man roared with laughter and slapped his leg with his large hand. Aetria giggled, wiping her lips with her right sleeve.

"Slowly, my Captain, there is plenty more. Some wine to wash it down and give yourself time to breathe?" He pointed to a metal cup warming in the ashes on her side of the fire. She picked it up and drank slowly. The wine was sweet, heavy, and smooth. The fumes of the warm liquid filled her nostrils, and she could smell a slight sharpness over the fruitiness of the wine. Aetria looked up at the man with a question in her eyes. Had he just drugged her?

"You smell the healing herbs, Captain 'who wears the Tierian daggers.' If I wanted you for any purpose other than as you are now, I had plenty enough chances before you awoke. My name is Tierii Delnos Pathla m'Lothur. I am at your service."

"I am Tierii Aetria Menhala v'Grelnes. I am indebted to you, Delnos."

"More than you know, daughter of Grelnes. Why are you here in the Logathians, a long way from Torrelon?"

He knows my father! Why am I so surprised by that? Does every Tieri know my father?

"I am searching for my sister. Have you heard or seen anything?"

Delnos reached behind the log he sat on and picked up a piece of firewood, carefully adding it to the fire. He stood up and walked around the fire to retrieve her empty bowl, filling it again from the pot and returning it to her.

"Late yesterday evening, three women dressed in black purchased several pack animals from a stable I provide veterinary service to. They were less than friendly and did not offer the usual exchange of current news with my customer. One spoke Hermanian flawlessly, the others nary a word. My customer was very curious about them and was eager to find out from me when I arrived this morning if I had heard anything about them in my travels. I had not, until now. The one who spoke Hermanian is your sister?"

Aetria finished the second bowl, wiping the sauce out of it with a piece of the soft inside of her bread and popping the soggy morsel into her mouth. "Are you guessing or telling me, Delnos of the Clan Pathla?"

The big man grinned at her. "No guess, Aetria. It is known among my people that the daughter of Grelnes has a Hermanian twin. She and her friends must be north of us on this road, for there is no other way out of this valley but past us. They are probably a day's ride ahead of us."

How long have the Tierians known I had a twin? "She is not with friends, Delnos. She is in grave danger. I must leave now to help her."

"I understand. I will saddle a fresh mount for you, for your horse is in nearly as bad shape as you were. He will take much longer to heal than you, for my skills are not as good with animals as they are with people." Delnos laughed heartily. "Funny that I cure sick animals for my living and they are my worst customers. But your sorcerers will not abide a Tierian non-sorcerer Healer, so I do what I can do. Now let us get you on the road, Aetria, Captain of Cavalry."

* * * *

Aetria had been sensing the presence of the new energy for hours. One source of the new energy was moving; the other, much stronger one was not. Aetria recognized the stronger as the source mine. She had not picked up the weaker one until now because the mine's strength was so great she could barely distinguish the weaker one moving towards the larger. The smaller one must be Fernonia's weapon.

Coleni is leading Corerilla to the mine. What is driving my sister to do such a rash thing? Is she doing it voluntarily or under duress? Am I up against two Aggressors with support of an Illusionist, or do I count on Coleni for help?

She had stopped her horse by the river that flowed out of Pleates' valley when she sensed the moving source. She now had a problem she had not thought of earlier. *Is Coleni working with Corerilla?*

Her sister had made the purchase of the pack animals. She could have made some effort to alert the stable owner she was being held against her will, but she didn't. She seemed to be aiding the Aggressors.

If she was working with them, Coleni had the ability to sense Aetria's stored Power and could alert Corerilla. If she Powered down to prevent that, she would only have her defensive skills to take on three Powered sorcerers.

What do I do?

Darkness was falling fast as it does in the mountains. The high ridges of the mountains blocked the sun's light as it set, and deep shadows developed quickly in valleys. She didn't think Corerilla would attempt the mine until morning. Climbing the steep hill leading to its entrance in the dark was not easy, even for the younger women. That meant they would most likely camp out in the trees below. She was still four to five hours away from them, out of Coleni's sensing range. She had eight hours of darkness to work with. If she waited several hours, maybe Coleni would be asleep and not monitoring for stored Power. Then she might be able to get close enough to strike before discovered. It was a chance.

Aetria was exhausted. The rest and stew of a day ago, and the unexplained magic of the Tierian, were wearing off. She dismounted and led her horse over to a large rock sitting in a tiny glade of high grass. The horse lowered her head and began to feed. Aetria sat down on the rock and put her aching head in her hands, elbows propped on her knees.

Am I thinking clearly? she asked herself.

How can I be? she answered.

* * * *

Primed and ready to cast the most magnificent spell of her career, Aetria strode confidently to the crest of the hill overlooking the battle raging below. To her right cantered the 23rd Kelrossian Lancers, preparing to charge. On her left were the elite Royal Guard, ready to supply the crushing blow to the Hermanian front lines before her. In front of her was the bespelled squadron of cavalry she had previously conjured for this most grand diversion of hers. She turned and looked behind her at the small group of black-robed Magi watching her from a not too distant hill.

Raising her arms, she summoned the Power and cast the spell, pouring every ounce of energy she could into the illusion. She felt the surge go through her as the Power shot out and the spell blossomed into being. With horror, she watched the glamor fall from the be-spelled squadron as it became the herd of cows that it was. The glory and grandeur disappeared from the assembled armies, and the power of truth exposed all for what it was. She looked down at her body and saw a sad, frightened little girl clutching a stuffed toy dragon, and she began to cry.

The Hermanian army sent up a wild cheer and began their attack. The Kelrossian Lancers wheeled in anger and ran. Their leader charged directly for her, his lance pointed at her heart. She hugged the dragon to her and begged him, "Save me, Rajii, save me." The thunder of the horse was upon her, the gleaming silver of the lance point at her heart.

"The projector weapon is still exposed, Little One. Why?" Rajii said.

* * * *

Aetria jerked awake, almost falling off the rock and startling the horse, which whinnied in protest. "Not that cursed dream again. How long was I asleep?"

She looked around in the darkness, the stars shining brightly in the clear mountain air. The moon was peeking over one of the mountain ridges.

"No more than an hour," she told herself aloud. Standing slowly, she walked over to her horse to steady her, patting the horse's neck reassuringly. "Sorry, girl. It is a bad dream I used to have back at Inhestia. I always awake before the lance kills me. And Rajii said ... Wait a moment. Rajii never spoke before. He said, 'The projector weapon is still exposed. Why?' Why, indeed? That's it. If Coleni is working for them, she would have gotten rid of the weapon to prevent me from tracking them. Thank you, Rajii, wherever you are."

She mounted her horse and started up the narrowing river to the mine.

* * * *

Aetria watched the three women in black labor up the hill to the mine. She was lying on a small ledge to the right and above the entrance, her position shielded by rocks and shrubbery. With all the energy pouring from the mine, she had risked a hiding spell as well. The women had to watch their foot placement very carefully and were not spending much time looking up into the harsh morning sunlight.

Fernonia was flanking Coleni, slightly behind her and to Coleni's left. If Coleni had tried to drop down on the women behind her, she would only have collected Corerilla on the way down. Fernonia had learned a lot in her short period of time with the guard.

"Stop a moment, Novice. I must catch my breath," Corerilla said. While the older woman braced herself with a rod made from a sapling, Coleni looked up the hill at the mine entrance, gauging the distance remaining. Her eyes looked up and locked on to Aetria's position. A slight smile flitted for a moment across her lips. She turned and started to her left toward Fernonia.

"She said to stop, Novice, not move around and stir up gravel to fall on her." Fernonia had been leaning on her projector weapon, but now had it swinging in Coleni's direction. Coleni stopped.

"Standing where I was, I was doing just that, Lieutenant. However, I will do as you wish."

"Now that we are almost there, you are thinking cooperation is a good idea? I wish you had made up your mind days earlier," the lieutenant said testily.

Corerilla waved them upward with a sweep of her arm and a grunt.

They made it to the entrance shortly thereafter and disappeared inside. Aetria could hear them talking, the sound of their voices echoing off the walls of the mine. She scanned the approach to the hill from the women's camp once more to ensure no one was watching, then began her journey downward to the mouth of the mine. She reached the floor level without causing rock and dirt to fall down the steep slope and warn the women in the mine.

A quick glance around the corner showed them near the very back of the mine, looking at the exposed shield material. They were close to where Alicia's body had been. She slipped into a small grotto on the right side of the entrance, the better to hear them talking.

"Fireballs are not going to blast away this rock, Counselor," Coleni said, poking a finger into the black crystalline flakes coating the walls. "It looks like something a lot hotter than a fireball has scorched this place in the past."

"Did I say she was going to use fireballs to blast loose the core material? How presumptuous of you," Corerilla retorted.

She nodded at Fernonia, who moved over to the wall and found a spot to sit against it as she moved a pouch from behind her back and began to search inside it. Coleni looked at Corerilla quickly and noted with disappointment that the Magess was watching her instead of the lieutenant. Fernonia pulled out several plates of black material and put them on the floor.

"Since you and your sister were nice enough to discover the timing problem with the weapons, all the lieutenant has to do to make her weapon explode is increase the shield material inside. We put the weapon in the crevasse over there where we can see a vein of source material and spell in a fireball. The weapon explodes, and we—I mean you and the lieutenant—harvest the material."

Coleni looked into the crevasse Corerilla had mentioned and sensed the outflow of new energy, revealing the presence of the red source material. "And what if her weapon causes the whole mine to explode with it? There is that possibility, Magess."

Dismissing the thought with a flip of her hand, Corerilla said rather coolly, "My son didn't think so, and he used a much bigger red source to make this hole. If it does, then my plans to rule Delmathia, Hermania, and the rest of the world will be finished. We will be dead. Your sister will be executed, and the Order will muddle along into obscurity as it is now. A very dull future. I would not want to be part of it. So we will explode the weapon and take our chances. Don't you agree, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, Magess. I will be ready in just a few moments."

* * * *

Aetria felt the cold edge of a knife press gently against her throat and she felt a hand grip her armor at the back of her neck. "Don't move, Aetria, and you may still live a few moments more." The voice was hoarse, garbled, almost impossible to understand. She froze.

* * * *

A commotion at the entrance of the mine made Coleni look in that direction. She was shocked to see

Aetria slowly walking toward them, a tall figure behind her pushing her by the back of her armor.

A knife at her throat! The man is Pleates!

* * * *

"Well, my son, I am glad you decided to join us. And you brought a friend! Sorceress Aetria, you are supposed to be locked up in Inhestia awaiting execution. I see my loyal troops are not so loyal. That is a problem I will have to take care of as soon as I finish here. I should have listened to you and assumed she would escape.

"Pleates, my dear, how clever you were to Power down so these troublesome sisters could not detect you. Needless to say you must be very careful with Aetria. You have disarmed her, haven't you? You know what she can do with those wicked little daggers of hers."

Pleates stopped Aetria a few paces away from his mother. His response, coming from behind her, was a combination of a coarse growl and a laugh. She felt a stinging at her throat as Pleates pressed the blade inward, and for a moment thought her throat was being cut. Pleates did not complete the cut, growling in her ear, "Not yet, Aetria, but soon."

She felt what had to be blood dripping warmly down her neck, sliding past her armor and between her breasts. She watched as Fernonia stopped opening her weapon, putting the pieces on the ground by her feet, and moved toward her. In moments, she was stripped of her wrist daggers and sword. The lieutenant tossed them toward the mine entrance, where they fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Thank you, Fernonia, I feel so much safer now you have pulled Aetria's fangs. Please step over here by me. Pleates, move away from Aetria, but keep her covered with your weapon. Carefully, son! She is very quick with her feet and hands. Move over by me. That's it. Very good."

Aetria was now isolated, weaponless, her back to the wall of the mine a few feet away. Coleni stood to her left, the center of attention for Fernonia, whose sword was covering her sister. Pleates was watching her very intently. She could now see the badly healed wound in his throat, his voice box horribly mutilated by her dagger. His eyes were filled with such a hatred for her that she wondered what kept him from killing her. Corerilla stood between them, looking from her son to Aetria, as a cat would watch her kitten worry and threaten a mouse.

When is she going to turn him loose?

"First things first. Aetria, you are the easiest of my problems to take care of, so I will fix that right now." Corerilla hit her with a lightning bolt, knocking her backward into the stone wall. She didn't feel any pain, even after colliding with the wall and careening off the jagged rocks, because the bolt had numbed her. When she hit the rocky floor, she did not feel that either. She lay there, staring out at the feet of Corerilla, stunned, unable to move, but still hearing the witch.

I have been here before.

She heard Coleni's yelp of fright and Fernonia's order to stand still. She couldn't see her sister.

Do what she says, Coleni. One of us has to live. Aetria willed her sister to understand her unspoken plea.

"Now is the time to make your decision, Coleni. I have no doubt that Aetria's misdirected concern for

the people, her vaunted honor, and her sickly sweet goodness would prevent her from ever joining me in my conquest of the land. I don't need her if I have you, and I don't need you since I have my son. You do have talents that would be useful to me, and your shared talents for detecting the core material would make his work a lot easier. I am willing to have you join us. You have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

"Your life in Hermania is worthless. No Order will ever let you be a sorceress again. You have no family that cares for you, except for a sister you hardly even knew who killed your lover. You could have great power and wealth if you join me. I could train you to become a powerful Magess, head of my Illusionists. You could do whatever your passions drove you to do. You desire Aggressors; my son would not be displeased to pleasure you, I'm sure. His voice does not work so well, but I think the rest of him will function. Just think of what that union might create! You would be free to rule your own life, just as long as your actions don't interfere with me. Make your decision, Coleni."

The numbness was wearing off. Aetria felt the presence of Power radiating through her and realized her head was resting on the source of it. The confusion she was feeling was not just due to being stunned. She willed her arms to move and managed to roll onto her back. The movement caused the others to look at her. She twisted her head to look at her sister. Coleni was staring at her, indecision in her eyes. Aetria tried to speak, but only a groan escaped her lips.

"What about Aetria?" Coleni asked fearfully.

Corerilla put her hands on her hips and sighed in exasperation. "Now I know you want her to be spared, but she has been such a problem. First, she almost kills my son. If one of the assassins had not been trained in rudimentary healing, Pleates would be dead now.

"Then she gets that General Borlock curious about the business of the Order, and the general begins to poke around in areas she should not. Between the general and Aetria, the two of them managed to severely undermine my influence with the Council by making me look foolish during the hearing.

"Finally, she kills the only guide I had to find my son when she tossed one of her nasty knives into Sergeant Ventler. He was going to take me to this mine. I had to move my entire plan's time schedule up by grabbing you to find the mine for me. I now no longer have the possibility of returning to Inhestia and taking up where I left off because you and she interfered with my plan to get rid of the lot of you. No, Aetria must pay the price for her interference."

Easing herself up until she was sitting upright, Aetria looked down to where her head had been lying and saw the green of a source. It was Alicia's missing student source! The leather thong used to hang it around the neck was coiled around it like a tiny snake. Aetria looked groggily at Coleni, catching her eyes, then looked back quickly at the source. Coleni followed her eyes, saw, and looked away, nodding her head.

"Since Aetria is feeling better and is now aware of what is about to happen, perhaps she would like to give you a counter argument to plead for her life. Would you like that, my dear soon-to-be dead Sorceress?"

Aetria nodded. She coughed once and moved her tongue around in her mouth trying to get moisture to her lips. She weakly said to Coleni, "You can put the monster back in her cage, Coleni."

"Now you are calling me names, Aetria. Kill her, Pleates."

Snatching up the source, Aetria tossed it at Corerilla. Fernonia just as quickly grabbed it in mid-air before it hit the Magess. It dangled on its leather strap.

"A student source? What is this?" Fernonia laughed out.

Pleates looked at Fernonia, and seeing Coleni start to point at the source, croaked out, "No!" He threw his knife.

Coleni shot a lightning bolt into the source. It was the largest bolt she had ever spelled, but it did the job. The source exploded.

Just managing to cover her face with her arms, Aetria felt the blast the least because she was sitting on the ground. She was shoved violently against the wall behind her once more and this time felt the pain.

The explosion deafened her, and as she rolled over, she could not see through the choking cloud of smoke and dust created by the detonation. She crawled to where she hoped Coleni was and found her sister flat on her back. Her eyes were open, staring into nothingness. Pleates' knife was buried in her heart.

"Power, no," she wailed, grabbing the knife and pulling it free. She pulled the bottle Loreana had given her from her pouch and tried to pour its contents into Coleni's mouth. The liquid filled her sister's mouth and spilled over her lips, and Aetria saw that Coleni was not breathing, for the liquid just stayed pooled in her sister's mouth.

In sitting up, sharp pains shot up from her back and sides, and Aetria gasped in agony.

"Oh, Rajii, help me." She summoned the Power and sent it surging out from her grid, putting all she had into one last Healing spell for Coleni.

Aetria pitched forward onto her sister, unconscious.

EPILOGUE

She was nestled between Rajii's front legs, leaning up against his broad chest. His armored scales felt soft to her, and she could hear the beating of his huge heart, so constant and reassuring. They were in her favorite glade—the glade she had made for him in her favorite forest. It was the glade where she had met the Other.

"Rajii, when is she coming?" Aetria asked her dragon.

The dragon looked around them, his eyes searching the void beyond the glade, and he sighed a sad sigh. Aetria looked up at him and watched a tiny tear fall from his large eyes. How could eyes so huge cry such a small tear? she wondered.

"I see no path for her, Little One."

Aetria sat upright, alarmed at his words that suddenly put meaning to his tear.

"No!" she cried, jumping up from between his sheltering feet, the fierce long talons intertwined to keep her safe. She raced to the edge of the glade and began a frantic search for the path. She found her own path, glowing and alive, with tiny lights darting back and forth along the path. It was where it should be.

She raced along the perimeter of the glade, calling for the Other, searching for her path. It was not there.

"I'll share," she wailed at Rajii. "Tell me where to share," she begged her dragon. He only laid his long snout on his front feet and breathed out a tendril of smoke that wafted across the glade and disappeared into the void.

She burrowed past his face scales, under his horrid fangs and into her safe haven, where she cried her heart out against his blue-green breast. The soothing noises he tried to make sounded like a lion's snarl, but she felt better after a while.

Then she got mad and punched her dragon, pummeling his protective scales with her little fists.

"You said you would protect us, Rajii. You promised," she said angrily.

"We both did all we could do, Little One."

"It wasn't enough, dragon."

Rajii raised his head to look down at his tiny burden, her eyes all red from crying, her lips curled in anger at him. "For so very many of your kind, your concept of enough is so limited you will always believe there is more. And you are not happy thinking you could have it. There are a few of you who understand enough and are content with its vastness, knowing it will meet your needs."

"Where is her path, Rajii?"

"I don't know, Aetria. It does not touch my heart anymore."

* * * *

"She is awakening, Sonja."

The general moved to the chair by Aetria's bed and sat down, taking the Sorceress' hand in her own rough one and massaging it gently. Aetria's eyes fluttered open, seeing, but not seeing.

"Welcome back, Captain."

"What? Where ... where am I?" Aetria whispered, her voice hoarse and weak.

Sonja squeezed Aetria's hand, giving physical presence to help the Sorceress' senses locate her in the confused world of Aetria's mind. "You are in the Healer's ward of Chalinee's lodge. You have broken ribs, numerous cuts and bruises, your hair is the shortest it has ever been, but most importantly, you are alive."

"My hair?" Aetria raised her right hand to her head and felt the stubble of hair that remained.

"Sing'd off by the explosion's fireball. Do you remember the explosion?"

"Coleni! A knife stuck in Coleni's heart. I tried to save her, but..."

The distress in Aetria's voice hurt even the hardened Sonja. Loreana moved up beside the general and cast a calming spell on Aetria. The Sorceress' breathing slowed; her grief-contorted facial muscles relaxed.

"Peace, Aetria, peace," the Healer crooned. Her spell could not stop the tears that flowed from Aetria's eyes, and Loreana thought about putting her patient into a deeper coma to keep the young woman from sinking into the same kind of misery her sister Coleni had suffered so many months ago. The general acted before she could.

"Captain Aetria, I need your report of what happened right now! You are well enough to talk, and I have been waiting patiently, but time is running out."

Harsh words, thought Loreana, but she seems to be responding.

Aetria struggled to sit up. Sonja adjusted the pillows to assist her chief advisor, hoping the call to duty she had challenged Aetria with would snap the scrappy young woman out of her mourning.

"Yes, Ma'am, the explosion." Aetria's mind did not want to think of the explosion. It was fixed on Coleni lying there with that horrid knife in her chest. She blinked her eyes, as if shutting out the daylight from the room would change the inner vision in her mind.

"The explosion, Captain. What caused the explosion?"

"Alicia's source. If you inject a spell into a student source, it explodes. I threw the source at Corerilla, Fernonia caught it in mid-air, and Coleni hit it with a lightning bolt."

"I thought Illusionists could not do Aggressor spells," Sonja said, looking at Loreana.

Before the Healer could answer, Aetria's strengthening voice said, "They can't, but Coleni was a wild sorceress like me. She learned the spell from Lornes. Pleates? And the others?"

"Very dead, for certain. Their charred and broken bodies were the first things Lieutenant Maneles found when he entered the mine. Adept Loreana confirmed their deaths after she had taken care of you."

"But why was she there? Why are you here? What—"

"My, we are full of questions, aren't we, Sorceress? Loreana was there because she was taking care of me. I was there because I wanted to capture that witch myself and bring her to justice. Lieutenant Maneles was there because the Council ordered the Sorcerer Guard to assist me. Now, let's make sense of what I just said. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Ma'am." Aetria focused her wandering mind on the general, trying to banish Coleni's unseeing eyes from her mind.

"The morning you 'escaped,' I awoke to find my command in complete turmoil. I had to fight off Adept Loreana's attempts to keep me stationary and managed to get Council Leader Meldoran admitted to my quarters. The Royal Guards were not allowing any sorcerers but Loreana near me. I told him what happened at Trelana's—who is doing well and sends her love—and ordered the arrest of Corerilla. He was very embarrassed by his Counselor's actions and had the unfortunate task of telling me she was 'absent' from Inhestia. I would still be yelling at him if the pain in my head had not stopped me.

"I suspect Corerilla knew no one would really believe you tried to kill me once I awoke and was able to tell my story. She made her exit as fast as she could. I believe she would have loved to have finished Trelana and me off after killing you, thus making her story believable. And it would have gained her a lot

of time to complete her plans. As it was, it took more time than I cared for to organize the pursuit, part of which the Sorcerer Guard spent figuring out their loyalties."

"Since he is here in command, then Corerilla's threat to take over Inhestia is past?" Aetria asked.

"Not quite. I sent Lieutenant Maneles and his men after you as soon as I could, hoping they would catch up with you and assist in running down Corerilla. The rest of us followed as fast as I could convince Loreana to let me travel. I must have trained you too well because you managed to get here before they could catch up with you. They were in the midst of capturing Pleates' band of Assassins when you blew up the mine."

Aetria frowned, asking, "Pleates' band of Assassins?"

"Obviously, Pleates did not die at the tavern. He would have, but one of the Assassins was a failed Novice Healer who took more pleasure in taking lives than saving them. You have heard his name, Sergeant Graner. Graner was smart enough to save Pleates' life, and Pleates recruited him to join Corerilla's plot to take over Delmathia, or as I suspect, the known world. They evaded the search parties I sent after them and traveled to the mine valley. Pleates sent Ventler back to Chalinee to spy for him and keep track of what the Hermanians were doing. He later carried the 'condemning' letter to Corerilla and was to lead her to Pleates, but we all know what happened to that plan."

Loreana could see Aetria was tiring from the conversation. Awakening from such a traumatic experience as she had had, and finding her world in chaos, was draining on her patient. She caught Sonja's eye and signaled the need to stop.

The general nodded in response. Aetria caught the interplay between the two women and quickly asked another question.

"You answered 'not quite' to my question about Corerilla's threat to take over Inhestia. Is there still a threat?"

"Yes. We have learned from a relative of yours that Corerilla has a small army of sorcerers that has to be disbanded, and a number of co-conspirators to find. Her tendrils of dissatisfaction have reached deeply into your Order, and there are non-sorcerers willing to aid the ambitious sorcerer who would step into her now-vacant place. There is a lot of work to be done."

Is my father telling the general this? How involved is he in the affairs of Delmathia? "A relative of mine?" she asked.

Loreana walked to the side of the bed opposite Sonja and sat down on its edge. Aetria looked at her in confusion, for Loreana was smiling in reassurance, but crying at the same time.

"Aetria, after what you have seen, and been through, this is going to be hard to tell you, but—"

"Coleni is dead. Is that what you are trying to tell me? You have avoided saying anything about her. Rajji said the path was gone. Is that why?"

"No, I don't know why."

Aetria looked toward the foot of her bed where the voice had come from and saw Coleni standing there, propped up by Chalinee's arm around her waist.

My sister—alive! But how?

The general stood and helped Chalinee move Coleni to the vacant chair. Coleni refused to sit until she had held her sister, and the two women collapsed into each other's arms with sobs and cries of joy. Sonja and Chalinee waited until the sisters had expended the emotion of their reunion before settling Coleni into the waiting chair.

Beaming radiantly, the pain and sorrow erased from her face, Aetria looked at Loreana and started to ask the question the Healer knew now was foremost in the young sorceress' mind.

"I told you I was reluctant to teach you a healing spell, for with your lack of control, you would turn a toothache cure into a resurrection spell. And you did."

* * * *

She watched the cavalry squadron trotting briskly up to the crest of the hill, and the lone figure at its head pull off the trail and face back towards Inhestia. The sun glinted off the armor of the figure, making it easy to spot the final farewell wave of the rider. She responded, but it was unlikely Coleni would see her; sitting in the shade of the trees by her grassy knoll, she would blend too well into the background of the mountain. The rider wheeled and galloped after the squadron as it went over the crest.

Aetria wiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand, then dried her fingers on her robe. It had been a short six months for Aetria. As she watched the dust cloud kicked up by the departing squadron drift with the wind into the tree line on the crest of the hill, Aetria's mind raced back to the time she had spent recovering from her wounds at Wendelia.

With Loreana's and the Hermanian Healers' care, she was ready to travel within two weeks. After a week she was able to limp around on a quick tour of Coleni's training lodge. The bareness of the lodge and its severe austerity made her appreciate Inhestia even more. The coldness of the reception Coleni got from her former teachers made Aetria very concerned for her sister. Coleni's status at Wendelia was one of guest only.

When it came time to leave, Chalinee was very reluctant to let Coleni return with them to Inhestia. She insisted Coleni was a Hermanian subject and still a member of her Order. Sonja countered that Coleni was still a lieutenant of the calvary in her army, and her aide-de-camp. It became a test of the wills of these very determined women, but Sonja had the upper hand if she chose to evoke the peace treaty. She did not.

In private conversation with Chalinee, the general got the Magess to admit she could not guarantee the Hermanian Order would not punish Coleni for her wild magic. Chalinee, for all her hardness, liked and respected Coleni and knew the probable outcome if the Novice went to trial. When presented with the choice of staying or going, Coleni chose the one path that offered the least risk to her: to remain with Sonja. Chalinee gave in and let Coleni leave, but not before stripping her of her Novice status. Coleni was heartbroken.

Aetria sighed as she remembered the days of unhappiness that followed their return to Inhestia. The first few weeks were spent recuperating from their physical injuries and Coleni's depression over being banned from practicing magic. Aetria told her sister that being banned in Hermania did not mean she couldn't use Power in Delmathia, but it was a question the Council would have to take up.

The Council's judgment was still not pronounced as the general, with support from the Council, was

busy rounding up Corerilla's small army of neo-Aggressors. The majority of them surrendered very quickly when they found out the fate of their leader, but several dozen took to the wilderness with their unpowered weapons. Several more weeks went by before the general returned to Inhestia, having chased the neo-Aggressors, but failing to catch them.

The Council met, with Mage Kelristo acting as Counselor. Trelana and the general gave testimony to that fateful night's events, and Coleni told of Corerilla's boasted plans. The fact Corerilla had recruited failed applicants was very disturbing to the Council. The hearing would have been bogged down in trying to figure out how to deal with the problem of the neo-Aggressors, but Sonja cut short the discussion by pointing out the threat to the king's rule. The problem was now one the king must solve.

This led to a very lively discussion about who had jurisdiction over the neo-Aggressors. Kelristo saved the general from a protracted argument with the Council by reminding everyone of their purpose that day—to decide what to do with their wild Sorceress.

Aetria smiled, feeling again the relief in her heart when Magess Trelana stood before the Council and stated the judgment she thought fitting. It was so outlandish, considering the Council's normal way of thinking, that several members sputtered and gasped in astonishment. Then they agreed. Advance Aetria to Adept. Trelana told them that, no matter how one tried to state what Aetria had done, she had, in fact, advanced the use of Power. That she broke a few rules was also true, but she saved the Order in doing so. Her actions had given the Council enough research topics to last most of their lifetimes. Kelristo alone had enough to study that he would have to double his staff and he needed to get started immediately because the solution to the neo-Aggressors' problems lay within his area of expertise.

While the Council was thinking over what she had said, Trelana brought Coleni into the picture by pointing out that she also had been instrumental in advancing their knowledge and proven herself worthy of praise. Trelana then proposed that the Council grant Coleni status as a Sorceress. The Council balked at her proposal. Aetria remembered feeling hurt, then angry that they would refuse her sister.

Sonja spoke from her chair, as if talking to herself, saying that there were only two people in Delmathia who could find the new energy. What a shame one of them was a Hermanian who had been banned from her homeland. Perhaps Saphradea or another country might find her services useful? The Council reconsidered. Coleni was offered a place in the Order as Sorceress.

With the onset of winter, and the frigid cold one expected to have in a mountain valley, Inhestia nestled down into a warm building-bound community. The next five months were a blur of activity for Aetria and Coleni.

Loreana was released from the army to assist Kelristo in a study of grid burnout and the mental paths Aetria and Coleni had developed.

Brusilla was asked to return to Inhestia to assist them, and she came willingly, turning over her village healing duties to Verdilan. The two sisters became the focal point of the Healer community.

When the snows melted and the first hints of spring weather arrived, it became time for Coleni to leave. The general had promoted her to fill Aetria's place as chief advisor with the rank of Captain of Cavalry, then ordered she spend the winter at Inhestia and participate in Kelristo's study. When spring arrived and it was possible to travel in the mountains, Coleni was to lead an exploration party for any yet undiscovered source deposits.

Sonja believed the heavily guarded mines were safe from the neo-Aggressors' attack at present, but if

they could find new sources of the red core material, they could become a very serious problem very quickly. Coleni agreed. Now she was gone with her cavalry escort.

"Adept?"

Looking around at the Healer Novice, Aetria smiled and said, "Is it time for the experiment?"

"Yes, Ma'am, it is," Carleena said, stepping aside as the Adept walked past her to take the path back to Inhestia.

"Then let us begin, for the fate of the world lies in its success."

Margaret L. Carter

Marked for life by reading *Dracula* at the age of twelve, Margaret L. Carter specializes in the literature of fantasy and the supernatural, particularly vampires. She received degrees in English from the College of William and Mary, the University of Hawaii, and the University of California, with her dissertation published as *Specter or Delusion? The Supernatural in Gothic Fiction*. Her other works include *Dracula: The Vampire and the Critics*, *The Vampire In Literature: A Critical Bibliography*, and *Different Blood: The Vampire As Alien*. She is also the author of a werewolf novel, *Shadow Of The Beast*, and four vampire novels, *Dark Changeling* (2000 Eppie Award winner in Horror), *Child Of Twilight*, *Sealed In Blood*, and *Crimson Dreams*, along with a fantasy novel, *Wild Sorceress*, co-written by her husband Les Carter, and a horror novel, *From The Dark Places*.

Margaret and Les, a retired Navy Captain, have four sons and several grandchildren. For fans of "Vamp Tales," please do not hesitate to visit her website:

The Vampire's Crypt at:
members.aol.com/MLCVamp/vampcrpt.htm

AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

Quality Books, Print And Electronic

Horror

Romance

Fantasy

Mainstream

Young Adult

Science Fiction

Suspense/Thriller

Action/Adventure

Non-Fiction

Paranormal

Historical

Western

Mystery

Erotica

Buy Direct And Earn Free Books!

www.amberquill.com

Visit www.amberquill.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.

This eBook copyrighted. See the first page of this book for full copyright information.