

CHRONICLES OF INGARDE I CLOUD REALM

BY LARRY SMITH

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Dedicated to my wife Marjie without whom this book would never have been finished and with appreciation for Dave Kukla, James Cavanaugh, Bill Connors (who went on from my gaming group to work for TSR/WizardsoftheCoast on Dungeons&Dragons), Rob Caswell (who also went on to make a name for himself as a professional illustrator), Mike Dane, Bruce Lutz, and Christina and Juliet Stumph, my gamers who would often challenge me to come up with something “*really* different.”

Chronicles of Ingarde ###: TITLE

Typographic Conventions

I have tried a number of experiments in this edition of the book to make it conform with similar notions in other novels I hope to release soon. I have developed these to provide a typographic analog to the impressions certain sounds and utterances make on people. This is most obvious in the way I use certain punctuation and fonts.

The use of italics signals a change to a point of view that is very unlike human. In this volume, it is used for dragons and cloud whales. Italics are a warning that motives, feelings, and thoughts may become very different very abruptly.

The use of * and * as an alternative to double-quotes *like this* indicates a mind-to-mind communication, by magic, telepathy, or some technology permitting such a thing. Such transmissions are *private*, meaning they cannot usually be overheard by others. Kara's ability to overhear Cly talking to Kourishand in this manner is an exception that tells you something about how Kara's powers work. The hash mark (or "pound sign") # is occasionally used in words to signify parts the listener doesn't understand.

I have also made use of different fonts in the dialog. Sometimes this simply indicates a unique voice. Dragons, for instance, such as Evenshade and Cloughload, each have a different quality of voice, and the fonts are chosen to give an impression of how each one sounds relative to others. Draconic utterances usually have no quotes or asterisks since they come across in a way that makes them hard to ignore or miss. The impression is as if *both* "" and ** were being used – if the dragon *wants* you to hear, you *will*. These utterances are usually just **put in bold**.

I also use different fonts to indicate different languages or dialects in use. The default language, using the normal font, may differ from book to book since it represents the primary language of the main viewpoint – in this book, it represents Assuran, the language of the cloud whale riders, of most beings of Imri, and which also serves as a sort of pidgen for many cultures in the ring around the Great Nestick Ocean, where the action of this novel takes place. Other fonts represent other languages or dialects, and usually these are indicated when they are first used, but the convention helps with the "flavor" of the narrative when people switch languages for one reason or another. Again, the font chosen tells you something about the feel of the language and the people who use it.

One exception to the foregoing is "Truespeech," the language used for spell-casting. It is known to magic-users of various species with various languages, but the font was chosen specifically to be hard to read (though not impossible), since the language itself is actually adapted to be hard to use and (hopefully) impossible to overhear accidentally. Since text in this language usually represents a spell being cast, the actual words are meaningless (although I *have* tried to keep them consistent and mnemonic, though it should be remembered that spell-casters are trained to insert meaningless null words into spells as a way to help disguise what the words of the spell actually *are*. This is a safety feature – nothing can be more dangerous than someone mispronouncing portions of a spell they don't know how to use) so this unreadability primarily serves to give the feeling of someone having switched to something arcane, strange and not well understood by others. It is possible to use the language to just talk, and magic-users may do so, but the context (and the length of the utterances) should tell you whether trying to *actually* read it would be good idea.

Certain fonts are also associated with the "elements" – this is most obvious when Semaj converses with Droï. Fire-aspected Semaj uses a fiery font, air-aspected Droï uses one with a wind-blown look to it.

I hope that these conventions help convey some of the feelings I wish to communicate in a fashion that enhances the narrative and I also hope you feel the same, but I don't doubt some will just find the whole idea annoying. To them, all I can say is, I think the story is still worth reading.

The world the story takes place in is large and complex, and many plot features take place because of things that are important, but not general knowledge. To help in that, you can find notes at the end of the book explaining important features of the background of the story. These aren't really needed to follow the story or appreciate it, but they can enhance your understanding of just why things happen the way they do.

Finally, I want to warn you that, though each novel will stand alone, as a whole they mesh together – but *not* in a simple linear sequence. Cly's meeting with Valkenhayn, for example, is repeated in the next novel "The Crown of Krithala" – but in that, it takes place from *Valkenhayn's* point of view. Often there are subtexts or implications that can change one's perception of the purpose or tone of a scene. Many of these stories are, in fact, going on in the same time frame to various people, each of whom has their own story to tell. I hope you will find reading my experiments as entertaining as they were to write.

Larry Smith

MAP OF INGARDE NESTICK OCEAN AREA



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1. A DIFFICULT LABOR

Atho had never known such pain. Fire swept through her dorsal sails, eating its way forward, destroying everything as it went. The air was filled with the screams of living things that ran panicked through her cavernous interior. As her senses began to fade, Atho heard the Oldest Companions give up, even as she did, robbed of the will to live that she gave them. Neither she nor they were equal to this struggle, but dimly she heard and felt the Youngest Companions still fighting on with a grim, mindless ferocity that belied their intellect.

Murderous thunderheads boiled around her, jabbing with flickering bolts that seared to the bone. In the distance, the pod leaders of the Last Fleet called Atho to join them, and she knew she would – very soon. Vorchula, her uncle and companion of many years, cruised as close as he dared; whistling encouragement to the Youngest Companions who fought for their lives. . .and hers.

But it was for naught. The fire burst through fragile gas cells, burning bone now, as well as tissue. The pain was beginning to fade; the end would not be long in coming. Even the Youngest Companions began to realize, or perhaps admit, that they would not see port again in this life.

But Atho was still part of her pod. Even near as Death was now she still had responsibilities. Rousing herself with an effort, she vented gas in a great gout of flame to drop toward the stormy grey seas below. Vorchula followed, calling now to Atho's sister, Kreen, to follow them.

For a moment, Atho mourned all the children she would never carry, and sorrowed that the pod would be denied them, for they were so desperately needed. But one child already waited to enter the world through her, and perhaps she might yet save him. Atho sounded her birthing call.

Whistling in a mixture of astonishment and fear, but mindful of ties of blood and duty, Kreen dumped gas, skimming the waves below as she moved beneath Atho.

With her last strength, Atho pushed. Her weakened superstructure creaked and snapped, and flames enveloped her entire body. Kreen held position below in defiance of her own death, for she, too, was burning now. Atho pushed again, and rushed headlong into oblivion.

Kreen caught the falling bundle aft of her dorsal sail, and surged forward as burning wreckage – all that was left of her sister – fell past to crash into the pitiless sea. Buoyed by Vorchula, she strained for altitude. Lightning flashed all around them, but it seemed satisfied with the lives it

had already taken. No new fires began and the Youngest Companions had the old fires out by the time they won through to calmer skies.

Kreen gingerly probed the scorched bundle she carried. Atho's baby still lived, though sore hurt. If he had his mother's constitution, he would live, and if he lived she would honor her duty to her sister and raise him as her own. But with a breaking heart Kreen hoped he would die. The baby's aspect was fixed now for all his life – and what could the Ances-tors possibly have in store for a cloud whale born to fire?

2. A BIT OF AN ODDBALL

Dakkor the Smith heaved a heavy sigh as he tossed his hammer aside, and gazed ruefully at the ugly crack that marred the bronze wheel-rim he had been working on. Dakkor was a good smith, one of the best, from a long line of smiths, and he did not crack metal very often. But then, he did not have to work with such an inferior grade of metal very often, either. Decent metal was getting hard to come by. Shipments of any kind that traveled by anything but cloud whales were getting hard to come by, thanks to the cursed pirates. The smith sighed again as he examined the crack. Times were hard all over, the smith thought, but *really*. Still, Dakkor reminded himself, only a poor workman blames his tools, and only a worse one would blame the metal.

Taking up his tongs, Dakkor moved the offending piece back to his sturdy stone forge, and began pumping the bellows. Sparks flew, and the heat increased as the coke in the forge burned more fiercely, lighting the smithy with a ruddy glow. Dakkor pumped with strong, steady strokes, and was soon rewarded with a bright circle of soft metal. With a flourish, he moved the hoop back to the anvil and caught up his hammer. Enjoying himself despite the poor metal, he banged away at the wheel rim, reforming the hot metal with swift, sure strokes, folding and refolding it to compensate for the impurities in it. As the glow faded, he found himself squinting to see in the gathering darkness.

Darkness? Why, it wasn't even *midday* yet! Even as the realization dawned, Dakkor was turning to the big front window that provided most of the light to the smithy and dropped his hammer with a loud clang as he beheld a great eye, larger than the wheel-rim he was working on, filling the entire window! The smith dropped his hammer and stepped back, closed his eyes and shook his head, then looked again – but the apparition was still there! Grabbing up a big prying bar, he started for the front door.

The eye retreated as he burst out of the door. The owner of that great orb, already ascending tail-first into the sky as the smith skidded to a halt, was a young cloud whale, scarcely three hundred feet from nose to tail. The creature climbed less than half its own length and then leveled out and hovered over the street in front of his shop, gently waving its lateral sails in the cool noon breeze.

A small crowd had gathered on the street, and now that the cloud whale had moved, Dakkor could hear the hubbub of a dozen people exclaiming at the sight. It wasn't that cloud whales were uncommon in the skies of Downtown, they weren't. With the enormous bulk of the whale rider Cloudhome dominating the northern sky a mere dozen miles away,

the residents of Downtown could see all the cloud whales they wished without stirring from their homes. But to have one peek into the smithy, *that* warranted some discussion! Dakkor scratched his head as he looked up at the youngster and wondered what had possessed it. There were several burn scars on the beast's lower parts – not that unusual individually, but strange to find so many on such a small cloud whale. Perhaps it was sick?

No, Dakkor thought. It must have required some pretty strange contortions for the cloud whale to get that huge eye into his window. It *had* to have been deliberate.

Turning to check the front of his shop for any damage, the smith noticed his wife standing next to him, holding a spoon smeared with a red sauce she was preparing. She gave him a wide grin as he turned.

"You should've seen it! He must've spent a good twenty minutes jockeying back and forth – almost stood on his head to see inside the shop! He near put out my cook-fire!" She gestured to the little cook-cart where she worked making lunch for the quarrymen down the road. The cart was usually kept in front of the smithy, but now it was fifty yards away, parked amid an amused-sounding crowd of his wife's customers. Dakkor shook his head in disbelief.

"I guess it didn't know there was fire in the cart...or in the shop..." he paused as he noticed smoke curling up from the chimney above the smithy. Well, maybe it was too young to know.

His wife chuckled. "I think that's the same one that followed old Wenda around for a week last summer! Like to give the poor old thing a fit!"

The young cloud whale, apparently satisfied with the havoc it had caused, began to climb away into the sky, followed by a spatter of good-natured applause from the crowd of diners down the road. Dakkor and his wife, one with a shrug, the other with a grin, returned to the normal routine of their lives.

Cly walked unseeing through a riot of colors, his face intent but distracted. Crossing a sward of green grass dotted with gnarled trees, he skirted a steep bank covered with wild flowers in their hundreds of varieties, each adding its own scent to the delicate flavor of the air. Tiny, darting birds and tinier buzzing insects swarmed and danced by his head but Cly saw none of them. His feet picking out the path with no conscious direction, he strode quickly to his favorite spot, a tiny glen beside a pool of still, clear water, shaded by the twisted bole of an old dror tree. In this

private place, alone but for the furtive scurrying of little creatures disturbed by his intrusion, Cly sat down on a soft cushion of grass and moss. Propping his back against a section of the tree worn smooth as glass by generations of his ancestors who had sought this place to think on their deepest troubles, he dropped his head upon his hands.

It had been a busy week, and Cly had much to think upon. Young Droï had at last summoned his crew. Walse, his childhood companion, was now Steersman; Trock, still the object of overpowering passions in all the young male candidates, was now Trader Captain; all his other friends and schoolmates; they all had berths – and futures – aboard the newest member of the clan’s fleet of cloud whales. Droï had chosen well, and he had a fine crew, but Cly was not part of it, and that hurt. It stung. But most of all, it frightened Cly to the very core of his being.

Droï was the last cloud whale that would crew before the young magician reached his majority, and that meant Cly would soon find himself living on the ground. He tried to think coolly on the possibility, to consider it dispassionately and logically, as his Master had taught him. It couldn’t be *that* bad. After all, grounders lived on the ground and they didn’t seem to mind. Of course, they weren’t cloud whale *riders* and didn’t know any better.

Cly nervously picked at an old burn scar on the heel of his hand as he considered these bleak prospects before he realized he was no longer alone under the old dror tree. He turned to find his Aunt Maia regarding him from the other side of the trunk. Cly did not see her often, though he was fond of her and had always been comforted by her presence. A very beautiful woman in her middle years, she always seemed to be somewhere, though never anywhere in particular. But, just now, Cly wished she were somewhere else.

“Now why did I think I’d find you here, then?” she asked in her faintly archaic accent as she settled down comfortably next to him. A furry little skitling, scarcely six inches long, broke from cover as she sat and raced for safety on the far side of the pool, where it scolded the humans mightily. Maia chuckled at its temerity.

“Maybe you studied sorcery in your youth,” he said, unsmiling. Despite his fondness for Maia, Cly really needed to be alone.

“Ah! If only I had! I’d’ve made fewer mistakes in my life if I could’ve seen as a Sorceress sees. But a lot more young men would’ve been denied my favors.” The coquette shone briefly in her humor, but Cly was in no mood to be diverted by jokes.

Maia sat silently regarding Cly for several minutes before she spoke again, "I hope you don't think we would've wasted years of training on a promising young Thaumateurge just to give him to the grounders as a gift," she smiled. "Surely you respect our judgment better than that!"

It was a subject filled with new-found pain. "What else can I think? Without a berth on Droi what choice have I? Old Pa is fully crewed, so is Kreen, and Sholi doesn't want any replacements for the opening *he* has. No other cloud whales are in for crewing or due before I turn sixteen. And promising or not, I'm too young to teach so I can't get a guild post here in Cloudhome. The ground is my *only* alternative!" Frustration sharpened his tone and twisted his young face. He jerked at the name talisman on his wrist, now a badge of permanent childhood, twisting viciously at the leather thong as if that would sear into the bone disk the cloud whale name that would make it a name for a man, and not a boy.

A look of pain crossed Maia's pretty features, but she chose her next words with deliberate care. "Do you fear fire?" she asked.

Cly looked up, startled by a question straight out of the drill scroll. It was not a question he had anticipated, but his long training had already brought the correct answer to his tongue when something stopped him. He vividly recalled the Ritual of Kindling that had given him his magic – and the terrific horror that had climaxed it. Unconsciously, he clenched his fist, feeling the taut skin that had been so badly burned. He wondered if she knew what had happened, but he realized it made little difference. If he was headed for the ground anyway, he might as well speak his mind.

"It is one of the most destructive of the elements, and especially inimical to cloud whales, but I cannot truly say I fear it," he said in a far-away voice. "The grounders don't fear it, they even *use* it, sometimes in strange ways, so it can be tamed. At worst it need not be feared. Only respected." After a pause, he added, "Respected a great deal."

That attitude was quite enough to get him grounded, but Cly did not really care. He was confident enough of his analysis of the situation to realize that grounding now and grounding later were his only alternatives, and he was too grief-stricken to care about the difference.

In the silence, Cly's eyes followed the skitling, which was sniffing at a dror nut that had fallen from the tree. It braced itself and tugged furiously at the nut, but made little progress. The stem was caught between two rootlets and all the little creature's strength could not budge it.

Aunt Maia's reaction surprised him, "Good! It's always unwise to fear the unknown simply because it *is* unknown. The Ancestors oft' hide pleasant surprises among the unpleasant ones they leave for us. Too much

effort to avoid the unpleasant ones and you miss the pleasant ones, as well.”

That was quite a speech from his old Aunt, Cly knew, and she was speaking with such slow care that she must be trying to tell him something. But Cloudhome was not a place to think radical thoughts, and she was having a hard time of it.

While Cly considered her words, a second skitling, perhaps the mate of the first, emerged from the flowers on the bank of the pool and sniffed at the nut. It added its’ efforts to the enterprise but still the nut remained where it was.

Ignoring the little drama next to the pool, Cly thought carefully. Curiosity is life to a magician, and even in the depths of hopelessness, Cly had had his piqued. “What sort of pleasant surprises might I find, if I got past the unpleasant ones I found today?” he mused.

Maia seemed reluctant to go on as if she feared treading too far on dangerous ground, but at length she spoke.

“Some folks think the cloud whales believe in a sort of destiny, that no cloud whale ever exists without a purpose or a reason, and that eventually any cloud whale’s purpose will become obvious. It may be a simple purpose or a complex one, and it may be for good or ill. I don’t know if it’s true, but I can only note that there are others *besides* you who seem to have no part to play.” She fiddled with a twig as she spoke, bending it around her fingers and rubbing it in the sod, making little figures and erasing them again. It was a habit Cly had seen before when Maia thought she was failing to give comfort. Across the pool, the skitlings had ceased their efforts to move the nut and were now nosing about to see what the problem was.

Cly had listened carefully. No apprentice magician lives long without that skill. But he didn’t see what she was driving at.

“You’re referring to Semaj? But he’s *years* past crewing, and he’s probably too old now. Not to mention crazy! Didn’t you hear about that little episode last week by the grounder smithy?” Cly squeezed his thumb and forefinger together, “*That* close to crashing and burning! Even if he decided to take a crew, the initial adaptations on a cloud whale his size would take so long and be so painful he’d be off on the Wild Ride before the work was half done. He’d tear himself to shreds.” Cly folded his arms and shrugged. “Besides, we have lots more whale riders than we have whales. Even if Semaj was crewable I’d get no guarantees.”

Maia flipped the little stick into the water where it bobbed up and down with the tiny ripples of Cloudhome’s motion. She looked up with a

bright smile, but all she said was, "Don't make choices that don't need to be made, and be sure to make those that do." She nodded as if that explained everything. Reaching out to take his hand, she called him back to remaining duty. "Now, I think you have a lesson with Master Bosrin in Old Chamura, don't you?"

Cly nodded mutely, and got to his feet. Maia squeezed his hand gently and let him go. She sat and watched as he strode off, deep in thought, and nodded again, smiling to herself the secret smile that had once maddened suitors. As she looked after Cly's retreating form, her eye was drawn to a sudden flurry of motion beyond the pool. One skitling had grabbed the stem of the nut in its teeth and braced with all six legs as the other scabbled at the rootlets. Both were bowled end-over-end as the stem popped free. Triumphantly, they dragged their prize away through the flowers. Maia, amused at their antics, looked again after her "nephew."

As Cly stepped down from the path to enter a slanting passageway she saw past him to the edge of Cloudhome, where a young, flame-scarred cloud whale hovered, watching them. Maia's smile became a wide grin as she faded away, leaving the glen untenanted.

3. A DAY IN THE LIFE

Cly headed deeper into Cloudbome, sliding down treacherous footing with the ease of long experience. Pushing his way past a flap hanging from an enormous bladder, he grabbed a rope slung on the other side almost without breaking stride, and slid to the next level. Pausing a moment on a small ledge of spongy bone he looked down at Old Tochou.

Tochou had been retired to this hangar so long ago that his often-repaired structure was beginning to merge with the other retired cloud whales who formed the bulk of Cloudbome. Cly noticed the old cloud whale was tilted slightly askew, and detoured along a catwalk toward his dorsal sail. Sure enough, a carved drowwood beam had bent, robbing the old-timer of a stabilizing strut. The bent spot was discolored – perhaps fungus. There was a water storage bladder in Old Benturi just above, likely he'd sprung a leak that dripped on the strut.

Satisfied, Cly continued on down past Old Tochou, following the bared spine of a cloud whale whose structure was no longer easily distinguishable, so long retired that Cly did not even know his name.

As he descended, Cly tried to consider Maia's words. She clearly wanted to tell him something, but apparently she had been having trouble thinking the thoughts. Cly was familiar with that. Cloudbome was an ancient structure, perhaps older than the clan was, and merely living in it seemed to encourage a sort of conservatism that bordered on stasis. It was exactly that feeling that made Cly long for a berth of his own on a young cloud whale – one free from that hidebound tradition.

Cly continued downward until he came to a slanting passageway that entered Old Pa's hangar. Old Pa – actually, his name was Paschalon, and he was not fully retired yet, though he was getting close – was not there, so Cly was able to head straight across the bottom of the hangar. The still-living skin of the cloud whale whose back formed the floor of the hangar, Old Rorvi, was thin, and it stretched under Cly's bare feet as he headed for Old Hamero in the next hangar. Rorvi was slung across the bottom of Cloudbome, and Cly could look through the remaining layers of tissue and gas bladders below his feet and see the terraced vineyards of Downtown a thousand feet below, clinging to the side of Mount Shorma, the traditional anchorage of the Khar Cloudbome.

Cly dodged around a line of hivelings, the waist-high mantis-like creatures his ancestors had found living aboard the cloud whales when they moved in. The creatures took no notice of the young human. Single-minded as always, they proceeded single-file toward Old Hamero bearing panniers full of chopped locust and churf destined to nourish the old cloud

whale and to give him the strength he needed to make his share of the gas that kept Cloudhome aloft.

Cly ducked under Old Rorvi's reefed starboard sail, and followed the line of Old Hamero's midsection to the main hangar. Here, on a catwalk at the very top of the hangar, Cly could see everything that happened within.

It was worth watching. No matter the time of day or night, there was always a bustle of activity in the main hangar. A full mile across, half that deep and nearly that wide, it was the biggest single room in Cloudhome. Here were berthed those young cloud whales not yet assigned permanent hangers. From his vantage point at the very top of the hangar, Cly could see five cloud whales. He recognized Kreen unloading at the main dock below near the main entrance; and Sholi, waiting his turn just behind. Ma-reen. Renn, a youngster first crewed less than a year ago, was moored by the vet dock – he'd strained some lifters in his last run, carrying too much cargo. With the pirates running amok in the Great Nestick ocean, all the cloud whales were working hard. . .sometimes *too* hard.

Vorchula was parked near the ceiling of the hangar at the smaller secondary dock, flanked by his two manta escorts. Cly could not immediately identify the last whale, docked near the entrance to the Hall Of Remembrance and all but invisible behind Kreen's bulk. As big as the hangar was, it was crowded when so many cloud whales were in it at once.

The air was alive with hivelings flitting about on mysterious errands; their buzzing whir punctured with shouts from the human workers and high-pitched whistles from the cloud whales themselves. Excited chirpies scampered about Kreen – nearly man-sized, but as agile as the squirrels they resembled – shrieking unheeded advice to the clumsy humans unloading the cargo. Cly filled his lungs with the spicy odor of living cloud whales and thought how grand it would be to sail the skies with such a mighty steed.

"Why torture yourself, Cly?" The speaker, a striking redhead, dropped onto the catwalk from a hatch near Hamero's port side number four sail. She jerked the hatch shut and gave it a perfunctory lacing, then adjusted her tunic a trifle as she considered him. "You must be getting as tired as I am of just seeing them from the outside."

Cly looked at her soberly and gave an elaborate shrug, then had to tug his sleeves back into place. "You take what you can get, Vonya. It's a little pleasure, and at least no one has taken it away from me, yet." Cly empathized with her bitter tone. Vonya was only a month younger than

he, and despite her sharp business acumen she, too, had been passed over when Droï crewed.

"I hear Droï decided he could do without a Thaumateurge," Vonya said sympathetically. "The news is all over Cloudhome."

"He'll regret it the first time he gets attacked," Cly noted, "*And* he'll regret not having a better trader than Trock the first time he buys a cargo. *Especially* on the Summuskeep run. Trock does all right when she can bat her eyelashes and look cute, but she just isn't the dwarven type."

Vonya giggled despite herself at the thought of Trock trying to act sexy for some grim-faced dwarf. "Well," she announced, "I have to get down there before Tomaz messes up the books completely. Going that way?"

"Sure," he said. Cly gestured to let Vonya take the lead on the narrow catwalk and followed her as she started down. From this station, Cly could appreciate Vonya's non-fiscal assets, another little pleasure which no one had yet taken away.

More cloud whales were waiting to enter the main hangar. They were visible through the entrance half a mile below, cruising patiently back and forth. Cly spotted Old Pa among them as he and Vonya descended – he must be carrying something too heavy to unload in his own hangar. It looked like only Catla was missing Cly thought to himself – pretty good scheduling, actually. When the cloud whales could rendezvous and transfer cargoes directly, it was not only faster for the customers; it kept the clan from having to store the cargo at Cloudhome itself – which cut back on the supplies needed to keep it aloft. Important consideration, in these times...

The young magician usually dawdled along here to enjoy the incessant activity, but when he recognized the last cloud whale a bolt of pain shot through him. He should have remembered – Droï had finished his final outfitting, and was receiving his crew – formally – for the first time. The little knot of new crew members were receiving a final blessing from the clan leaders, and each was fingering the little disk of carved bone that said to all, "I am an adult!" Eyes stinging, Cly jerked his gaze away. Vonya's face had gone totally blank. They looked at each other, but neither said anything. There was nothing to say. Cly swallowed hard and continued on down the catwalk toward the main dock, feigning total acceptance of his situation. Vonya trailed after.

As they stepped out on the main dock, Cly hailed Tomaz, who was busy checking off a cargo manifest as grunting stevedores hauled bundles, boxes and bales from Kreen's huge interior as she floated at dock, eyes

half-lidded. Tomaz turned and waved, "Clear skies, Magician, Trader!" he called.

The twosome bounced to the catwalk and then trotted up. Vonya looked over Tomaz's shoulder at the manifest and winced. Giving Cly a long-suffering look, she waved good-bye and ran lightly up the gangway into Kreen, calling for the Cargo Master.

Cly smiled to himself. Tomaz was a sharp trader, but his arithmetic was rather...*imaginative*. Tomaz sighed, and checked off another item as the stevedore hauled it past.

"Better have a look at Old Tochou," Cly remarked. "He's lost a stabilizing strut and is starting to list."

Tomaz nodded and grinned. "We know, it happened about an hour ago. Knocked us around a bit, I can tell you. Didn't you feel it?"

Cly shook his head, "No, I was up above, I wouldn't have. What have we got?" he asked looking at the growing pile of goods next to the trader.

Tomaz squinted down at his manifest, "Ah, let's see, jerked beef and venison, potatoes and yams, two bottles of reedle." He paused to smack his lips, "Not that *we'll* ever taste any of it. We have...hmmm...five Calthian heatstones, two glowstones and a load of miscellaneous stuff. That's for us, of course. We also have in a bunch of stuff for transshipment, some gold and assorted gems heading for some bank in Imri, mail for Imri City and Vindolonda, and I don't know what else I haven't got to yet. This is just the number two hold, too. Really, I don't know how she carries it all," he concluded, looking up at Kreen admiringly.

Cly had to agree. It was a considerable cargo and more to come. As he idly read some of the labels on packages still being carried out, he noticed a smallish box of some unfamiliar wood – probably some outlandish grounder wood – with runes sealed in wax on top. He nudged Tomaz and nodded at the box.

The trader shrugged and checked the manifest. "Oh, yes, that's for Master Bosrin. Good, you can take it. I need all the men I've got."

"Okay, fine," Cly responded. He took the box from the stevedore, who grinned as the magician nearly dropped it. It was much heavier than it looked, even grounder wood wasn't *that* heavy. He hefted the box and nodded thanks to the stevedore, who waved and headed back into Kreen. Cly heaved the box up on one shoulder and headed across the main dock to a relatively quiet passageway, pausing a moment to let a small gaggle of hivelings carrying eggs go by. Down the passage a short distance, and he stepped up onto a catwalk that led to the voluminous interior of Old Chamura.

Cly headed forward, toward Master Bosrin's workshop. Here the traffic of the main docks was inaudible, only the creak and pop of rigging could be heard. He hopped off the catwalk onto Chamura's springy membrane floor and entered the magician's workshop. Dropping the chest just inside the door, the magician looked about for Master Bosrin.

The workshop was a large room crowded with the tomes and equipment shared by Clouthomes resident agicians, Bosrin, Master of Thaumateurgy, and Shamyir, Master of Sorcery, representatives of the two major lines of magic to be found in Clouthome. A dozen tables of carved cloud whalebone sealed with varnish and polished to a high golden glow stood in no particular order about the room, most of them covered with thaumaturgic or sorcerous equipment. The air was pungent with the smell of fresh reagents, so Cly knew the Masters were in. Cocking an ear, he listened and, sure enough, heard voices from the back of the workshop, from one or another of the other rooms in the suite. Stepping carefully over an untidy pile of scrolls near the door, Cly headed towards the back.

As he passed the big desk near the middle of the room Cly noticed Master Bosrin had left his journal out, as if he was going to record the results of some experiment. But the sounds of the Master and Shamyir discussing some point of Sorcery in the back room came distinctly to his ears.

"Nonsense, Shamyir!" Bosrin announced. "It's a simple application of the principle of similarity when you get right down to it!" Cly heard. Master Shamyir's voice responded but the words were not as clear.

It was most unlike the Master to leave his journal out like this. Cly felt his curiosity getting the better of him, and he casually glanced over the open pages. The formulae were intriguing, so he casually flipped to the next page. After guiltily reassuring himself that the two Masters were really deep into their discussion, he began to read in earnest.

This part of the Master's journal dealt with the Cloak of Invisibility – a powerful spell, that. A lot of cloud whales have escaped death, injury, and pirates by just fading away at the approaching danger. Cly eagerly absorbed the strange formulae. Like most spells, it came in increasing more effective, and more complex, versions. He tapped his finger thoughtfully on one sentence as he considered. Cly had only recently begun to specialize in Thaumateurgy and was still wrestling with its bipolar nature – these spells could be cast two different ways to achieve the same effect. Up until now, this had been done with a different prefix – but this one had some sort of infix coda selecting different side-effects...

“...one for seeming and one for illusion!” announced a sharp voice at Cly’s elbow. The young thaumaturge jerked erect and only sheer force of will kept him from leaping clear of his own skin. He spun around to see...*nothing*. Despite his pounding heart, Cly sighed, and asked, “Today’s lesson?”

“Today’s lesson,” agreed the voice. Suddenly, a shimmering form appeared in mid-air, flickered along its length, and slowly sharpened up to reveal a short, but massively built man with a florid complexion and a mere fringe of strawberry-colored hair around his bald pate. Master Bosrin continued, “The Cloak comes in two forms because it reflects the nature of Thaumaturgy. The seeming fools the casual eye but always leaves telltale traces. In this case, your shadow remains behind. The illusion, of course, has no such drawbacks; it goes right for the mind and *compels* belief in the non-presence of the Thaumaturge. But like all illusions, it must be targeted at a limited number of minds at a time and is useless against anything without wits to fool!” Master Bosrin looked fifty but he was actually well into his second century. He was a most powerful Thaumaturge, a wonderful teacher, and a good friend.

But, someday, thought Cly, his love of practical jokes was going to kill him – or him, which was probably more likely.

Cly still heard the voices arguing in the back and mentally kicked himself for believing in them. Master Bosrin *never* left his journal out! No magician ever did, locking it away when one was done with it was pure reflex. A magician’s journal, like a pilot’s rutter, was a record of his personal voyages into magic. It was a guide in and, more importantly, a guide back out. Each was unique and irreplaceable. Cly had his own, of course, but it was not nearly as thick as Master Bosrin’s was. Still, as the Master’s jokes went, this one wasn’t too bad. He vividly recalled the time he entered the shop and was attacked by a raging demon...

Master Shamyir and his young initiate, Hodly, came out of the back room. Hodly, all of twelve years old, could hardly contain himself.

“Skies! We really got *you*, Cly!” he cried. Cly had to smile at the youngster. Hodly did not have a nasty bone in his body, but he delighted in magic and enjoyed its exhibition hugely. He was leaping about in excitement, not at Cly’s discomfiture, but at the effectiveness of the spell.

Shamyir nodded to Bosrin and said, “It does seem to nail the lesson down but I think I’ll stay with the traditional ‘Pay attention, stupid!’ rather than these new-fangled teaching methods.” Master Bosrin only chuckled.

“Do you have my practice papers, then?” Cly asked him.

"You have, of course, completely memorized the spell from my journal, so such aids are not needed. And it's time you began to learn without them. Go and try it," barked the Master promptly.

"But that was just a glance..." Cly protested but the Master interrupted.

"Glances at another magician's journal are rare and priceless, and if you didn't at least get the broad outlines of the seeming of the Cloak from that look then you will never be a truly powerful Thaumateurge. Get busy." Snapping his journal shut and locking it with an authoritative click, Master Bosrin folded his arms and waited.

"All right," Cly admitted, "I'll try it. Oh, by the way, you got something in on Kreen. A chest of grounder wood and very heavy."

Master Bosrin grinned. "I know. I'll take care of it later." Indicating Cly's workbench with a pointed gesture, he turned toward the back room. A moment later, the discussion, no doubt recorded by the Master last night, ended abruptly in a spray of light as Master Bosrin terminated the spell.

With the show over, Shamyir took Hodly over to the nook reserved for the Sorcerers saying, "Pay attention, stupid!" He began to drill Hodly in preparation for his Kindling, scheduled for later this afternoon. Hodly, keenly aware of the gravity of this event, forgot his mirth instantly and paid close attention to the old Sorcerer. The young initiate *seemed* ready...but Cly thought Shamyir looked worried. Cly didn't blame him. *All* the magicians were worried. Two of Shamyir's last initiates had come back burnt and drowned, respectively – none had managed to kindle the power since his own near-disaster. The riders had no Gods amongst the clouds but Cly offered a silent prayer to the Spirits of the Elements and to his Ancestors to watch over the brave youngster in his perilous task.

Cly sighed and wondered, as he often did, how Sorcererous magic worked. He had forgotten that Master Bosrin had picked up a fair smattering of the Sorcerous arts from his long association with Shamyir. Of *course* the Master knew the box was coming...just as he knew his *apprentice* was coming, so he could time his little demonstration.

Cly sighed again and buckled down to work. The journal had implied that a seeming was frequently easier and more effective to cast than an illusion, but it required actual, physical manipulation of light...perhaps it would be useful to start with something that would focus more than just magic. Pulling out a drawer full of carefully ground lenses; he selected several and began to review in his mind the outlines of the Seeming of Invisibility.

Vonya hurried through Kreen's interior, bouncing along the springy membrane floor past more workers, human, hiveling and chirpie, as they readied Kreen for her next trip. She *did* get to see their interiors, her comment to Cly notwithstanding – but never as a crew member, Vonya reflected to herself, willing back the pain this thought would always bring. She found cargomaster Qwin in the forward hold, where a couple of men strained to shift a wooden crate of fresh, Comfrey caviar without breaking any of the glass within. Vonya waited until the ticklish part was past before breaking in.

“Cargo Master, Tomaz isn't filling out the manifest properly, we'll lose track of the transshipments!” she said, the annoyance in her tone audible but still at a painfully respectful level. Qwin merely handed her a sheet from his board.

The sheet was a series of transship instructions and lot numbers. It was not on a regular form, but it could be copied without problem. But Vonya was even more annoyed at Qwin's covering up Tomaz's deficiency in paperwork.

“Qwin, Tomaz has *got* to learn! Kreen's been running record cargoes but she has less gold to her credit than any ‘whale except Droï! If Tomaz can't hack it then he should be replaced!” The injustice of it all left Vonya breathless with anger held barely in check.

“Vonya, we have no other *seasoned* trader to send out,” Qwin replied in a bored voice. The slight was doubly painful with Droï crewing in the next berth. Vonya would likely never be *seasoned*, now that no cloud whale was available for her sixteenth birthday. Her only choice now was a paper-shuffling position offered to her by the Trader's Guild, where she could spend the rest of her life correcting the addition of people like Tomaz, who always managed to just squeak by because of people like Qwin. Assuming, of course, she wasn't exiled to the ground by a lottery.

“Do you have any further Guild business here, Port Trader?” asked Qwin in a carefully neutral voice.

“No!” she snapped, flinching from the title and the slight it implied. “Not yet,” she added, flinging the correction sheet back at him as she left.

Cly was no longer at the dock when she left Kreen but that was just as well. In her current state Vonya might have either screamed at him, despite his total innocence in the affair, or else burst into tears. Neither one appealed to her. Kicking a blameless hiveling out of her way, she half-ran to a ramp leading up to the next level. Behind her, Droï gave a loud hoot

as he vented gas to drop toward the exit, departing on his first mission, the Summuskeep run.

Vonya headed up a ramp to the next level, passing a clump of clan elders clustered around Vorchula's loading ramp. She hurried through Old Pa's hangar, finally running out of steam on the starboard catwalk of Old Romiel at the outermost edge of Cloudhome. Vonya took a deep breath of the cool outside air and tried to calm down. Too excited to sit, she paced nervously back and forth.

The sky was clear as far as the eye could see, revealing the rich earth tones of Downtown far below to the south. Eeni, the fat yellow sun that defined the major day, accented the bright colors. Blue Bori, almost lost in the deeper blue of the sky, painted interesting secondary shadows. In the distance she could see a quite large cloud whale head-on – Catla, probably, here for the rendezvous. Old Pa circled below. Droi could be seen cruising south. Far to the west, Vonya's eye caught another cloud whale, a feral one, young but already encrusted with the vegetation that grew on a cloud whale that was not constantly cleaned and trimmed by humans. Vonya sat and considered it, drumming her fingertips on one knee. She paused as the sight sparked an idea.

Vonya *had* a guild post. That was not the same as membership in the guild but it could perhaps let her hold on for some time – until Mareen had a baby. She was the clan's last breeding female, Catla seemed to be barren. She *might* hold on – unless she was caught in a lottery. The idea of living on the ground was certainly not very appealing. But a lottery, she knew, was a real possibility – too many people, too few cloud whales – the arithmetic was inescapable. Even Cloudhome had its limits.

But Vonya had an active imagination – rather an unusual trait in the clouds – and it was triggered by the feral cloud whale curiously examining his civilized cousins. The ferals were fairly plentiful but they were hard to tame. It was not that they were intrinsically unfriendly, they weren't. But it was backbreaking labor to clear the vegetation that grew in every nook and cranny and downright dangerous to remove the wild beasts that lived on them. Cloud whales were hospitable creatures, their great bodies harbored untold numbers of plants and creatures, many of them so long adapted to the whales as to be unable to live on the ground any more. Even more effort was needed to construct living quarters, holds, catwalks and the like inside them. The biggest problem, of course, was convincing the feral to sit still for this lengthy and extremely painful enterprise. Converting a cloud whale to carry cargo was a chicken-and-egg problem – you needed access to the interior to administer painkillers,

but an unconverted cloud whale had none. It had to be built while the whale stayed still and endured the pain. Until fear and pain combined to make panic and then the Wild Ride as the poor creature tried at last to escape. If enough was done the clan gained a new transport when the crew managed to knock the whale out. If anything was missed the cloud whale tore itself to bloody shreds in mid-air, killing itself and its crew. It was tough enough with their own cloud whales. It was almost never done – all the cloud whale clans found it far easier and quicker to raise their own, and all had done it for so long that domesticated cloud whales were almost a separate species. Tame a feral? It was unthinkable.

But Vonya was thinking of it. Thinking long and hard until her view of the feral was blocked by Semaj, fluttering his lateral sails as he dropped down from some exploration of his own above Cloudhome. In her present state of mind, Vonya considered even a berth on Semaj – flame-scarred and half-crazy as he had to be – better than staying in Cloudhome. Far better than wearing a child's name talisman on her wrist. Actually, Semaj looked pretty healthy, considering. But there was a *lot* to consider about Semaj. He had never called for a crew and was probably too old now to take one – too large to finish the rigging before the Wild Ride, most likely. That young feral, on the other hand, *might* have possibilities. Excited now, Vonya leaped to her feet and ran back the way she came.

Fleet on her feet, Vonya was soon back at the main hangar. Kreen was dropping toward the exit, forcing a quick game of musical cloud whales as the others jockeyed around to let her past. Vonya ignored the spectacle, fired by her idea. Making her way to the hangar entrance, she trotted along a catwalk slung underneath Cloudhome until she came to the manta pens.

The sky mantas were very much like miniature cloud whales. Wider and flatter and much, much smaller, they nevertheless served the clan as gigs and even ran some of the marginal routes that would not profit a cloud whale. Of course, most of the larger cloud whales had manta escorts to ferry cargo up and down for them so they could conserve their own gas. Mantas were much less intelligent than cloud whales but they were tractable, ate the same fodder the whales did, and were more plentiful. Not hugely so but all told the clan did fly nearly three dozen of them alone or as escorts.

Vonya surveyed the dozen mantas tied up here and quickly settled on Ousten, her personal favorite. She untied him and leaped aboard, settling herself in the tiny cabin. Ousten, glad of the exercise, hooted and sank

clear of Cloudhome. Vonya felt a great load lift from her mind as they pulled away. It was always like this – when she was away her thoughts ran more swiftly, more surely, and with each powerful stroke of Ousten's sails, she felt more alive.

Ousten flew past the last overhanging portion of Cloudhome and headed out into open sky. Gently but firmly, Vonya pulled on the control lines threaded throughout the manta's body. Obediently, Ousten turned toward the feral cloud whale and began picking up altitude.

As he turned, Vonya could see Cloudhome floating in the air a thousand feet from the peak of Mount Shorma. A gigantic assemblage of cloud whales of several species, most of them retired so long they were no longer discernible as separate outlines, Cloudhome was ten miles long and almost six miles wide. It had formed over a period of at least a thousand years.

As Ousten climbed higher, Vonya could see the top of Cloudhome, a well-kept park-like expanse of grass and cork-light dror trees. Here the clan raised vegetables and fruit and hunted the several types of beast permitted to live there. Most cloud whales wound up like small versions of Cloudhome sooner or later. Taming slowed down the process but eventually all cloud whales looked like flying islands, too stiff with age and too loaded down with parasites and vegetation to keep on living. After that, it was only a matter of time – a great deal of time to be sure, but finite for all that – before they crashed.

Unless, of course, they were part of Cloudhome. It was hardly in the clan's best interest to have their secure trading base crash. As cloud whales outlived their mobility they were permanently retired to their hangers and physically incorporated into the very structure of Cloudhome. Humans kept Cloudhome neatly trimmed and in good repair and so it was far older than any single cloud whale that formed it. As the cloud whale carcasses passed the point of being able to help support the great structure the humans cut it lose. The wreckage made for some very fertile fields under Cloudhome – provided the crops did not need much light.

Ousten dodged Semaj as he climbed. Eternally curious, Semaj changed course to follow him. Vonya guided the manta toward the feral.

The feral was bigger than she had thought. *Much* bigger. She had been fooled by the clarity of the afternoon sky. Six thousand feet or more, he was well into the prime of a feral cloud whale's life. With a sinking heart Vonya looked down at over four hundred acres of tough dror tree jungle growing all over the feral, sending roots deep into his body. Colonies of birds nesting in cavities behind and on top of the lateral sails

took wing as she approached, flying around the feral in a colorful cloud, piercing the air with shrill cries. A dozen wild mantas cruised under the feral's vast belly and at least *three* colonies of wild hiveling searched the jungle for anything eatable, including one species of the mantis-like creatures she hadn't seen before. Everywhere she looked the surface and interior of the feral was alive – she even caught a glimpse of a huge, centipede-like muranda prowling the upper superstructure.

There was no way this living archipelago would ever be tamed. The dragon would leave Caerleon first.

Sadness mingled with frustration as Vonya turned Ousten back to Cloudhome, with Semaj trailing along behind.

Vil dove through space, cocking his tail this way and that as he adjusted his course, and landed lightly on a spine of bone projecting from what was left of Old Druri. Bouncing along its length in a series of furry loop-the-loops, he bounded off the end of the strut and glided a ways on his patagia – the membrane that connected his lower-front and rear legs. He landed on Old Hamero's broad upper lip and scampered down into the main hangar, as quick and sure in this three dimensional maze as his tiny tree-bound cousins, the squirrels, were in theirs.

Vil was happy, for today might be his last day of bachelorhood. He eagerly surveyed the cloud whales in the hangar hoping that today he would find a place for himself and his beloved Mru.

But his happiness faded as he realized that no new cloud whales had come in today. Vil noted sadly that each cloud whale in the hangar seemed to have his full allotment of chirpies. None of them seemed right for a pair of happy newly-mateds. Vil tried to think where else he might look for a home...

The pod elders flew in skies of pure thought, and marked their way by landmarks of knowledge and memories even older than they. One by one, they came to the gathering place until all were present. She, First and Foremost among equals, spoke first.

"WE MUST CONSIDER SEMAJ-BORN-IN-FIRE," she announced, "FOR HE HAS NOT YET CHOSEN YOUNGEST COMPANIONS AND HE BEGINS TO WORRY THEM."

A ripple of tension swept through the assemblage borne on a wave of dividing emotion. Even the tiny minds of the many companions seemed disturbed as they flitted here and there about the council.

The Voice of Disapproval spoke words of fire, "SEMAJ-BORN-IN-FIRE IS BROKEN IN HIS MIND, TOO BENT TO MELD WITH HIS ELDERS

AND HE WILL NOT ABSORB THE WISDOM THEY TRY TO FEED HIM. HE WILL BECOME STRANGER AND STRANGER, HE WILL BECOME 'OTHER.'"
The Voice of Disapproval was long stiff in its ways and convinced that the youngster was not worth saving.

Into the silence that followed came the Voice of Wisdom, older than all others, respected for memories older than any other.

"WE REMEMBER ANCIENT THINGS, AND ANCIENT PURPOSES. WE REMEMBER DAYS BEFORE THE YOUNGER AND YOUNGEST COMPANIONS. DO WE REMEMBER STILL THAT NO ONE OF US IS BORN WITHOUT PURPOSE? YOUNG SEMAJ-BORN-IN-FIRE MUST HAVE ONE, WE NEED ONLY WAIT TO DISCOVER IT."

"HIS PURPOSE IS TO BEDEVIL US WITH RIDDLES OF BEING, TO PUZZLE US AND DISTURB OUR CALM WINDS!" declared the Voice of Disapproval.

The Voice of Wisdom responded, "NOT SO. YOU ARE YET YOUNG IN YOUR WAYS, TO SPEAK SO. HIS PURPOSE IS TO BE WHAT HE IS, WHEN WHAT HE IS BECOMES NEEDED."

The First and Foremost spoke again, adding a crosswind to complicate the flight of their thoughts. "WHEN HIS PURPOSE IS KNOWN, WHAT WILL HE NEED? WILL HE NEED ONLY HIMSELF? WILL HE NEED OUR COUNCIL? DOES HE KNOW HIS WAY OR MUST WE GUIDE HIM?"

The Voice of Wisdom altered course too, with the ease of long experience, taking up the theme. "IT SEEMS UNLIKELY ONE SO YOUNG WOULD KNOW WHICH WAY TO FLY. PERHAPS WE HAVE BEEN REMISS IN NOT URGING HIM."

The Voice of Disapproval spoke again, "PERHAPS WE HAVE BEEN REMISS IN NOT BANISHING HIM!"

"WHY DO YOU FEAR HIM?" asked the Seeker of Understanding, curious as always.

The Voice of Disapproval was annoyed at the question, but answered readily: "HE IS FIRE-BORN! FIRE-ASPECTED! A STEPCHILD OF OUR MOST ANCIENT FEAR AND AN AGENT OF OUR MOST ANCIENT ENEMY. HE WILL BE OUR DOOM! IMAGINE YOU, THE FEELING OF THAT HORROR HERE, IN OUR MIDST, TOUCHING US ALL, CHANGING US ALL..."

"PERHAPS HE IS NOT AN ENEMY AGENT IN OUR CAMP BUT OUR AGENT IN THE ENEMY'S," said the Voice of Hope, silent until now. "IT WOULD BE UNTHINKING TO DESTROY OR BANISH HIM UNTIL WE KNOW WHICH. PERHAPS IT WOULD BE WELL IF WE BETTER TRAINED HIM — IF THE LATTER IS THE TRUTH."

The Voice of Tradition simply observed, "THERE HAS NEVER BEEN SUCH A THING. THERE SHOULD NEVER BE SUCH A THING."

The First and Foremost spoke as the voice of decision. "NO ONE KNOWS THE SKIES WE FLY NOW. PERHAPS TRADITION IS WRONG. SEMAS-BORN-IN-FIRE DEVIATES OVERMUCH AND SHOULD BE SHEPHERDED BACK TO THE OLD, BUT PERMITTED TO GROW AND LEARN, TO BECOME WHAT WILL BE NEEDED IN THE FULLNESS OF TIME. IS THIS AGREED?"

Murmurs of assent were heard in the meeting-place – and Tradition stayed silent.

"AS WE REMEMBER, SO SHALL IT BE."

Vil was suddenly struck by an idea. Happy again, he leaped onto the main dock and ran for the manta pens.

Kara cursed under her breath as she tugged at the cord, trying to find enough slack to tie the knot. She pulled in just enough, and gladly broke a fingernail finishing the last hitch. Quickly applying the glue, she stood back to survey her work, picking at her broken nail to soften the hard edge.

The baby manta tugged at the cords uncertainly but they held with just the right amount of tension. Master Wold applauded from his perch on the catwalk. Next to him, Master Sorva added a sardonic salute.

"Very good, Lassie!" Wold called. "A fine job in record time! You'll make an excellent vetengineer!"

"Record time?! Dear colleague," cried Sorva, in mock astonishment, "She took *twice* as long as one of my apprentices would have, and rigged him light into the bargain! Now he'll never carry more than twelve or fifteen hundredweight!"

Master Wold snorted and silently implored his Ancestors. "We have been over this again and again, Sor! The heavier rigging gives you less than twenty-five percent more payload and it *halves* the lifespan! With my rig, this manta will still be carrying its fifteen hundredweight long after *your* manta has died hauling twenty!"

Master Sorva scowled, "We have lots of sky mantas, we don't *need* them in service that long!"

Wold smiled, "Well, then, it doesn't really matter how much one manta can carry, does it? 'We have lots of sky mantas!'"

Kara had heard the argument in many forms over the years. Shaking her head, she ignored the two bickering Masters as she bent again over

her work. All that remained was setting the correct tension on the dror-wood spring that would almost double the power of the sky manta's wingflukes. With the light-rig, tension was critical. Too tight, and the manta lost power fighting the spring, too little and it gained no extra power at all. Kara strummed the cable several times as she cranked the mainspring, adjusting the tension by ear. The baby seemed to take it in stride, not really uncomfortable, just nervous.

"That's not the point, Wold!" Sorva protested, "Sure we have lots of mantas but we don't have lots of vet apprentices! Your rig takes *three* times as long to install!"

Wold said, testily, "It takes *twice* as long and we lack apprentices because you and the other Masters keep voting the new candidates down! Besides, my rig only has to be installed *half* as often. And it is far more comfortable. Look at Ousten!" he jerked his thumb at a sky manta several miles off heading toward the pens. "He's the biggest manta we have but he flies with only one pilot! No twisting, no jerking about, just simple, trustworthy flight. Do you think it's a coincidence that only light rigs are actually happy to fly? Do you think it's a coincidence that only your heavy rigs get cantankerous and hard to control?"

Angry anew despite the old argument, Sorva gritted his teeth. "*It is not traditional!* We rigged mantas that way for thousands of years. Cloud whales, too! We didn't need your 'improvements' *then*, and we don't need them *now*, by the grounder's Gods!"

Wold sighed. "And that's always the way it ends. 'We don't do anything new, because we have never done it that way!' Fine thing! It won't wash, Sor! The world is a changing thing. The grounders say, 'Change is the only thing that lasts.' And they're *right!* The Ch'yoan clan is experimenting with light-rigging *cloud whales* not just mantas. Can we afford to have them steal any more business from us?"

"Unfounded rumor, as you know *perfectly* well! They'd do no such daft thing. And *we* need less dead weight!" cried Sorva, "This new generation expects everything to be easy! In *my* day. . ." but Wold interrupted in a snide tone.

"... it was tough! Sometimes we had to get out and flap our arms! These kids have it too easy!' I've heard it all before, Sor, and it still doesn't explain why we've had to subcontract yet another route to the Thenten! It'll be ten years before we have another cloud whale ready for crew – The Thenten have no less than sixteen healthy young cloud whales to crew over the next five years. The Ch'yoan have even more! If we don't take up the slack with mantas then how will we cope? Ride cargo on

hivelings? The simple fact is this: we have no breeding females left! None! Mareen is not old enough, Catla never will after after losing half her insides. Kreen has produced her last, and Atho is dead and gone. And we've gotten scant help from Semaj, I might add, our ancestors know who we'll breed Mareen with. We can't even afford stud fees from Ch'yoan. Who's left? Renn – her *brother*. Talk about *inbreeding*! We have to fly *something*, Sor!”

Sorva snorted. “Do you have any idea how the other clans will take your *innovations*” – he made the word a curse – “When they find *out* what you're up to? Are you *planning* a cloud war?”

He stalked away, muttering under his breath. Only the light, springy construction of the catwalk prevented him from stomping loudly, but the implication was clear anyway. Wold sighed again, muttering “It won't *come* to that” to himself. He was *pretty* sure it wouldn't. But *shunning* was all but certain. Not fun, but what was their alternative?

But he smiled as Kara backed off a notch on the spring and plucked a perfect middle C from the taut cords. She applied a coat of varnish, and carefully folded the baby's skin over the new lines. With deceptive ease, her quick, meticulous stitching sealed the incision. A few drops of anti-septic, and the job was finished.

“I still say you'll be the finest vet we've turned out in a hundred years,” said Master Wold. He scanned the baby manta with a professional eye, and nodded approvingly.

“Wonderful,” she said. Giving the restive baby a consoling pat, she packed up her kit and climbed up by Master Wold. She sat down next to him and grunted.

“What is it, girl?” he asked.

“You know what it is! This. . .*this*,” she gestured at the baby manta still tugging at its new control linkages, “This is just baby stuff! I joined the Vetengineer's Guild to work on cloud whales, not mantas! And you know very well that mantas have neither the payload capacity nor the range to replace cloud whales! Your breeding program might change that someday, but it won't help us right now. And you'll never get the other Masters to agree to light-rig, either! Skies above and below! They get their sails fouled just with these experiments on mantas, never mind cloud whales! You remember – the Masters *never* left this place while Mareen and Droï were getting ready to call crew, they were that worried they wouldn't have the senior position for rig leader! I want to work on cloud whales!”

Master Wold sighed again. But then he chuckled, “Well, well, well, another old argument. ‘Master Wold, when will I work on cloud whales?’ morning, noon, and night. Well, my girl, not today! Today, the argument goes differently. Tomorrow, my girl! Tomorrow you will work on cloud whales. I just got the notification this afternoon, and as of midnight tonight, you have an official guild post! ‘Course, you’ll have to learn the heavy rig,” he shrugged. “Yes. You are right, we need the other Masters to get this bird out of the nest. We must cut that first hatch – and you will help me – in the Guild. Perhaps someday your son or daughter will light-rig a cloud whale – if we live that long. In the meantime, we play the political game.”

Kara looked blank for a moment and then said, “But I’ve never served journeyman on a cloud whale. I’ve never done vetting in the field! How can I take a post?”

Master Wold said, “There is a little-used codicil in the guild rules that permits journeymen to serve in Cloudhome if there are no cloud whales available. Field vets always need help when a cloud whale comes in hurt, we need top vetengineers right here! So, I twisted a few arms and got the post for you. Let’s face it – a highly qualified vet like you would be a tragic waste on the ground. And until we can get new blood into the Guild, we will never make that first cut.”

Kara tried to look happy, “That’s. . .that’s really great, Master. Thank you. I suppose it *is* better than the ground.” Her voice trembled just a bit, and she bit her lip in rage at herself for that little slip.

Master Wold grimaced and said, “I’m sorry, girl, there just aren’t any berths left. You’re a vet, you know better than anyone what a cloud whale’s lift limits are! The clan is short this year; a lot of fine young cloud whale riders have no cloud whales to ride. At least you can stay with your guild and hope for a berth next year. Women can always hope for next year. Men. . .if a man doesn’t get a berth by sixteen then he just never will. That’s the way things *are*, girl!”

Kara shifted uncomfortably as Master Wold went on, “An entire culture is not a cloud whale, to be trimmed, and cut, and altered to human tastes and needs by the skill of a vetengineer. We don’t live in an ideal world, girl. We never will. But we must make a start!”

Kara shook her red-blond hair out of her eyes and stood up. “I *understand*, Master Wold. But I don’t have to like it. I can’t ‘hope for next year’, either. I’m nineteen, I’ve been ‘hoping for next year’ for three years already. Now we play politics while we wait for another generation of cloud whales to appear from the Ancestorsknow-where. And yes, I *do* un-

derstand lift limits, and men and women *both* will find themselves on the ground when Cloudbome exceeds them. As it will soon, as you, yourself, know very well. Don't look so surprised! I can count, and I *know* the elders are already considering a lottery! And even a guild post won't help when that happens, Master! And without vetting in the field I can never aspire to be a Master under the current rules anyhow – there's another hurdle for you! And another, and another. Politics!?! I'm a *vet*, not a politician! And vet or politician, it's the ground sooner or later!" She left Master Wold sitting by the baby manta sleeping in its pen, holding his head in his hands and cursing the evil fate that had befallen so many young people this year, and cursing the inability of an old man to do anything about it. Not even a vetengineer could build a cloud whale, and for all his brave words to Master Sorva, Wold knew in his heart that only a cloud whale would serve.

4. A DANGEROUS PATH, MAGIC IS

Vonya pulled Ousten into his pen and tied him up. The sky manta, his appetite sharpened by his little exercise, nosed into his feeding trough. Vonya, still deep in thought, was walking slowly along the catwalk to the main hangar when she was suddenly knocked aside by a running chirpie. Windmilling her arms, she lost her balance and dropped onto Ousten with a thump. Ousten startled back, pulling the catwalk askew and dumped the chirpie off onto his back as well. Frightened now, he vented gas and headed down only to be brought up short by his tethers. Vonya groped for a handhold as Ousten cut loose with a piercing shriek of alarm which was promptly answered from the other pens. The air was full of sky manta alarm calls, and Ousten himself hung from his restraints protesting loudly.

Vonya yelled at the startled chirpie that started it all who bounded back to the catwalk. "Throw me a rope! A rope, *burn* it all!"

The chirpie, pulling himself together, grabbed up the slack of a mooring line in his upper forearms and clumsily tossed it to the woman. Vonya caught the line as Kara and Master Wold arrived.

"Vonya! What's going on?" Kara called as she ran lightly up with Master Wold huffing along behind. Vonya pulled herself to the relative safety of the catwalk. Ousten, concluding that his dive was not working, snapped his vents shut and buoyed up to the catwalk, twisting it back into position.

The humans and the chirpie staggered along the walk, but were able to avoid falling. Kara moved from pen to pen, easing lines and whistling a soothing air on the pipe she drew from her belt. The frightened sky mantas calmed under her ministrations, and the pens slowly returned to normal.

Vonya glared at the offending chirpie. "You scorched near sent me groundside, do you realize that?" Vil nodded mutely, the very picture of a sorry chirpie, and fixed his enormous blue eyes on the woman.

Wold asked, "What happened?"

Vonya heaved a great sigh and said, "This chirpie ran by and pushed me off the catwalk onto Ousten. It frightened him."

Wold speared the offending chirpie to the catwalk with a stern stare, "You're not supposed to be running on the catwalks, Chirp! What's got you so excited?"

Vil could not always follow human speech but, as usual, the gist came through. He tried to answer, but in the excitement of the moment he could not form the words, so he babbled in a mixture of tradetalk and chirptalk.

“Easy, easy!” cautioned the old Master, “Just tell me what is going on.” Vil, still trying to tell the humans why he had been running, suddenly spotted Semaj rising into a position near the entrance to the main hangar, where he hovered. Vil became still more animated, waving his bifurcated forelimbs about in a futile attempt to make the humans understand.

“I give up,” said Wold, “Go ahead, Chirp, go on with whatever you were doing, but *don’t run on the catwalks!*” Vil, understanding the dismissal, and assuming he had gotten his point across, snapped his patagia in acknowledgment and ran down the catwalk toward the main entrance, nearly pushing Kara off as he passed.

The humans shook their heads, and returned to their own affairs.

Hodly waited at Vorchula’s entrance ramp, bathed in cold sweat. Master Shamyir patted his shoulder and said, “Easy lad, you’ll do well. Just remember what I told you, and you’ll do well.” Arvin added his own encouragement as he clapped Hodly on the shoulder.

“Easy, son. You’ve been thoroughly trained by the very best. The entire council is behind you – a hundred percent!”

One of Vorchula’s resident chirpies bounded up to the ramp from cloud whale’s dark interior.

“Ready now! Come! Come!” announced the chirpie to the apprentice.

Hodly, with a final embrace from his Master, stepped into Vorchula. The chirpie hauled in the ramp and laced the hatchway shut. He emitted a loud shriek that echoed within the cloud whale’s hollow interior. It was answered by another of his kind and by several human shouts. Slowly, Vorchula pulled away from the dock and sank toward the exit, Mareen easing to one side to let him pass. Vorchula’s manta escorts set up a shrill ululation when they discovered they could not slip their restraints to follow.

Vorchula was soon lost to sight. Master Shamyir heaved a tremulous sigh and looked to the several clan elders clustered on the dock. He closed his eyes, bent his head to his clenched fist and prayed to his ancestors, prayed to them to protect that brave little lad, because what he was about to do killed so very many. Arvin, too, closed his eyes a moment in prayer and did not speak. One by one, the clan elders and the old magician found comfortable spots to await Vorchula’s return. This was no ordinary trip, and it should not take long. Soon the clan might have another magician. Master Shamyir would not let himself think about the alternative.

Semaj forced himself to wait for a full hour after seeing Vorchula leave, but then he hurried aloft, dodging behind Eeni so the old cloud whale would not see him. He ignored the fierce sun burning only a few hundred yards away and stalked Vorchula through the skies. He sensed young Hodly on board, and knew Vorchula had left without a cargo and without his manta escorts. There was only one place Vorchula might be going. Semaj was determined that, this time, he would see the Place Where Magicians Were Made – or know the reason why.

Semaj listened on the far band but, true to form, heard nothing from Vorchula. He was too far for the near band, and he doubted Vorchula would have anything to say to him anyway, so he tried a mild probe of the old cloud whale's thoughts. Vorchula seemed to be concentrating on something, stray fragments of thought bounded and rebounded through his mind and those of the chirpies and humans, the 'Younger' and 'Youngest' companions, on board him. Semaj was puzzled, and fearful of losing track of his quarry. He vented gas and dodged under the glowing sun, ignoring the plume of flame that trailed him, and headed as fast as he could for blue Bori, ahead of Vorchula's course. Here, he could see most of Vorchula's usual exit route. He waited.

The thoughts he sensed from the other cloud whale were becoming strange, especially in the weird thrum between Vorchula's mind and the minds of the chirpies on board. The human crew seemed to be preparing for something. . .

Semaj had never seen the need for a crew. With his lively curiosity, he liked to study grounders and other strange things, and a crew would hamper him, require him to maintain a schedule. Besides, he was too young to really need the constant trimming and cutting which was a crew's primary task. He did not need a crew, and would not for years, maybe decades.

The strange activity aboard Vorchula was growing more frenzied. The thoughts in and around his mind were growing more incomprehensible. Several fires flared on Semaj's dorsal sails and he put them out with an impatient twist of his will. He waited for Vorchula.

Suddenly, the world was filled with a piercing howl, and the very fabric of the sky rent open, revealing within the shifting colors of a power gate. Vorchula's mind went completely blank as he stiffened and accelerated directly at the gate at a speed no mortal cloud whale should be capable of. In a whirl of rainbows he was gone within. Semaj hurled himself at the gate too late. It slammed shut in a roll of thunder whose backlash

pitched the young cloud whale end-over-end. Sheets of flame erupted off of Bori, igniting Semaj in a dozen places.

Semaj fought the maelstrom grimly, forcing the fires out as soon as they began. Slowly, he won free of the roiling aftermath of the gate closure. Anger boiled within him as he realized that Vorchula was gone again, gone to a place where Semaj just could not follow.

Vorchula carried a crew, as did most tame cloud whales. The crew kept him limber and trimmed, nearly as agile as he was in his youth. In return, Vorchula carried cargo as the crew directed. Semaj had thought that that was the whole of the arrangement. It now appeared that he was wrong.

Despite the pain of his new burns, Semaj waited near the fading sparkle that still marked the gate. Vorchula would be back soon. Power gates worked both ways.

Cly studied the mirror with a great deal of annoyance. He was certainly invisible, but wherever he stood was outlined with a bright halo of rainbows. That hardly provided the sort of concealment he could wish for! Not to mention the promised shadow – incredibly obvious. Sighing, he made another note in his journal, and decided that he would have to have a little more help.

“Master Bosrin, what am I doing wrong? I’m invisible right enough, but no matter how carefully I cast the seeming I get this stupid halo!”

Bosrin looked up from his own work with a grin and studied the apparition that had addressed him. “Nice colors, Cly. Very precise casting, but that’s not the correct solution, as you have already discovered.”

“Well, if precision isn’t the solution then what is?” Cly demanded.

Bosrin gazed off into space and said in a distracted tone, “Have you ever watched an apothecary prepare a solution? First he makes the medicine – for fever, say – and then he asks himself, ‘What would this stuff do to a healthy person?’ Suppose it would cause muscle cramps – no one with fever wants muscle cramps, too! So he adds another medicine for muscle cramps to the mixture. The patient does not *have* muscle cramps, you see, but he *will* have them when he takes the medicine, so the apothecary prepares for it.” He grinned as he looked at his apprentice – and chuckled as he imagined the expression he knew was there. “Finish that later. Give me a hand with that box.” Cly, still puzzling over Bosrin’s “this seemingly pointless story actually has enough information to help you” answer, quickly canceled his spell and shoved his paraphernalia into a drawer before dashing off to get the chest.

The box proved to contain a variety of very interesting things. Cly found it full of small vials and packets, each marked with a fussy handwriting detailing the contents in Truespeech. Underneath was a journal – a very *thick* journal – and a leather sack.

“I sent for this when I heard it would be sold at auction,” said Bosrin, thumbing through the journal. “Before he died, Timuron became renowned as a great Alchemist, a Master of an art that has all but died out here in Clouthome.”

Cly began unlacing the sack, “You hope to bring it back? Do you think you can teach an apprentice about an art you don’t know?”

“I’m not quite so ignorant,” said Bosrin pausing to watch Cly with a growing smile on his face. His apprentice pulled the sack open, reached inside and let out a yelp of pain, dropping the sack and putting his fingers in his mouth.

“For example, I know about the ‘permanent heat’ spell that was Timuron’s trademark,” Bosrin grinned. He bent to retrieve that sack, and removed the contents with a pair of forceps he fetched from the desk. The sack proved to contain a chunk of stone glowing cherry-red with heat. Cly eyes went round.

“Loaded with fire!” he breathed. “Won’t it get lose?”

Bosrin shook his head. “No. Timuron wrought well. This is a cookstone. . . it was intended to replace an open fire of the sort that grounders used for cooking. As you can see, it is much, much hotter than a heatstone, but it is just as well disciplined. And as to your other question, yes, that is my hope. Shamyir and I decided that we would try Hodly at it. If it looked as though he would work out, he would spend part of his apprenticeship in Imri with Master Yothar.”

Tearing his eyes away from the cookstone, Cly poked around the other contents of the box. “What’s this other stuff?”

“I frankly have no idea. Pick out three or four items and give me a report, please.” Bosrin shoved the journal into his desk and locked the cookstone, carefully wrapped in its magically heatproofed leather pouch, in a cabinet. Cly grabbed a handful of likely looking things and stuffed them into his pockets before helping Master Bosrin stow the box, as well. As Bosrin straightened up he glanced at the clock.

“Ah! Hodly should be due back any time now. I’ll go up and meet him at the dock. You’d better get back to the Cloak. We’ll have a little celebration tonight. Perhaps we’ll break out Shamyir’s reedle!” Bosrin donned his dress cloak and left, leaving Cly pondering the connection between Thaumateurgy and apothecaries.

Hodly woke with his head pounding and his stomach protesting. Despite the dire warnings he had been given, he had underestimated the gate sickness, and paid for it by losing his lunch *and* breakfast. As the heaving subsided, he looked about to see the other whale riders were in little better shape.

No one did anything for at least half an hour. It was torture to try. Some people were sick, like Hodly, others were so tender that even light contact caused them fiery pain. The chirpies seemed even worse off. Some were curled up in their furry tails, but the others looked like they had been tossed about in a high wind. As his own sickness receded, Hodly fell to helping the others who lacked his young constitution.

Hodly carried the chirpies to their berths and arranged each in the hammock-like beds they favored. Several seemed to almost come around, twitching in alarm, but they calmed as he scratched them behind their furry, pointed ears. Soon, Vorchula's eight chirpies were sleeping soundly, and the humans had largely recovered.

Hodly joined a detail to release the stays on all Vorchula's joints that had been rigged prior to gate entry. The job took the better part of an hour, but by the time it was done, everyone felt well enough to eat a hearty meal. The youngster kept trying to get a glimpse of the territory they were over, his curiosity honed to a fine edge by Cly's and the Masters' evasiveness about the Kindling Place, but it was very dark outside and he saw little. It really didn't matter; it would take Vorchula himself at least another hour to recover from the gate. The rest of the crew seemed very ill at ease, though Hodly could not tell if it were some general malaise or specific fears about his own approaching ordeal.

"Hodly," said Vorchula's Trader Captain, coming up behind him. "How do you feel? Will you be able to complete the ceremony?" Her old face seemed tense, but matter-of-fact. She had carried both Master Shamyir and Cly on their Kindlings, so she knew what she had to do. She fervently prayed that this young slip of a magician knew what *he* had to do. And that *he could* do it.

"Yes, Captain!" Hodly piped none the worse now for a couple hours rest and a good meal. "I'm ready any time!"

"Good. We will remain here, you will descend on the cargo lift to the floor of this cavern." Hodly suppressed a double take. *Cavern?*

"We can't get any closer than we are, the floor is covered with rocks. I understand that there is little danger from typical underground creatures here but take no chances. None! If you see anything carnivorous, or even

anything that looks like it might want to be, come back! We can do this another day if we have to. Nobody expects you to fight. Do you understand?" The captain searched the young face carefully, while Hodly considered. She did not tell him that she could, and would, cancel the entire thing if she thought he was going to make this one bit more dangerous than it was already. Hodly thought a moment more before replying.

"Take no extra chances. Come back if I meet anything dangerous. I understand." The Captain nodded slowly.

"Hodly," she said, "There are five ways for an apprentice magician to die, and only one way to live. Since Cly kindled the power, between the two Masters *five* apprentices have died – all of them unpleasantly. Two were turned to stone. Two were nothing but burnt cinders. The last one drowned. I've seen apprentices dead without a mark but blue skin and I've seen them blasted to bits. I have brought sixteen apprentices to this place, but I have carried back only two magicians, Shamyir, and Cly. There is a very real chance – even a probability – that you will die today. You *don't* have to do this. No one requires it, no one asks it, and no one will think the less of you for deciding at this very moment that you wish to leave magic behind, now and forever. Six apprentices have done so. Arvin was one, no one held it against him, and he went on to lead the Council. If you don't feel you are ready, you can decide right now to come back without attempting to kindle the power, and we'll leave with no more questions asked. And you can still try another day, if you are so minded. Do you want to try this?"

Hodly nodded solemnly, without speaking. He knew all this, of course. Every grim statistic. The old Captain held his gaze for long moments. She did not mention the three candidates she had refused to even allow to try to kindle the power. But his eyes were clear, and his course was set. She nodded, and beckoned to the Trader Second. "Take him down to the lift. When he is down, raise us up to five hundred feet."

"Aye, Captain," responded the man. He hooked a thumb aft. "This way, youngster." He led the way as Hodly, his heart beating out a staccato rhythm, followed.

A short time later, Hodly found himself standing on a flat stone on the floor of a truly enormous cave, watching the sling of the cargo lift recede into Vorchula's belly in the dimness above. The captain's last blessing – "May all our ancestors and all the spirits of our home be with you, stay with you, protect you" – still echoed in his ears. A moment later, Vorchula began to rise toward the distant ceiling. Hodly shivered in the dim light of his glowstone, and tried to still his pounding heart. Everyone

was so *grim* about this! Looking around, he spotted the runemark that showed him the way he had to follow. Holding his glowstone higher, he started off.

Hodly had a right to be nervous. Not only was he about to invoke the Ritual of Kindling that would make him a magician – or kill him – but he had to do it – of all places! – *underground*! No wonder the magicians didn't want to talk about it! Shamyir's lecture this morning about courage and fortitude suddenly seemed much more apropos! Hodly could almost feel the crushing weight of who knew how many millions of tons of rock poised over his head...he throttled *that* thought in its cradle and concentrated on picking his way across the rocky path.

He passed several smallish sorts of beasts that did not seem dangerous, though he recognized none of them. Most were lizards of one sort or another – slow and harmless. He gave one creature – a fearsomely spined beast about two feet across, with no visible front or rear – a wide berth, but decided to go on when it did not try to intercept him. The quiet, musty air seemed like lead in his lungs.

As he proceeded, Hodly began to notice the ceiling coming into view, and the natural rock formations first supplemented by, and later replaced with, ancient but sturdy-looking stone masonry. He recalled hearing of the sorts of creatures that built such things at great depths in the ground and shuddered. But he did not stop. At the end of this trip was the thing he desired above all else – a magician's power. For that, he would brave anything.

At length, the ceiling rose again and vanished overhead as the walls came together in a wide cul-de-sac. The ground was littered with bones in wild disarray, and here and there were splashes of long-dried blood. Despite his coaching, Hodly trembled a little at seeing this place for the first time. The broken bones were sacrificial victims, he knew, hurled down from some unguessable height above by who knew what. Why they had been killed was immaterial, what he needed now was a ghost. There should be plenty around.

Hodly propped up his glowstone on its built-in tripod and unslung his tiny pack. Choosing a relatively wide, flat area, a stone's throw from the spot where the bodies seem to hit most often, he prepared for the ritual. It would not necessarily be fatal if a ghost showed up before he was ready, but a botched preparation might kill him in a very messy fashion.

Soon he had a tiny cauldron filled with the herbs he had brought, and was eagerly mixing in a little of the reagent. The cauldron warmed, and gave off a pinkish mist that seemed to remove some of the horror of that

place. On a flat rock, Hodly then sketched the runes of his names – his used name, and his soul name, the secret name of his inner self – in a circle, and within that he placed a little lantern about five inches high. He turned the shade to reveal within the shimmering beauty of a small diamond, glowing brightly from the magical power locked within. This was his magic lantern, loaded with power and spells from Master Shamyir. The source of an apprentice's magic – and something he would not need soon, if all went well. Satisfied with his preparation at last, he settled down to wait, concentrating on deep-breathing exercises to calm himself.

He did not have to wait long. Almost as soon as he sat, Hodly felt rather than heard the whispering of the dead in the shadows around him. Some, bolder than the rest, began to move in the shadows cast by the glowstone and the lantern, shifting back and forth in a hypnotic way. No powerless spirits these, but true ghosts; loaded with the power he needed to complete the kindling. Hodly focused his mind on the ritual.

"I seek a magician's power, I offer a magician's bargain. Who among you will be my companion?" he called. The shadows gave no answer, but the nearest of them seemed to glow and began to assume human form. Some seemed to ignore him, moving about the cave on some unguessable business of their own. The others watched him with a quiet intensity. Hodly swallowed the lump in his throat and again offered the Arcane Bargain.

So it had gone, from great antiquity. All who aspired to the magician's power sought this ancient bargain. So it was before the dragon took Caerleon and so it will be long after a Prince of Caerleon lives again in its gilded halls. It is the way to magic.

One spirit suddenly detached itself from the others and darted to the cauldron. It stopped a moment, as if to read the runes he had scribed, though not even Shamyir knew if they really could read. Several other ghosts drifted closer now, but the first seemed to push them back with an impatient gesture. Slowly, it drifted towards him.

Hodly's heart skipped a beat as the ghost's coolness descended upon him. Quickly, he triggered the magic lantern, raising wards against the other ghosts, to avoid interference. The next part required no magic – only fortitude. He began to chant an ancient liturgy to help him concentrate, mentally counting to the next trigger, when the ghost melded with his aspect and stepped forth from his body – as an elemental. He seemed to be pulling apart, as if the ghost sought to wrest a part of him away. He tried not to resist for that part of himself, of his very soul, was all he had to offer the spirit in return for its eternal help and companionship – and its

power. Hodly tried to help the ghost as he had been trained to, pushing at that part of himself even as the ghost pulled. His breath came in ragged gasps, and they seesawed back and forth, the living and the dead, trying to complete the agonizing birth of his power. Dizzy and sick, he suddenly bent double, knocking the cauldron over. Pain raged through his body, he felt parched and dusty, as if he were drying up and soon only his rustling husk would be left. He tried to cry out, but his parched throat could only huff softly. Jerking in pain, Hodly tried to pull back, to lessen the agony. The pain faded immediately, but somewhere close, he felt rather than heard a shrill keening begin. Realizing his mistake, and realizing he had lost count, he tried again to help the spirit, but it was growing difficult to breathe. Hodly gasped, but only coughed up water. He felt the spirit screaming its own pain as the magic went bad. He tried to trigger the lantern, hoping the binding spell would recover, but his fumbling hands knocked the lantern away. As his consciousness faded out, Hodly felt sorry for the spirit that had traded at least some sort of eternity for a short, agonizing existence as an undine before they both died.

The ghosts of that place, watching in the shadows, began to slip away one by one, leaving the slain mortal in a puddle of water.

5. SEMAJ CALLS HIS CREW

Despite his determined vigil, Semaj was still surprised when the gate opened several hours later, and cursed to himself when he saw that it had opened several miles east of where he waited. Furious, realizing that he was foiled yet once more, he waited for Vorchula.

It took the rest of the afternoon for Vorchula to pull himself back together after taking two power gates so close together. The light from both suns was fading in the distance before Semaj sensed activity aboard the other cloud whale. As Vorchula slowly returned to a semblance of his normal self he began to drift toward Cloudhome. As he passed Semaj he looked at him with eyes sad and very, very old.

***“COME,”** he said, and dropped some water ballast in a silvery sheet to gain altitude and to lighten himself for speed, and was shortly hurtling back to Cloudhome at full speed. He said nothing else to Semaj, indeed, did not even acknowledge his presence. Semaj guessed that something was very wrong, and hurried after Vorchula, no longer making any pretense at concealment.*

Semaj had noted the intimate details of Vorchula’s two gate runs. It seemed that no unassisted cloud whale could survive the stress of the gate without the help of a crew. Remembering the strange thrum between Vorchula and the minds of the creatures aboard him, Semaj also suspected now that a cloud whale could not even open a power gate without their help.

Semaj thought now that a crew was not an unalloyed liability, useful only for trimming. It seemed almost as if they were mobile, independent parts of a cloud whale, part of the whole, but able to manipulate it – and capable of bestowing other advantages by virtue of their own intelligence. Semaj began to glimpse now the concept of a “team.” It was a powerful idea. Semaj considered it carefully during the trip back, and as Cloudhome slid into view in the misty distance, he made his decision.

Semaj would have a crew, now. He would fly the cargo; he would accept the limits they would place on him. In return, they would keep him healthy and trim. . .and they would show him how to fly a power gate, and show him the strange places that existed within. Semaj paced Vorchula back to Cloudhome, still seething despite his decision. Semaj hated to lose.

Vil waited impatiently near the entrance to the main hangar, scanning the sky below for some sign of Semaj. Mru sat nearby, unconcernedly

cleaning her bright yellow fur, sure that Vil would eventually find them a home.

Suddenly, Vil stiffened. Vorchula sailed into view, heading toward Cloudborne at reckless speed, with Semaj close behind. Vil marked Semaj's course and realized the young cloud whale was not heading for the main hangar. He tried to think where Semaj might be going in such a hurry...

TOCHOU, WHERE ARE THE YOUNGEST COMPANION LEADERS? asked Semaj's thoughts.

ON THE MAGICIAN'S DOCK, came the old voice. **THEY ARE WAITING FOR VORCHULA-WHO-BRING-MAGICIANS.**

GET A RIGGING TEAM READY, ordered Semaj, **I WILL WAIT IN PASCALON'S HANGAR. BE SWIFT!**

Amused by Semaj's impertinence and his sudden (but not unexpected) desire for a crew, Tochou tolerantly relayed Semaj's impatient orders. Several of the tiny minds in his mental constellation darted away in great excitement. The old cloud whale regarded them with amusement...

...and concluded that he must be heading toward Old Pa's hangar. Vil nudged Mru and ran as fast as he could toward the old cloud whale's hangar. Mru, a little surprised, followed close by.

Vil stopped, panting, as he reached the secondary dock. The clan leaders and magicians were sprawled out in comfortable positions awaiting Vorchula. They looked up at the winded chirpie in surprise.

"Khar-Semaj calls his crew!" he cried, "Khar-Semaj calls his crew! Soon in Pa's hangar! Rig team! Crew! Crew!" Vil finished excitedly. Proud at how easily he had gotten out the words, Vil and Mru bounded for Old Pa's hangar, leaving the dumbfounded elders to sort out what had happened.

Arvin was the first to speak. "The fool chirp has lost his mind! Semaj is years past crewing!"

Bosrin grinned. "About time, then."

Shamyir, forgetting for a moment the cold gnawing at his heart, said, "It was only a matter of time, Arvin! A cloud whale crews when it wishes to. Semaj has decided." He chuckled, "And it looks like Vil has found himself a new home. He'll soon be telling everyone the news!"

Arvin said, "And we have a new cloud whale to figure into our schedules. Fire! This messes up the whole week's work!"

Shamyir took umbrage, “Would you rather he *didn’t* crew, Arvin?! Semaj is the get of Old Atho and Paschalon, he has *tremendous* potential that’s been wasted up ’til now!”

Bosrin nodded. “*And* he’s only distantly related to Catla. We had best figure how to use this windfall!”

Arvin waved his hand, “Yes, yes, I know all that, but this is so burning unexpected! The usual rig team shipped out after doing Droï – I mean, it’s their first vacation in two years! And. . . Master Sorva is in Downtown. We don’t have any experienced riggers!”

“Terrific,” Bosrin commented. “No vets? He’ll skit for sure. Might be ten years before he calls again!”

Arvin said, “No! We can’t let that happen! He might be too old *now*, and he’s getting no younger. It’s now or never, even if we have to do the rig with apprentices!” He rubbed one hand with another for a moment and added, “It’s going to be tight. If Semaj is crewing, Paschalon will follow his Wild Ride, which means Vorchula must take his place and go to Torsheim with the others to pick up the Prince’s delegation to Calthis. That delegation is not only profitable, it’s crucial to end that *stupid* war! And we don’t dare mess up the protocol, the Torsheimers make a scorched *re-ligion* of protocol, they’d probably declare war on *us* if we mess this up!” He paused a moment and then gritted, “And with Imri collar-bone deep in pirates and Kenekra¹ itself rising again, for all we know, we had better get *this* war settled, before another one erupts in the Nestick! I think we can do it, but it leaves us with no reserve for anything. And not one, single moment to loose!”

Counselor Geron spoke as he turned to go, “I saw Master Wold down at the manta pens a while ago, I’ll have *him* get a rig team ready.”

Arvin grabbed at his arm. “Wait! We can’t let Wold do it! He’s. . .” The clan leader stopped.

Geron’s lips tightened, “He’s a light-rig proponent. I know. But he’s also the senior vetengineer when Sorva isn’t here, and I saw Sorva taking the wire Downtown to join his team just before Vorchula left. It’s *Wold’s* rig, Arv. It’ll take hours to get Sorva and his team, even if they are all still in Downtown, which I doubt like flames. *I* wouldn’t be there.” He waited, watching the council leader narrowly.

Arvin considered his words carefully. He remembered the anguished planning the clan had gone through back when Old Atho had died. Hard times were clearly coming, and plans had been laid. Oh, but such a commitment to the new and untried! How Arvin had tried to avoid that, how

1 KEN-eh-krah – Litoyan for “Port of Ken(d)”

he had feared it! But today he had no choice. It was time to fly in some unknown skies. He took a deep breath.

"Quite right," he said, releasing Geron's arm. "Wold will be an excellent choice. Make it so, Geron, and make sure we set up a training class for the other vets on Wold's light-rig." Arvin smiled at the dumbfounded look on Geron's face. "Well?"

Geron hurried away, shaking his head. Ancestors alive! He'd never suspected Arvin had it in him!

The other elders looked at each other. Some shrugged, others looked outraged. The magicians merely looked satisfied. Arvin sighed and scratched his head.

"I guess we will just have to deal with this as best we can," he said. "We'll leave the delegation plans in place, except for replacing Pa with Vor. Rajus, Tolim, you'll have to change Vorchula's markings, make them match Paschalon's, near as possible. I don't know if Prince Vorn will recognize an individual cloud whale, and Vor is *nearly* as large as Paschalon, but there's no sense taking chances. . ." he broke off as Vorchula entered the main hangar.

Shamyir leaped up, hope lighting his old features like a blazing beacon. All were silent as Vorchula docked, and none drew breath as the hatch opened. Vorchula's Trader Captain came out and saluted the assembled elders smartly, then turned and assumed a parade rest. Shamyir felt the world going gray as the pallbearers brought the small soaked bundle out of the black depths.

The captain's report was brief. "We waited the required time and then went in. He was drowned." She turned to Shamyir and added, "I'm sorry."

Bosrin took Shamyir's arm, "Let's go, old friend. There's nothing we can do." Shamyir did not respond, but permitted Bosrin to lead him away.

Arvin gritted his teeth. Aside from the personal horror of this event stood the pragmatic knowledge of yet another setback that the clan could ill afford. He refused to admit to himself how much he had been counting on the young sorcerer's apprentice to distinguish himself. The Ancestors know they could've *used* another Sorcerer! With Shamyir's efforts directed entirely toward Torsheim and Calthis, Imri and the great expanse of the Great Nestick ocean was left entirely uncovered – and open to piracy. Flames! Well, first things first.

"All right," he said. "This is bad. It's a *rotten* omen. But we still have a cloud whale to rig, so things are not as burnt as they might be. Let's do it!" He glanced around, catching each eye, and slowly the elders

moved to their tasks. As they left, Arvin turned to Vorchula's Trader Captain.

"Take care of the body, Toz. Then get Vorchula to maintenance, we have a new assignment for him." Toz, her old face a mask of sadness, only nodded, too stricken to really care about the new task. Arvin strode away, grimly reworking his schedules in his mind.

6. A CLOUD WHALE COMES OF AGE

Vil and Mru reached Old Pa's hangar just as Semaj entered. Maia was already there, and she quickly took command.

"Vil, Mru, bring him down to the floor and secure him. Quickly, now!" Vil and Mru climbed Old Efrik's ribcage to reach Semaj, and the young cloud whale began to sink as soon as they climbed aboard.

A powerfully built man apparently in his twenties suddenly flickered into existence beside Maia. She gave him a quick kiss and then said, "Ekim, Master Sorva is in Downtown, so Master Wold will be rig leader. Do you know how he usually starts?"

Ekim grinned and nodded, "Sure. It's the same as usual, but you take out the ventral 4th sails, rather than the third. Better balance as he grows, you see. The leftover musculature is still used for the crane. I'll get the tools." He vanished, and Maia turned back to Semaj, who was now settling to the floor. The two chirpies raced excitedly back and forth on his back, startling the hivelings trimming Semaj's 3rd topsail. Maia sighed and shook her head as she surveyed the new fire-damage on Semaj's upper surface.

"Can't you *ever* stay out of trouble?" she asked as the cloud whale landed gently. "You'll worry your crew into early retirement at this rate." She patted his chin and said, "Well, the big day is here. You timed it well." But Semaj made no reply, nor did she expect any.

Ekim reappeared with a box full of vet tools, and the two began measuring for the main hatchway cut on Semaj's left side.

Geron found Master Wold and his favorite apprentice just finishing up a restringing job on one of the older mantas. He hailed the old vet as he ran down the catwalk, almost knocking a busy chirpie off in his haste. "Wold! Master Wold!"

Wold shot a dark look at the runner that turned to surprise as he saw a normally dignified clan elder doing the running. Leaving Kara to finish closing the incision, he stood and waited.

Geron arrived a little winded, "Wold, Semaj called his crew! We need someone to do the prep, it'll be less than two hours before the chirpies start rounding up the crew, and we have no time to fetch Sorva from Downtown! Will you do it?"

Wold looked blank for a moment, but then a knowing smile crept across his wrinkled features. "Do you mean to say," he asked slowly, "That *I* am the senior vetengineer on this rig?"

Geron nodded. Wold smiled even wider. "My rig?" Geron nodded again, grinning sheepishly.

Wold closed his eyes and thanked his Ancestors for such speedy service. "I see. Kara!"

"Just finishing. You want help?" she said, hurriedly applying the antiseptic.

"Help? With my shaky old hands? I'll supervise! *You'll* do the job!" Wold shouted. "Snap it up, Girl! There's a cloud whale calling you!"

Geron started, "Look, Wold, we really should have..." he stopped as Wold whirled on him.

"What? Should have what? *I'm* rig leader!" he said, he shouted happily, jerking a thumb at his own chest. "Any arguments?" he demanded.

Geron shrugged and grinned. "Do it your own way, Wold. But don't let our first light-rig cloud whale be our last!" Kara struggled up the ramp with her gear and looked breathlessly at the two men.

"Let's go!" she cried. The threesome hurried away.

Maia and Ekim had finished the hatch, and were now carefully removing a key section of bone from Semaj's skull.

"Not so much, Maia," Ekim remonstrated, "Semaj is just a little fellow, yet, and we need only a little space for his hive." Semaj's hivelings were crawling over the both of them, bewildered but not pugnacious about this invasion of their domain. Maia nodded, and the two slowly eased the entire hive into its correct location behind Semaj's skull. Inside the hive, the hiveling King and Queen huddled, wondering what these crazy humans were going to do next.

"Good!" Maia said with satisfaction as she hefted a chunk of spongy bone. "With this and the first joint we have just enough for the name talisman. I'll get this to the Hall of Remembrance now if you'll tidy up?" Ekim nodded and began bracing the hive in its new location. Maia patted his bottom and ran down the new ramp, where Vil danced about in an agony of impatience.

"Vil, take both of these pieces to the Hall of Remembrance. Don't lose one, now!" she said severely. Vil grabbed the pieces in his upper forelimbs and raced away. As Maia turned back to Semaj, she noticed a clan elder enter the hangar. In a twinkle she was gone, and a moment later, an answering twinkle within Semaj heralded the departure of Ekim.

Voris stopped in surprise as he beheld a hatch already cut into the virgin cloud whale. Puzzled, he glanced about but saw no one except hivelings and a single excited chirpie running about the burnt topsail. He frowned as he looked at that, and wondered how long this accident-prone cadet was going to last.

Sighing, Voris readied his paint pot, and began to inscribe on the side of the young cloud whale the runes of protection and identification that were the badge of Semaj's membership in clan Khar. The first banner was soon finished and Voris looked in satisfaction on the name. Khar-Semaj was official, now. Voris began work on the more delicate task of inscribing the protective runespells against fire and theft. He muttered spells and invocations as he worked, but was not overmuch worried about accuracy. A cloud whale had to *grow* into its protective magic. These spells would grow and change with the cloud whale, becoming not what Voris wanted, but what the cloud whale actually needed in whatever rôle he would play. Still, he worked diligently.

Wold arrived at a dead run, with Kara right behind him. He skidded to a halt in surprise at the newly cut hatchway adorning Semaj's side. A look of anger crossed his normally mild features until he noticed the missing ventral 4th sails. He chuckled as he checked the work more closely. Obviously he had a secret admirer somewhere in Cloudhome who wanted to help!

"All right, girl! We have to get moving. Cloud whales need a lot of work done in a very short time before they are ready to fly cargo. They're not simple like mantas. We have to get started before he skits, or it may be months or never, before he's ready to sit still for us again. And once we're started, we have to get the minimum done before he panics or he'll tear himself apart in midair. Remember, we can't give him anesthesia until we can reach the major nerves, and we can't reach *them* until we've all but finished the initial work. It's a very painful thing we are about to do. The first thing is to get the hive positioned correctly just back of the skull. Ignore the buggies, they won't bother you inside a cloud whale." He suited action to word and strode inside, still describing the work that was needed. Kara, breathless from the run and from her sudden change of fortune, trotted along trying to memorize every word, just on the off chance he might mention *something* she didn't already know.

After the shock of the hatch, Wold was not startled to find the hive work almost done. After a thoughtful moment he said, "Girl, I'll finish the bracing here, you head aft and start rigging for the main spring." He cursed as a thought suddenly struck him.

"Smudge and blazes! We don't have any springs anywhere near heavy enough!" He gritted his teeth as he reluctantly considered heavy-rigging the young cloud whale after all.

"No problem," Kara said after a moment. "We'll gang in four sky manta springs, all we have on hand, and double-brace them with number

five cable. They won't hold more than a few weeks but by then we'll have thought of something better." Wold nodded, slowly at first, then with enthusiasm.

"Good. Good idea! It's stupid to try anything permanent at this phase that we don't absolutely have to, and that's faster to do, anyway. Get to it!" he ordered. Kara hurried aft.

Wold was finishing up the bracing when he was hailed from outside. A moment later, Tyla stuck her head inside the hatch.

"Sorva?" she called.

"No!" Wold shouted back. "Me!"

"Wold!? Where's Sorva?" Tyla demanded.

"Downtown somewhere. It's my rig!" Wold replied. "Live with it," he muttered under his breath.

Tyla shook her head and looked toward the hive where she could see Wold's legs sticking out. She felt ill – he was going to use his light-rig, she just *knew* it. The thought made her queasy but there was nothing she could do about it now.

"When will you have the main catwalk in?" she called.

Wold thought for a moment. The main catwalk needed to be in before he could get any real help inside, but it had to be braced against the breastbone and the eighth or ninth vertebra, which wouldn't be accessible in a light rig until after the mainspring was in. He calculated rapidly.

"I figure about half an hour, Ty. But we'll need the cargo hatch connected up to the 4th sail muscles and that can be done from outside, since you need to cut that hatch anyway," he said, finally. "Do you think you can do that for me?"

"You took out the 4th sails?" Tyla pulled her head out and gave a horrified look down and to the right. She glared at him. "Why?"

Wold chuckled. Tyla was such a traditionalist. That's how she had made clan elder at the ripe old age of thirty-nine. Good thing, too, she was never anything but a so-so vet.

"Better balance. And we remove *all* the 6th sails. He won't need them after we shift those sail muscles to the springs. Moves the power to the wingflukes, which we pull forward ten degrees to give them better swing area. That saves us an extra five or six hundred pounds!" he said gaily. Tyla frowned but shrugged.

"You're the vet, Wold," she commented, bitterly. "But your experiments will be death for this cloud whale. Mark my words." Wold shuddered in spite of himself, but Tyla withdrew and issued orders to the growing crowd outside. Shortly the sound of sawing could be heard.

Pulling himself together, Wold began working on the main catwalk with determination.

Arvin headed back to the Hall of Remembrance, wondering whether this unexpected bonanza would offset that unexpected disaster. As he caught up with the other clan elders, he tapped Robbit on his shoulder and said, "You had better start getting the youngsters together. Knowing Semaj, he won't be able to stand still for the entire preliminary rig, and we'd best have a crew on him no matter when he leaves for the Wild Ride." He thought for a moment and added, "Semaj is older than normal, but we'll go for the regular three starters. Make sure the best choices are out in front – especially Damin." Robbit nodded, unsurprised at Arvin's choice of his own nephew, and trotted on ahead.

By the time Arvin and the other elders had arrived at the Hall, a panting chirpie overhauled them carrying two slabs of bone.

"Wold must have been in Old Pa's hangar when Semaj arrived to get that here so quickly. Well, quicker is better! If Wold is working already then at least Semaj won't skit. I hope. We can't afford another fiasco like Catla. Let's get started." Arvin laughed aloud at the apparent eagerness of the old vet, but he and the others began the delicate but urgent task of creating Semaj's name talisman. This was not just tradition, the name talisman was the center of the Khar clan spells that help protect a cloud whale.

Vil left the bone with the humans at the Hall of Remembrance and charged back to the hangar. He was already breathless, but still he ran as if his life depended on it, filled with a deepening, nameless fear almost indistinguishable from his general excitement. His thoughts were filled with images of his new home...

For Semaj, the work had begun with satisfying rapidity. The hatch had hurt, but not too badly and now the Youngest Companions were crawling about his insides, poking and prodding, pounding and sawing, tightening this and loosening that. His sails jerked about as the humans altered them to their own pattern, and little twinges of pain or numbness made themselves felt throughout his anatomy as they worked. Semaj bore the discomfort stoically – he had been warned about the pain of this operation. He knew it was going to get nothing but worse. He began fighting down the feeling of panic that was starting to nag at the fringes of his consciousness.

...but his heart was filled with dread. Vil scurried back to the hangar as fast as he could, but had to push his way through the crowd that was

now gathering in Old Pa's hangar. Mru shrieked at him from her post on the 1st topsail, where she had evidently retreated as the hangar began to fill with humans. Vil smelled cloud whale blood on the air, and heard the whiz of the human's saws as they bit deep into Semaj. His feeling of dread grew worse, but he fought it down and pelted toward the new hatch.

"Khar-Semaj calls his crew! Paschalon's hangar! Khar-Semaj calls his crew! Paschalon's hangar!" Robbit shouted in time with his own steps as he hurried through all the main thoroughfares of the aerial metropolis. Faces painted with surprise or hope, depending on their age, peered at him from hatchways, but people began to hurry toward Old Pa's hangar.

Kara knew that a young cloud whale made a great sacrifice when it called for a crew. She, like so many others, had thought Semaj would never make that sacrifice, but now she found herself cutting through bone, sinew, and muscle, racing against that inevitable moment of panic when Semaj would decide that he had had enough.

She worked quickly, but with great care, occasionally pausing to press on minor nerves to help deaden the pain and discomfort the cloud whale must be experiencing. This would merely delay the inevitable, but Kara prayed to her Ancestors that she and Wold would finish the preliminary rig before Semaj took the Wild Ride. If they did not, his temporarily weakened structure and his own panic would conspire to tear the young cloud whale to pieces in midair when he bolted. They had nearly lost Catla that way, and she may never have children because of it. These thoughts froze her blood, but her hands moved swiftly and with precision.

Kara and Wold met in the aft midsection, and put the finishing touches on the main catwalk together. Within moments of its completion, cloud whale riders began to scurry in and out, bearing the tools and supplies needed for the next phase of the rig. Wold set aside his own tools, bellowing orders to the workers as they hesitated at the unorthodox preparation. Kara ignored the ruckus around her and taking the big, drorwood springs passed to her, she began to put in the temporary mainspring using the mounts she had placed before the catwalk was finished..

Arvin put aside his tools and looked critically at the name talisman. Its pale colors gleamed at him as he turned it over and over, looking for flaws. There were none. Nodding to himself, he reached for the sealer and varnish.

Vil ran forward and aft across the new catwalk, his mind a blur of fear and excitement. He tried to calm himself...

Semaj felt the press of the Youngest Companions as they gathered about him. Never had he known such insecurity, never had he known such strange sick feelings. Already he regretted his rash choice, but he tried to hold firm, guessing that movements at this phase might hurt him more than help him. He wished he had someone to be with him, and his questioning thoughts found Tochou and Paschalon, Hamero and the others, all murmuring encouragement. He quieted as he felt their support. He waited.

...and succeeded in bringing some measure of calm. Vil tried to ease away the pain in his joints with a vigorous shake but did not succeed. Miserably, he huddled on top of Semaj's head and surveyed the growing frenzy of work proceeding all around him.

Arvin finished applying the varnish to the name talisman. He sneezed at the sharp odor, now that the job was done. Without even waiting for the talisman to dry he rushed towards the hangar where a new cloud whale would shortly join the clan.

Robbit stuck his head into the magician's workshop, but saw no one. Finished with his rounds, he headed back to Old Pa's hangar at a dead run. He felt the hush in the air as Clouthome itself waited for Khar-Semaj to come of age. He rubbed his head as he went, cursing the beginnings of a bad headache.

Vil rocked back and forth, hugging himself as he tried to ease his tortured body. Mru, huddled next to him, was in nearly as bad shape, but he was very glad of the company...

But glad as he was of the company, Semaj could feel his panic rising again. More Old cloud whales responded to his call, and tried to send him their own quiet strength. Semaj continued to hold himself in check. But the pain was getting very bad...

...though it made him feel only marginally better. Vil rocked and waited.

Kara shook her head, but the headache was getting worse. She cursed as the silk cable slipped away, missing the hook. Angrily, she jerked and tugged at the line, but could not summon the strength to reach the hook. She was on the verge of tears when her cousin Ekim showed up. She didn't recall the last time she had seen him, but Kara was mighty glad he had picked now to come.

"What's next, Kara?" he asked, when the line was installed.

Despite the growing headache, she outlined the work that still needed to be done. Ekim nodded and hefted his archaic-looking tools confidently.

"I can handle that," he said. "You'd better sit for a minute." He eased her down on a soft spot near the catwalk, and went back to work. Kara gasped and nursed her head as it began to throb.

Into the quiet of the magician's laboratory came a spot of carmine light. It flickered up and down, forming a hollow cylinder that slowly coalesced into the form of Cly Khar. He looked about, and then checked his notes. As he worked, several protective runes on the forward wall began to glow. Absorbed in his work, Cly did not notice.

Cloudhome woke as Semaj's fear hit a new high. One by one, the Old cloud whales slept as their wills joined the Last Fleet. Cloudhome sensed the Youngest Companions suffering as Semaj unknowingly projected his fear and pain, and the pod reached out to him, to support him and protect him, as it had done for all the living things in the clouds, from time immemorial.

Vonya heard the news of the crewing with a gasp of pure astonishment, and sprinted for Old Pa's hangar. She groaned at the first twinges of a headache, but did not slow. This time, she swore, she would not be left behind. Luck was with her, she was only a short way from the hangar. As she entered, Vonya could see the crowd already breaking up into three groups. The first was older men and women, reeling away from Semaj, clutching their heads, already far gone in the massive headache that heralded the Wild Ride. The second group was the crowd of young crew candidates, Damin, the clan master's nephew, well in front. She snorted at that, and looked at the remainder, working on and in the young cloud whale, racing against the time when Semaj would finally panic. She recognized Cly's Aunt Maia working on the aft dorsal sail and waved to her.

Maia returned the wave, and indicated the crowd of candidates below her. Vonya nodded and joined them. These younger cloud whale riders, like herself, were less affected by the headache, but they lacked the skill to help in the pre-launch preparations. She scanned the crowd for Cly but didn't see him. Where could he *be*? Surely everyone in Cloudhome knew a cloud whale was crewing!

Cly was still in the laboratory, fading in and out as he practiced his magic. Behind him, a drawer opened and a sheaf of papers from Shamyir's desk whooshed inside, to restack themselves in the correct order. A closet popped open, and a stately procession of various sorts of

equipment began to put themselves away. Here and there about the workshop, more such storm preparations were going on, and yet more protective runes were flickering. Cly, his sight impaired by the light spray of his lenses, saw nothing.

Despite her feeling that Semaj was nearing his time, Vonya hurried off to look for Cly. There was only one place he might be where he would not be aware of the growing mental discomfort spreading throughout Cloudhome – though someone should have checked the magician's laboratory.

Vil rocked back and forth, not understanding why he felt so bad when earlier he had felt so good. He felt strange things happening inside himself...

Calming under the comforting touch of the pod, Semaj tried to distract himself from the pain, concentrating on what sort of crew he might get. He knew the sort he needed, if only the Youngest Companions could guess. The ones like himself, the freaks, the sports. The ones who smelled of fire – or worse. He almost succeeded when one jab from below broke his concentration. He whistled in alarm.

...and suddenly knew he needed *help*. Even as Semaj's ear-piercing wail filled the hangar, Vil was scanning the crowd, looking for the faces he sensed he needed. *But they weren't there!* Not there! With a howl of frustration, he leaped from the cloud whale to land amongst the candidates, where he tried to fight his way to the exit. Mru, screeching with an unnameable anger, first ran in circles on the upper foredeck, then dove inside and began to evict the humans still aboard Semaj. She rampaged through Semaj's interior, bypassing Kara lying slumped under the catwalk, she hounded the humans until they retreated before her wrath. Maia and Ekim flickered into existence after she ran past.

"Semaj is reaching his limit, Ekim," Maia paused as Mru, still screeching indignantly, hurtled past and through her, not seeing the two even as she passed through their bodies. She vanished down the catwalk. "After Mru clears out the last of the workers, the crew will be the only living souls allowed on board. We'll continue to work until Semaj has departed for the Wild Ride." Ekim nodded and turned to several more people who appeared from nowhere. Like himself and Maia, they too had no shadows, and were not seen by Mru. He began issuing orders, and Khar-Tochou's last crew continued to prepare Khar-Semaj for his first.

Vil pushed his way through the astonished crowd of candidates, leaving several, including Damin, badly cut for standing their ground. He rushed off toward the main hangar as Semaj's whistle became the siren-like ululation that meant "crew-call" to anything that lived with the cloud whales. Frantic with worry, he bounded along searching for the ones he needed, the pain in his body forgotten.

Vonya burst into the workshop to stop and stare at bottles and equipment whirling through the air to put themselves away with an alacrity seldom seen in normally inanimate objects. She noticed her headache was gone, and realized her surmise was right. But Cly was not to be seen.

"Cly! Cly!" she called, then stumbled as all of Clouthome rippled. Under the influence of the growing mental storm, even the retired cloud whales were beginning to shake and quiver, and Clouthome itself shook as they did. As Vonya picked herself up, Cly appeared in a spray of rainbows gone mad.

"What in flames. . ." he began, but Vonya shouted at him, "Semaj is crewing! We've got to get to Old Pa's hangar. . ." she broke off as Semaj's crewing call reached them through the very walls. Tears welled up in her eyes as she pictured Vil gathering Semaj's new crew from the candidates assembled there, while she and Cly were left behind again.

Cly was stunned. Despite the whorl of rainbows still clinging to him, he grabbed Vonya's hand and tried to reach the door. They both went sprawling as Clouthome pitched again.

Vil hurried as fast as he could, sensing that something was about to happen...

Semaj tried to hold it all in, but his fear and pain and doubt were powerful foes and the pain was excruciating. Still he felt the Youngest Companions banging and scraping within. He whistled again, feeling the other cloud whale's mind's leaving his as they turned inside themselves, seeming to remember old crews even as Semaj began to doubt he would ever get one of his own. The activity within him redoubled, and he whistled again and again and again...

Vil burst through the laboratory door as Cly and Vonya disentangled themselves from each other and from the equipment flying about. Such was Vil's state of mind that he didn't waste time trying to put his thoughts into the human's words, he rushed across the room and sank his claws into Cly's arm!

Cly cried out as Vil hit, and felt himself being dragged across the floor by whatever had grabbed him. Through the slowly dissolving rainbows, he saw Vil, shaking and trembling, dragging him by main strength to the exit!

Vonya hardly dared believe what she saw. Vil should have been back at the hangar, loading Semaj's new crew! Even as she wondered, Vil dropped Cly at the doorway and launched himself at her. They both went down in a heap as Clouthome shuddered again.

...sawing and banging and scraping and hurting...

Vil shrieked and tried to hook Vonya to bring her back, too. Cly realized what was happening at the same time Vonya did.

"It's us! It's us!" he cried. Grabbing up his journal in one hand, and helping Vonya up with the other, he staggered out the door. Vil, seeing them moving at last, ran after...

...pounding and twisting, joints popping...

...as fast as his legs could move. Cly and Vonya both staggered again as they left the protection of the workshop and were smote with mighty headaches, but neither would stop now. They and Vil ran for all they were worth.

As they entered the hangar and pushed their way through the crowd, they saw Semaj shuddering throughout his entire length, deafening all within with his call. Vil raced for the hatch...

...it was agonizing...

Cly and Vonya followed...

...it was horrible...

Vil vanished into the hatch just as Mru ejected clan master Arvin, the last human aboard save for Kara, still curled up under the catwalk. Both chirpies ran forward, screeching uncontrollably...

...it was beyond all endurance...

Cly fell against the hatch and dragged Vonya in after him. Vil and Mru could be heard near the hive, gibbering at the tops of their lungs...

...it could not be endured!

Khar-Semaj exploded out of the hangar with a great surge of his sails, the backwash bowling the unfortunate occupants of the hangar over like tenpins. He heeled over with a snap that sent his five living crew members – three humans and two chirpies – careening to the deck and accelerated away from Clouthome at a speed he had never before attained. Filled with the creak and whirl of the mainspring that multiplied the strength in his muscles and seemed to feed power without end to his sails. He hurtled

through the sky leaving Cloudhome dwindling behind him, as wreckage from Old Pa's hangar fell upward from the gash left in the entryway.

7. THE WILD RIDE – AND A MYSTERY

Khar-Semaj dashed through the skies of Ingarde at a speed no other cloud whale of his clan had ever attained before. Too panicked to care where he went, his only concern was to *get away* – away from Cloud-home, away from the Youngest Companions, away from the *pain*. The seas vanished behind him with unthinkable quickness as the young cloud whale sped through the air.

Inside Khar-Semaj, his crew was being tossed about unmercifully. With no one at the wheels and none of the rigging tightened, they were helpless to stop Semaj's flight. Each held on, grimly, praying that enough of the rigging had been completed to keep the stress of his flight from tearing the cloud whale to pieces in mid-air. The frightening sounds of popping lines and cracking wood made such prayers all the more urgent.

The flight seemed to last for days, but hours is probably more like it. Cly clung to a recently installed stanchion and prayed to his ancestors to keep Semaj together. For all the legends and folklore that surrounded the Wild Ride, the magician was completely unprepared for the sheer violence of it – no human being could hope to do *anything* but *hold on*. Hold on – grimly, with aching arms, and wait for the ride to end, as it had to, sooner or later.

But Semaj could not outrun the pain, though he tried his best. He did not slacken speed until a rending crash from his own insides sent spears of agony through his skull. Stunned, in a red haze of unadulterated pain, Semaj slipped gratefully into unconsciousness.

It was some time before the humans aboard the cadet cloud whale could untangle themselves from the wreckage. Cly was the first.

"By the grounder's Gods, I wish my head would just explode and be done with it!" Cly blearily looked about, but recognized nothing. The corridor was filled with bits of rope and shards of wood. His arms and hands ached and shook with the aftereffects of his death grip on the stanchion. Cly suddenly noticed that there was a shapely leg sticking out of a pile of debris. The magician dug down a ways to find Vonya.

"Vonya! Von! Can you hear me?" he called. Vonya replied without opening her eyes.

"Cly? Did you die, too? I'm sorry," she said.

"We're not dead, Von. Come on, pull yourself together!" Cly hauled her up, and the two huddled in the mess, trying to recover enough to carry on a civilized conversation. Cly seemed to recover quickly.

"We're here, Von. We're actually crewing a cloud whale!" Exhausted but exulted, Cly looked about. The view was not at all encouraging.

"Looks sort of like one, anyway," agreed Vonya. Still rubbing her head to soothe away the last of her headache she looked around. They were just aft of the main catwalk, in what would eventually be Khar-Semaj's main cargo bay. It was full of detritus and junk in such a thoroughly ruined condition as to preclude guessing what it used to be.

"Cly! Your arm!" Cly looked numbly at his bloodied right arm as Vonya jerked off her sash and wrapped it around the wounds Vil had made as he tried to drag Cly to Semaj. She knotted the makeshift bandage as Cly peered around.

"Hello! Anybody else here?" Cly called, wincing at the jab that went through his temples with the noise. Surely there must have been some other choices! A cloud whale this size should have at least four or even five crew members.

"Vil here! Vil here!" cried a chirpie's voice. Sure enough, two chirpies were forward near the skull. Of course – a mated pair. The male – Vil, he called himself – was picking his way aft through the mess but he stopped half way to dig in some wreckage.

"Hello? Hi! Hi! Not sleep now! Sleep later!" he piped.

Vonya leaped to her feet, her headache forgotten. "He found someone! Let's go, Cly!" Suiting action to word, both felt their way to the human form barely visible at the end of the catwalk.

"It's Kara!" cried Vonya. Quickly, and despite the help of the excited chirpie, they extracted her from the rubble. She was stunned, but started to come around as they moved her forward into some fresher air.

"Are we dead?" Kara asked as she came around.

"It looked like it for a while, but I'm reasonably certain we're all alive," replied Cly. Kara gave him a dirty look that turned to shock as she took in the scene.

"Great flying sheets of elemental fire!" she screamed, "What happened?" Cly and Vonya could only shrug.

"We just got here ourselves, Ka," soothed Vonya. She wrestled the smaller girl down as Kara lunged for her toolbox. "Not yet. First I want to make sure you're not hurt." Kara had suffered many cuts and scrapes – much worse than either Cly's or Vonya's since she was under the catwalk when it collapsed – but her eyes darted about, already planning out her work. Cly searched the rest of the cloud whale, and was back with a report by the time Vonya had finished.

"We're holding more or less steady at three thousand feet or so, but we've got two bad punctures in the seventeenth and eighteenth lifters, so we'll probably start losing altitude soon. There's no one else aboard but

us. Semaj is completely out of it – unconscious, I think. Looks like one of the hive stays gave out and the hive swung away from his skull and then – *wham!* – swung back. Pretty hard too, I'd guess, but the inner skull seems okay, and the outer skull just has a couple fractures we can glue up. The hive is out of commission after that, too, but the King and Queen are both there, so we should see some hivelings about soon. Several aft sails are shredded and both port and starboard ventral 4thsails are completely gone, along with the 6thmidsails *and* topsails." Kara smiled just a bit.

"Those are *supposed* to be gone, Master Wold had them removed. Semaj is light-rigged, we didn't need them. The 6thsails muscles power the springs which route power to the wingflukes, the wings are pulled forward ten degrees, although that probably hasn't been done yet, it's a task meant for the refit," she explained.

"Light-rigging, hmmm? Does that explain the cargo of toothpicks we have in the main hold?" asked Vonya.

"I'm afraid so," Kara nodded unhappily. She climbed to her feet.

"I'm going to see what I can do for Semaj." She looked around, and beckoned to the two chirpies, "Let's go, Vil. Bring my kit, please." Vil grabbed up the correct item without the usual coaching and explanations and he and Kara headed aft. Mru trailed uncertainly after.

"Well, Trader Captain, what is your first order for the Magician Aboard?" asked Cly, grinning. Vonya looked startled, then grinned back.

"If you're the magician, and Kara is the vetengineer, then if we *have* a Trader Captain, I guess it must be me!" she said with a look of pleased surprise. "Well, I guess we should find out where we are and plot a course back to Cloudhome. Now that Semaj is over the hump, we can take our time with the rest of the rig. We'll need a *lot* of help cleaning this up. Besides, we have to get these fixed!" She indicated her name talisman. Cly winked.

"That's the best part," he agreed. "You see to the wheels, then, and I'll see what I can do about a position." They split up.

Several hours and a great deal of work later, they all met at the cat-walk head – the "salon," they called it – to compare notes. Kara spoke first.

"With Semaj unconscious, I took the opportunity to build an access-way to his spine. Normally that would be too painful for him to bear, but he's too far out of it to feel anything. I had just enough anesthetic left to give him a spinal. He was in *much* more pain than we knew, he has so much internal burn-scar tissue that several major nerves had re-routed when he was a baby. They were pretty badly mauled during the rig, but

they are still intact. I can work around them, though. The mainspring is a total loss. Not only can I not repair it, neither can Cloudhome and a full force of vets. Without the mainspring, the best we can do is three to five knots – six or seven if I can rig the wheels for propulsion, but that'll be tough with so few good pieces of wood left. I figure we'll need at least six, maybe eight weeks of refit time at Cloudhome – plus the time we need to solve the mainspring problem. The central rigging is holding well, with only a couple exceptions that I can handle, and I can finish tightening everything while Semaj is under the spinal. That way we don't have to risk any more pain to Semaj and we can avoid another wild ride."

She sighed as she checked her notes.

"Semaj's far band vocal chords are damaged, though – when the hive smacked his outer skull it shifted down and turned the shock away from his brain – which was actually good, but it clobbered the voice box really, really badly. *Really* badly – I don't know if Semaj will ever farspeak again. We can't even tell Cloudhome we're all right." She sat down, a little breathless after such a long speech. Vonya grimaced thoughtfully.

"I see," she said. "That was a close one. Very close. Well, the wheels are also intact, but I'm not strong enough to turn them without springs. The hive slip was the worst problem, but I got it back into position without any trouble. It won't move again, I think, but Kara will need to make sure, and also patch the outer skull. We lost about half our hivelings, but I saw some straggling in a few minutes ago, so we can figure about one-third losses there. We still have the King and the Queen, so it is not a permanent problem. I agree, we should get back to Cloudhome and get this job done right. *Especially* with the new rig. I cannot *believe* Sorva let *that* happen.

Kara smiled knowingly. "He didn't. He was in Downtown when Semaj called. Master Wold did the rig."

Vonya laughed shortly. "Should've guessed. Any way you look at it, we need to get home soon. Besides, people will be worried about us. Cly?"

Cly sighed, rubbing distractedly at the horny scar tissue on one hand. "I'm afraid that's not going to be easy. I don't know where we are," he admitted, ruefully. He shook his head at the cries of dismay from his crewmates.

"But we can't have come *that* far," protested Vonya. "Surely you can spot us. Perhaps we need more altitude? We can chuck a lot of this junk overboard if Kara can't use it."

"We'll have to chuck it, anyway," said Kara. "We're down to about fifteen hundred feet, and we may have to land on the water if Semaj doesn't wake before too long. I was waiting to suggest it since I don't want us to go too high. I patched the leaky lifters, but there's no sense in putting extra strain on them."

"Altitude isn't the problem," said Cly. "Both Eeni and Bori are out of sight. There is a medium-large yellow sun south of us, but that could be practically anything. I can also barely make out a little green sun to the southeast. I don't even want to *guess* what that one is. We came a *long* way, folks." Kara looked thoughtful.

"It may be a long way at that," she said at last. "The new spring would have way increased the power in Semaj's wingflukes, even though it wasn't as strong as the one that would've eventually replaced it. Now that I think of it, I really *don't* have any idea how far Semaj could've gotten. Figure thirty to forty knots for half a day or a little more. I'd judge from the condition of the liver that that might be a good guess."

Cly and Vonya looked at each other and whistled in unison. That was *twice* as fast as Droï's emergency speed – and Droï should be the fastest cloud whale the clan had since he was the youngest cloud whale in Khar by six years. Vonya frowned as a new thought struck her.

"Can we tell how *high* we went?" she asked, suddenly.

"How does that help?" Cly asked.

"There are *seriously* fast winds – jetstreams, I think they're called – if you get high enough. They seem to link various suns into a network. Sort of an air circulation system, I guess. Old Hamero used to ride a low-level jetstream linking Imri to Calthis directly. Almost 25,000 miles. He could do it in two days. The trip back was harder, he had to get higher to catch the return, it took four or five days all told. He died young from the wear and tear, though. Arvin said he tried to exit the stream on a trip back from Calthis, bobbled it somehow, and all we got back was his front half. We don't let the whales try it since he died, but he could travel legendary distances in *insanely* short times. If we strayed high enough. . .and caught a stream. . ." she left the conclusion to them.

Cly said, "Cloud whales do climb when they are stressed or scared. Semaj would have had an upward tilt to his course for sure. And with his new speed. . .yes, I think that is terrifyingly possible."

Vonya sighed. Kara started to add something, then bit the end of her tongue.

Cly raised his eyebrows. "...and?" he prompted.

Kara seemed uncomfortable. "Well," she said, "Um – I'd heard that the Ch'yoon clan lost their first light rig outright on the wild ride. I naturally assumed she broke up, but they never found her – I wonder now – well, if she caught a stream, and picked the wrong direction to get home – she couldn't get back before she starved or dehydrated."

Cly shook his head. "We *might* be talking *thousands* of miles, here. Come to think of it – oh, I don't like *this* idea – if we *did* hit a jetstream, we have no way of knowing what our *actual* direction was! I mean, whichever way Semaj is sailing becomes irrelevant, all he does is add or subtract his speed from the jet."

"I *will* find a way," vowed Vonya. "I don't know the streams. But I figure we went almost directly south, if we went east we'd be over Thermia, if west, Vindolonda, or the Far Isles. If north, we'd be over Lakosha. Only south would we find trackless ocean like this. If we head north, we should come across some landmark or something we can use. Kara, you'd better re-rig the wheels for propulsion if you can. We can each stand shifts and help Semaj along."

"And we'll be a lot older by the time we see port again," remarked Cly. Kara nodded unhappily.

It was the next day before things aboard Semaj were tidied up enough to permit moving. Once the wreckage was thrown overboard, Semaj floated up to about two thousand feet, which is where he woke up.

Semaj was feeling a lot better. The pain was gone, as was the numbness, but he did feel very weak. He understood that this was not really his problem – it was just that many of his muscles had been disconnected. Once the little crew had finished their emergency repairs, Semaj headed north at his best speed – about four knots. He got that up to eight by finding a good north wind at four thousand feet.

And at *these* speeds, if Semaj had really gone *thousands* of miles rather than *hundreds*. . .they'd never make it back. It was simple arithmetic. And trying to use the jetstreams in his current condition would just be a strenuous effort to commit suicide.

The lack of navigation was a clear concern. Even Semaj did not recognize their location – no surprise there since there was not a speck of land to be seen from horizon to horizon. The mysterious green and yellow suns fell behind as their motions combined with Semaj's to take them away, but they were shortly replaced by a trio of deep red suns to the north. These were not auspicious, either. No one could guess what they were.

By the third day, life had settled down to some sort of routine. Semaj continued to navigate more like a free-floating balloon than a cloud whale and his human crew went to bed exhausted every night from helping him move his own sails and wingflukes. But food was becoming a problem. With his weakened lift bladders, Semaj could not reach any of the clouds of free-flying churf bugs that provided most of a cloud whale's nourishment. Since the whale riders took their food from the cloud whale's stomach, the problem began to become acute for everyone by the fourth day. Vonya decided to call a meeting.

The crew gathered at the catwalk head, their little "salon," to discuss the problem.

"I don't know about you folks, but *I'm* getting scorched hungry," announced Vonya. "Obviously, we're either further away than we thought, or we're headed the wrong way. I think we are going to have to re-provision before we go on." Kara agreed.

"Semaj really lacks the physical resources to deal with this in his present state. He is already curtailing gas production to compensate for his weight loss," she noted.

"If that's so, why don't we just ascend to the nearest churf or brit cloud and stoke up?" asked Cly.

"We *could* probably reach the clouds, but the minute Semaj started to eat, he would have to produce gas to compensate for the weight gain. That would stress the two damaged lifters. At that altitude, they would surely burst, leaving Semaj with even less lift than he needs right now, much less the amount he'd need after feeding. We'd crash for sure," answered Kara, patiently. Magicians were great at what they did, but they sometimes seemed to think that cloud whales flew around by magic, and they *didn't*. Vonya pondered for a moment before speaking.

"I think our best course might be to cruise slower and closer to the water. We might raise a ship or a small island we would otherwise miss at this altitude and we can re-provision there. Or maybe we can rig up a net or something and pull in some fish." None of them knew anything about fishing, but it seemed like the best idea they had.

Semaj cruised lower and much slower. At the lower altitude he not only lost his helpful tailwind he also faced a two to four knot headwind. His net speed was averaging around one knot, but at least the humans got their first decent meal in days when a squad of flying fish came aboard accidentally. Their flesh went into the crew's stomachs and their bones went into Semaj's, for he needed calcium more than anything else at this point, to help him rebuild the bones in his lifters.

On the fifth day, however, things were a little different.

The headwind had died, and Semaj was cruising north at three knots, his best speed at this altitude since the Wild Ride. The sea stretched from one infinite horizon to the other and a tiny but fierce yellow sun lighted the scene with an even tinier, nearly invisible, blood red companion. Semaj, eying the bright sheen the light gave the still waters, felt a moment of disorientation. Unsure of his heading for a moment, he corrected slightly to the starboard. A moment later, again unsure, he corrected starboard once more. Still unsure, he wanted very much to correct to port, but some impulse kept him on the new course. It was nearly north...it was north. Fairly north. What was that on the horizon?

They had overhauled a ship. Excited, Semaj directed his hivelings overboard to check it out.

Oddly, they did not report food. Ships always carried food, or at least something that the hivelings scouts would think was food. But their response was confused, as though they had found something that might have been food but they weren't sure. Curious, Semaj began to descend. The humans were busy working inside, making more of their incessant alterations. They noticed nothing. Semaj vented gas slowly and worked his sails to start a right turn. He began a long slow spiral downward.

He broke out of a low cloud bank a mile from the ship and could see immediately that something was different. There were no white sails billowing from the latticework of spars above the hull and Semaj could not sense any minds on board no matter how hard he tried. He had never seen a ship without anyone on board before. It was a mystery that he could not fathom alone. Pleased with his insight, Semaj chalked up another use for his new crew.

Cly and Vonya were sitting wearily against an interior membrane watching Kara make the final adjustments on a temporary muscle reroute. They had decided to supplement the wingflukes with the muscles that had been reserved for the winch, since Semaj had nothing that needed winching anyway. Kara was doing the final test when Vil came in chattering with excitement.

"Come! Come! Strange! Must see."

"What have you been getting into now little chirp?" Kara stroked him fondly behind the ear and Vil danced in pleasure, then beckoned to them again.

"Must come. Must come to look. See what is!"

Vonya shook her head resignedly. "We'd best go and see what he wants. If you don't need us any more, Kara?"

Kara chuckled as she watched the cavorting chirpie. "No, I can finish this alone. Go ahead or he won't give us any peace."

Vonya followed Vil forward with Cly trailing after her. They were both tired from lifting the clumsy supports into place and a break was welcome.

Vil lead them to the upper lip. As they emerged onto Semaj's forward cupola – which was, at this point, a hole in his forehead and a rope – Vonya halted in surprise. "What are we doing this low? I thought we were running at a thousand feet?"

Ignoring her question Vil bounded to one side and pointed, "Look! Look! Tell why is?"

Cly followed the chirpie to the edge of the lip and looked. "Good! It's a grounder ship, Vil! You've seen them before. This is great! Perhaps now we..." He trailed off. As he looked closer Cly realized that the masts were bare except for some tattered strips of canvas. The deck was nearly awash, waves breaking just below the gunwales. There was no one visible.

"It looks like she's sinking," he said finally. "I don't see anyone on board."

Vonya squinted down at the hulk. "That's strange. Could they have been wrecked in a storm?"

Cly shrugged. "Weather's been fine for us, Von." They were still several hundred yards away and above the mast tops. It was impossible to tell. "We'd have to get closer, maybe go on board to find out. But the hull is still floating. I don't see why everyone would have abandoned it."

Vonya came to a quick decision. "Then we should go aboard and find out. There might even be some salvage."

It was a delicate operation. The masts and spars were a constant threat to Semaj's thin hide – more so than normal, since Semaj could not pressurize his damaged outer hull, which would make it harder to penetrate, for fear of rips. But finally they managed to get a line on the center mast tethered to the mast cleat forward under Semaj's chin. From there Cly and Vonya could scramble down the rigging to the ship's deck. Kara remained aboard Semaj, watching anxiously as they made their precarious way to the deck.

It was immediately evident that there had been violence. Great gashes cut across the deck and sections of the gunwales were missing entirely. In

several places there were splinters driven into the wooden bulkhead and masts. The two aft cabins had taken a large amount of damage.

All of the hatches were open, and stale, smelly water was sloshing around in the holds below. If the weather hadn't been calm the ship would have sunk long since. It was evident that it wouldn't last much longer anyway. But there was no sign of the crew – even though a ship's boat still sat in its cradle amidships.

Cly looked around the deck trying to imagine what could have struck with such savagery. He found Vonya looking at him, a puzzled question in her gaze.

"I don't know. The boat's here so they didn't leave in that, but I don't remember if there was one on the stern." He looked around the deck again, confused. "The Master or Captain's cabin should be in the stern. If we find the log it may tell us something."

Vonya nodded and followed him toward the doors under the wheel. They found the first of the ship's crew there, just inside the companion-way. His skull was split open and the body stank with decay. A broken cutlass lay on the deck beside him. One of their own hivelings stood near, looking first at the dead man then at them, as if unsure what to do.

The two whale riders looked at each other mutely. Vonya fingered her dagger but Cly shook his head. "Whoever killed him, it was days ago. I doubt that anyone is still here." Cly looked down at the body sadly. "At least we know they put up a fight." He glanced around again with a questioning look on his face. "Exposed corpses and no birds. Flames. We must still be pretty far from land." Cly sighed and nudged the hiving, startling it into buzzing flight, and watched as the being rose to Semaj and rejoined its fellows already clustering about the lower hive entrance.

Vonya shook her head. "This is too creepy. There's nothing here worth having but the knowledge we've gained already. Let us away, Cly!"

Cly nodded. "I think you're right. Perhaps we...perhaps..." He got a faraway look in his eyes and trailed off.

"Cly!" Vonya said, with an edge in her voice. "Cly! What is it?!"

The magician shook himself like a dog coming in from a swim. "Nothing. It's just. . . I don't know. We're missing something. I'm sure of it!" With a determined look, he moved aft again.

Not trusting the unnatural quiet, Vonya drew her polished bone dagger before following him deeper into the ship. They picked their way carefully over debris scattered on the deck, lit only by a few scattered beams of light straggling in from the door. The corridor ended in a massive door of polished wood, broken in and hanging from one hinge. The

wood was splintered around the latch. Inside were four more bodies, one of them a woman garbed in a man's clothes, now slashed and bloody. There were no weapons visible though all but one seemed to have died violently. They lay near the door, their bodies facing or fallen away from the opening. The windows in the stern were smashed, waves lapping only a couple of feet below them.

The room had been ransacked. Linen was tossed about the cabin and drawers had been ripped out of the desk. The bedding from the main bed as well as the two side bunks was slashed and strewn across the floor. Feathers from pillows clung damply everywhere. Tables were overturned and even the cushions slashed open, their stuffings scattered around the floor. Some shelves had lined one wall, they and the books they had held were now all over the deck. The air was heavy with the stench of decay.

Cly picked his way carefully across the deck checking each of the bound volumes until he found the ship's log. It was lying near the desk, open but with the pages down. The spine was bent as though someone had stepped on it. The paper was damp but at least the leaves weren't stuck fast. Nodding in satisfaction, Cly retraced his steps, stopping to examine one or another of the books scattered about. Several were histories in Imrian or Faerie languages. Those that weren't too badly damaged he took.

Passing the books to Vonya, Cly headed back to examine the unmarked body. It lay unmoving, face down, in the back of the cabin. Cly reached to turn it over but jerked his hand back before touching it. Vonya dropped the books and fell into a fighter's crouch at the sudden movement but nothing seemed to happen. Cly looked thoughtful.

"Well?" Vonya demanded, irritated at her own jumpy nerves. Cly shook his head.

"This man was a magician. I don't recognize the college. Possibly Wizard but I'm not sure. He was *good* – his body is still surrounded with a protection spell. Dead for *days* and the spell is still holding. Incredible! I'd bet not even Master Bosrin could hold a spell like that – not without days of preparation."

"What killed him?" asked Vonya.

"He was overwhelmed with superior magic. No question about it. From the way he's clutching at his chest I'd say it was probably a simple death spell. Necromantic or Enchantment, most likely. And whoever did it was *really* powerful to be able to punch it through such protection," Cly said, still eying the body.

Vonya looked around the cabin again. "Where might the cargo manifests be kept?"

Cly gestured at the shambles with a shrug, "Try anywhere. I don't know where they should be, or even if they're still on board. If there's anything else left we'd be scorched lucky to find it. Who ever did this searched hard – physically, if not magically. Anything still in the holds is under water and probably heavy. We couldn't move it, especially without finished cargo holds." Especially not without a winch he added to himself.

Vonya started again to suggest leaving but as she opened her mouth, Cly suddenly made a strange gesture toward the slain magician.

"# tel cancelli nerak duran - Dag!" She shuddered. Magic! She stood, rooted, as he traced little patterns in the air with one finger. Vonya wanted to scream – she couldn't *believe* Cly was meddling in such circumstances! – but she didn't dare disturb him now that the spell was begun.

Cly gingerly touched the body. Vonya let out a shuddering gasp and said, "Cly! By the Ancestors and the Elements! Don't *mess* with this!"

Cly glanced back, "Calm down, Von. The man's dead, he's not resisting." Cly turned the body over and searched through the man's clothing, grimly ignoring the clammy feel of the days-dead flesh. He shortly found what he was looking for and tucked the journal into his own tunic.

"I'm sorry, fellow, but I need all the help I can get, and for sure you're beyond missing it," Cly gently closed the magician's eyes, and murmured a non-magical but sincere prayer for a brother magician's soul to find its Ancestors, before turning to join Vonya. "I don't think we'll find anything worth salvaging, Von. Whoever did this took anything of value." Cly grimaced at the entire, unholy, mess.

Vonya was still staring at Cly with a look of horror on her face. "I guess I never really understood what you. . .I mean. . .I never figured. . ." she began.

Cly smiled a little, "It was just a minor spell, really. I merely dispelled the protection. Not a Thaumateurgical spell to be sure, but a very basic one that all magicians know. Quite harmless," he added, after a moment. "All it really does is apply brakes to any on-going spell or dweomer."

Vonya seemed to collect herself. Cly was in his element now. He was Magician Aboard and he carried an aura of authority she had never sensed before in her childhood friend. He was changing, she thought. They all were.

"What about that book? Why wasn't it taken?" she asked. Cly chuckled.

"The attempt would've fried somebody, most likely. Spells decay over time – unless they're *designed* for long-term use – and that protection spell must have really been something when it was fresh. *I* wouldn't have searched his body, either."

Vonya nodded understanding and gathered up the books she had dropped.

"Right," she said. Let's get out of here!"

"Yes. Unquestionably," Cly agreed. But he made no move toward the door.

"Cly?"

"I don't *know*, Von. *Something...*" Cly said, again scanning the room.

Vonya stepped to the door to try to encourage the magician to leave when she, too, suddenly felt as if she were forgetting something. She glanced around curiously, checking the books and her still-drawn dagger to assure herself that they were not the source of the feeling – when suddenly, an ever so slight motion caught her eye. She pointed with her dagger toward a metal fixture swinging from the ceiling. "That held fire, didn't it?"

"For light, I suppose, yes." He moved closer to it, mildly curious. The metal still gleamed dully and glass fragments stuck out at odd angles. Cly reached up to touch it. It swung easily, but there was a dull clunk inside as it came back.

Intrigued, he took a moment to examine the fastening, then lifted the lamp off its hook and looked more closely. "I've never really examined one of these before but I don't think they're supposed to have anything inside," he said. "If it was fuel it would slosh not clunk. Looks like it used up all the fuel, the wick burned down and it went out."

The top unscrewed easily, lubricated by the fuel. A rank, oily smell drifted out, and Cly wrinkled his nose. Careful to avoid getting any of the stuff on him, Cly poured it out onto the deck. Only a drop or two of oil dripped from the lip. Then a piece of metal dropped to the floor with a tiny thud. It glowed, with the feel of magic no longer shielded by the metal. Excited, he grabbed a bit of linen from a slashed pillow and carefully wiped it clean. A golden disk with a small gem set in it. Small and otherwise unremarkable, most of the markings obscured and unreadable, the tiny glow of light in the gem spoke of magic. Two rough spots on the circumference testified that it had been broken off of something else. Looking up at Vonya he said, "This we take."

She nodded her agreement, glancing at the slain magician. "Do you think he'll mind?"

Cly shook his head. "Not even a little. I'd guess he stuck it up there hoping to hide it from the searchers. If the lamp was lit at the time they might not have thought to look inside – and the metal base would've helped shield the magical feeling. Quick thinking. If he had kept it on him, the enemy magician would have sensed it and spent all the time needed to break through the protection and recover both the amulet *and* the journal. As it was, he must have been tired after the fight and never checked the lamp. Must have decided the journal alone wasn't worth the effort, so he got nothing."

Vonya nodded. "Well, I guess we got lucky. Now, let's improve our luck still further and get off this thing before it sinks. I'd rather be grounded than caught here when it goes down."

Cly couldn't agree more. Shuddering at the prospect of being covered with hundreds of fathoms of water he followed her back on deck. They took a last look around, even climbing the forecastle before leaving, but there wasn't anything else interesting. Not even any more bodies. Cly wasn't sure if that was good or bad. They did find a metal ball embedded in the bulkhead under the forecastle, deep in splintered wood. The ball was bronze and it might have once been round. Now it was dented and gashed, the shape flattened from several sides. They took nothing else but the log and the histories they had found in the captain's cabin. There was nothing to take. Vonya went up the rigging to Semaj first. Cly untied the loop and caught hold of the rope. Timing his jump to the ship's roll he swung free of the mast and climbed back aboard the cloud whale.

The creepy feelings were left behind as Cly and Vonya brought Kara up to date in the little salon. As Semaj laboriously climbed to his former altitude the threesome considered their limited options.

"The log mentions quite a lot of pirate attacks. I gather that the captain of the merchanter decided to swing way south of the normal routes to avoid the increased piracy in the regular shipping lanes. Now, pirates preying on regular shipping is one thing but these poor people managed to find one out in the middle of nowhere. Otherwise, the log tells us little we don't already know," remarked Vonya, turning the battered tome over and over in her hands as she spoke. "The vessel was a brig, the *Gallun's Luck* by name, outbound from Westernmost Islands, wherever *they* are, and was hit by pirates on the fourth day of the month of the Serpent. Whenever *that* was. The log is in a funny dialect of Rithian – loaded with poor grammar and bad spelling. I got the impression that it wasn't the captain's usual tongue – could be he was using it as a sort of 'secret' language or something, I've heard of that."

Cly nodded. "That's common. Those islands are very far west of Imri, outside our normal trade routes. Za clan connects the Thenten there, I think. I'd guess this vessel was headed for Talus or maybe even Krumm's Mote. It's too bad we don't know their calendar, we could make a good guess from the course and maybe nail down our own position better," he shrugged. "As it is, I'd try to bear northwest. Imri trades both east and west, for sure we'll cross a shipping lane if we do that."

Vonya looked at Kara, who shrugged. "Anywhere is fine provided they have wood and silk. Until I get that, we'll go nowhere, very slowly." Vonya nodded and waved Vil over. The chirpie bounced to her side, twitching his bushy tail in excitement.

"Northwest. Low. Watch for ships," she said clearly. "Okay?"

"North! West! Look for ships!" Vil gave an almost human giggle and bounded forward, followed by Mru. A moment later, the humans swayed as Semaj angled west. Cly still seemed troubled.

"Pirates are one thing, Von, but pirates with a *magician* on board – that's something *very* different. It was no amateur that killed the magician on the *Gallun's Luck*. And another thing, Imri has the finest navy anywhere. She has steam and she has armor both, for ships of the line, and all her heaviest warships also carry magical defenses. If the piracy is so bad that this merchanter swung this far south to avoid it then why isn't Imri fighting them tooth and nail?"

Vonya closed her eyes. "I don't know. Maybe they have other concerns. Maybe they *are* fighting them. We have no way to tell. But I hear your real question, Cly. You're right. Whatever is going on is bad for business and it's smack in the middle of *our* territory." She sighed and went on. "I've heard so many rumors. But the number of *confirmed* pirate hits wasn't *very* high. But now I wonder if the tales aren't true."

"Tales?" Cly prompted.

"Tales of the pirate city. Of Kenekra," she replied, looking at her nails and picking at them.

"Kenekra. . .the Lost City," Cly echoed. "Oh, the tales I've heard about that one! History has it that it was behind every pirate uprising in the Nestick. At least, oh, a dozen times. The Lost City – *Hidden* city, believe! How it could support so much mischief and never be found? *We* should have spotted it," the Magician said. "We have a perspective no one else does. But even we never found it. Not even with sorcery!"

Vonya shook her head.

"As if we didn't have enough trouble. Well, we still have our work cut out for us. Let's do it." The three returned to their various jobs, Cly

detouring to a private place to stash the dead magician's journal. He would not have time to study it for a while, it seemed. Cly kept the disk in a pocket of his jacket and when fate spared him a free moment or two he would take it out and ponder it – but the mysterious disk didn't seem to want to give up any secrets just yet.

The young magician also pondered the riddle of that sad hulk. It was too far from land, too much a challenge to Imri and her navy. Several times before pirates had heralded great upheavals in the world. First when Evenshade froze Caerleon. Then at the founding of Calthis. At the opening of Krumm's mote. The war that raised the World Wall. Each and every cultural disaster he could think of arose during or just following a period of increasing freebooting. If this was such a time then soon great masses of men, non-men and – more importantly for traders, *money* – would be moving around too. That meant power shifts, fighting, war – and *more* piracy. And always in history was one evil city poised to take advantage of all the chaos. Cly resolved to inquire discreetly, if they made Imri, to find out if the lost city was rising again. When pirates grew bold and the world grew dark 'twas nearly always Kenekra that profited. Each time his logic came to this point, Cly would offer a prayer to his Ancestors and the Elements that he be wrong.

Semaj continued north for four more days and morale aboard the clan's newest cloud whale was at a very low ebb before their luck finally changed – not, however, for the better.

8. PIRATES – WITH MAGIC

Cly was pacing back and forth along the gangway just aft of Semaj's skull – almost the only intact woodwork to be found aboard the cadet whale – when he spotted an irregularity on the horizon through the rent in Semaj's forehead that would someday be the forward hatch to the cupola. He leaped forward and worked his way around Semaj's braincase and stepped out on the whale's upper lip and peered ahead. It seemed too small to be an island.

"Vonya!" he called back into the salon. "We're coming up on something!" Cly squinted into the distance and decided to use a bit of magic. He reached into his cloak to one of the many small pockets there and pulled out a tiny crystal lens. Strictly speaking, the prop wasn't *necessary* but using one let him cast faster with less effort. He concentrated – "*Sed fidilium neg Alara + dag!*" – and a fog began to appear before him, whirling first slowly then more rapidly to form a lens five feet across and oriented toward the distant object. At the same time, ghostly controls appeared around his hands. Zoom and tilt on his left, pan on his right. In a moment the view stabilized and, as it cleared, Cly found himself looking at the deck of a pirate ship!

The burning ocean must be *filled* with pirates, the magician cursed to himself. He half turned at Vonya's gasp behind him. He waved her to come out.

"Come on. Take a look. We don't do Sorcery in the School of Thaumateurgy but we have our ways when information is needed," Cly said.

Vonya was impressed. The great lens gave them a brilliant and sharp view of the ship at an apparent distance of about a hundred feet and only a bit over deck level.

"I don't think we want to get much closer," the Magician said with folded arms. Vonya gave him a wide-eyed glance and then called back into the salon.

"Kara! Pull us ten points port with the wheels. See if you can get Vil to drop Semaj closer to the water – slowly," she added throwing a glance at the lens. Kara's head vanished from above Semaj's brain case where she had been watching them and Vonya heard her call to the chirpies. In a moment Semaj turned away – the pirate ship swishing out of view and leaving them looking at water.

Cly zoomed out, relocated the ship and zoomed back in bringing the ship back into view. Grimly they watched. The magician had no idea what the pirates were about.

The vessel appeared to be holding still somehow – perhaps it was anchored, though the view gave no indication of how that might be. Maybe it was just shallow there. Pirates were being marched one by one to the gangplank. Were they executing members of their own crew? No, Cly decided. They were jumping off the plank *willingly*. One burly pirate – bald, though he sported a blonde beard, shirtless, but with rich trappings – stood at the base of the plank giving each man a swig from the jeweled flask he held before they leaped off the plank. Some went laughing, even clowning, though none were to be seen in the water – they sank like stones. One man clowned over long and fell to the plank full length clutching at his throat, convulsing, before he rolled into the water – and though there was no sound with the image Cly could see the great shout of merriment and derision that greeted the drowning clown. The muscular, shirtless pirate laughed hugely, silently in the lens.

Soon the pirates seemed to tire of drowning their own and moved aft and Cly panned the lens to track them and adjust it's tilt as well, as Semaj approached the water below. Now the view was nearly level with the deck of the enemy ship. The shirtless pirate and his cohorts joined more pirates who were busy hauling in nets. Nets? From a *motionless* vessel? Even a skyjammer knew that would catch few fish. And indeed they had caught none, for what was in the nets was treasure. Bag after leather bag of it, each opened in turn and poured into great chests on the deck, before each bag was weighted with a brick or stone and tossed back into the water. The filled chests floated until they were dragged below by something. The nets were lowered once again. Cly and Vonya watched with growing understanding.

"There's a ship down there, Cly," Vonya said faintly. "They've sunk it. And somehow they've found a way to get men down to loot it." Cly nodded.

"Magic, clearly. The flask is a decanter of some kind of potion that lets them breath water." Cly squinted at the scene memorizing the face of the powerful, bare-chested pirate who seemed to be the leader. Suddenly one man pointed toward them and in a moment all faces were turned to watch the whale riders!

Cly knew they could see little but some sort of distant moving shadow – the lens did not work two ways. But he dismissed the lens with a wave, palming the lens and returning it invisibly to his pocket. Sheer habit, that, but a good one. He didn't care if Vonya knew, but it would be obvious to stranger what he was about if he didn't use the prestidigitation. He was worried – Semaj was not fast in his crippled condition – and he

might easily be vulnerable to pirates with such magical resources. Un-easily, he considered what to do that would let them slip away unseen. For a moment he toyed with his invisibility spell but he realized the colorful outline would make them even easier to see at a distance not less, and he wasn't totally sure he could reliably do the reverse prism. Vonya looked at him uncertainly.

Then the magician had an idea. He didn't have a prop for this one yet, but he called up another spell – “*Artisti physicula Semaj pre-senta + dag!*” – a seeming to paint. A ghostly brush appeared in his right hand and a palette of colors in his left. An image of Semaj – the target of the spell – appeared before him, with controls he could use to pan, spin, and tilt the image using the butt of his brush. He considered how to change the cloud whale's colors. He was not that good an artist. Using the butt of the brush he selected all of the cloud whale and used the hue control to make him bluer all around. To someone far enough away Semaj's new colors would make him impossible to see against the distant sky. He hoped. He shut down the primary spell after taking the ghostly controller, maintaining the effect as they skirted the pirates, before letting it lapse. Semaj returned to his normal colors as the control vanished.

The spell did the trick – or else the pirates were too busy looting their prey. But the whale riders now had a severe case of nerves.

Heretofore the rapaciousness of pirates was limited by the need to keep the victim floating at least long enough to rob it. Now there was no such limit they could savagely and safely kill everyone aboard and recover the cargo at leisure. The efficiency was matched only by the cold bloodedness of the idea. “Pirates?” thought the magician. No. Murderers more like. Or *worse*. . .grave robbers. They had thought the pirate problem was bad. But now it seemed they had somehow underestimated it. There was no talk of what they would do with this vessel. They were clearly outmatched. Semaj cruised on himself, and crew, alert to the dangers below. But their luck was soon to change.

9. THE BATTLE!

Semaj – his normal colors restored once the spell wore off – was cruising at about five hundred feet when he noticed a white dot on the horizon. Hoping that they had at last found help and not yet another pirate or victim, he swung right to investigate. In less than half an hour he saw that his hunch was right. Not just one but two grounder ships were sailing along to the east ahead of him. A fleet, perhaps.

Semaj considered waking up his crew, all but one of which were slumbering soundly in the salon, but it seemed wiser to let the little things rest. Their thoughts were not moving as swiftly or as surely as they were before and they needed to sleep. Semaj decided to scout the area first. He recalled nothing from the minds of his crew that pirates would travel in pairs.

At first he didn't notice anything unusual. The two grounder ships were moving near each other and seemed to be sailing a little erratically. Semaj turned to pass nearer.

The first sign that anything was different with these ships came from the mental emanations – at first merely a distant murmur but growing louder and more distinct as Semaj approached. There was fear and anger boiling up from the two ships, desperation mixed with despair, and avarice lusting for blood. Never had Semaj sensed such a maelstrom of emotion from the groundling cousins of his Youngest Companions. The nearest he could remember was when he had chanced near a ship foundering in a storm. This was new. Semaj vented gas to drop toward the sea. Maybe the watching one of his crew would know what the ships were doing.

It was Cly's watch. Keeping watch wasn't common on cloud whales but with a new cloud whale, an all but destroyed rig, and pirates seemingly behind every wave, they all slept easier knowing that someone was awake to find trouble before it could happen. Or, at least, not too soon after it had. For the most part he was spending his watch at the main wheels just behind Semaj's braincase.

Vonya was sleeping, as was Kara. His own duties were light. Check the lines throughout the cloud whale every so often to be sure nothing was binding or abrading and otherwise just be there if anything did happen.

Cly hardly noticed the gentle sway as Semaj changed course. There were always cross breezes or eddies and the young cloud whale would frequently turn aside for no apparent reason only to return to course a minute later. If there was any trouble he would hear Semaj's alarm call.

When Semaj started to vent Cly came alert. There still wasn't any alarm call but he decided to go out on the lip to see what was happening anyway. Besides, he was bored.

Even with his studies of grounder lore and history Cly didn't understand what was happening right away. Semaj was bearing down on two ships sailing close together, one just behind the other. The nearest was a two masted schooner with a dozen or more men on deck or in the rigging, her starboard beam passing directly ahead of Semaj. In front of the schooner was a merchant galleon running downwind with all sails set. Semaj was coming in from up wind, off their stern quarter.

The schooner was catching up to and coming alongside of the galleon, with Semaj a scant few hundred yards away, when Cly saw a man fall from the schooner's rigging. It took another second for him to realize the significance of that. The schooner was attacking the merchant-man! *Pirates!*

Seconds passed in shock as Cly's tired mind tried to deny the idea even though he could see the bowmen now that he knew what to look for. Grappling lines were being thrown from the schooner. Then he was running back to the salon yelling to Vil to turn Semaj away from the ships.

The pirates had been too intent on their prey to notice a cloud whale silently gliding toward them from the other side. They were grappled fast to the galleon's side, the boarding party crouching behind the gunwale ready to swing across, when an arbalestier in the rigging glanced over his shoulder and saw a cloud whale looming out of the sky no higher than the mast top. His cry of warning was lost in the general hubbub on deck but it reached the other men in the rigging.

Semaj ignored the panic he felt from his magician as he approached the ships, intent on discovering what they were doing. He was astounded as the first arrows hit. He had never been attacked before – and the arrows stung! Whistling in alarm, Semaj began a hard right turn and voided ballast water to get away.

Even as he started the turn Semaj realized that a gas bladder had been punctured. Lift was leaking away with lost gas and more arrows were flying toward him. He could be left floating on the sea if he didn't get away! With real alarm now, Semaj began stroking his sails with all of his strength. Inside he was aware of the Oldest Companions tumbling out of their hive in defense.

Cly was shaking Vonya and Kara awake when Semaj turned. His hold on a nearby strut was the only thing that saved him from pitching directly out through Semaj's main hatchway. As his crewmates groped for handholds, Cly staggered back to the wheels.

The grounder's arrows filled the air and Semaj was helpless to avoid them. Reining in his panic, he tried to ease away from the schooner but his lost lift was critical. His aftmost ventral sail fouled on the schooner's tallest mast, jerking the cloud whale to a halt.

The schooner was pulling past the galleon, snapping some of the grappling lines, her stern swinging away from the galleon's side despite the steersman's best efforts. The sails were still full set, the aloft crew hadn't dropped them as they should have. The pirate captain turned to bel-low orders, ready to boil someone in oil for their dereliction. His shout turned to a strangled shriek as he sighted the great bulk hanging above. A look of horrible greed crossed his piglike features.

"Forget ze fat merchant!" he yelled, *"Go for ze vale! Ze vale! Five hundred crowns to ze man who reaches her veels! A hundred to every man who heels vun uff her crew!"* His crew responded with a will, falling back from the galleon and swarming into the rigging.

Holding desperately to the wheels with both arms, Cly watched helplessly as arrows arced up from the schooner's rigging. Pirates were climbing higher, waving cutlasses as if they intended to board the cloud whale now thoroughly entangled with their rigging. Cly could hear Kara screaming orders to Vonya and the chirpies, trying to clear the fouled sail.

His cloud whale was being *attacked!* Cly was a whale rider, and the crew Thaumateurge. It was his *duty* to defend Semaj and here he was, helpless, his cloud whale crippled and his mates unprepared to repel an attack, without so much as a simple crossbow to aid in their defense! In near panic, Cly willed himself to think of *something* to do!

Suddenly a com flashed into existence. *"I hear, Yovanitch."* From something attuned to his magic that came toward Cly's need and followed the arrow of his anger straight at the schooner.

A blast of flame sprang into existence on the schooner's forward deck. Screaming pirates leaped away as the apparition rose up into a vaguely manlike winged shape familiar and terrible as it reached for the nearest pirate. *"Hee waw,"* it crackled over the com as it seized its first victim.

"No!" Cly screamed from the depths of his soul a desperate denial that this had anything to do with him even though he knew with utter cer-

tainty that he had called it. A *fire* elemental! *His* fire elemental! Kouris-hand, brought into being at Cly's own kindling!

Cly watched in frozen horror, unable to tear his eyes away, as the freed salamander raged into a great gout of flame touching sails and rigging lines and flashing across the deck!

From beneath Semaj a tip of flame licked up the cloud whale's side. Cly wrapped himself tighter around the wheels, overwhelmed by the magnitude of what he had done, certain that he had destroyed Semaj.

The merchant crew suddenly realized that there were no more arrows raining down on them. The pirates had turned all their attention to the cloud whale that was inexplicably attacking them. The merchants were free to stand up and fight, to let their own arrows fly – or to run. The portly merchant captain of the *Lady Shewa* froze for a long moment to make his decision.

"Sink de muddoless bastids!" he shouted, leaping for the gunwale. After a moment of shock, his crew cheered and let fly with their arrows.

The schooner's full reached boom was jutting across the galleon's deck threatening to buckle spars and foul rigging as the first boarders leaped across. In a trice they pushed back the few defenders left on the boarding ramp and established a foothold on the pirate's own deck.

The fires were a minor annoyance. A small distraction in the midst of his battle to escape but Semaj could feel the terror and confusion they caused in the Oldest Companions struggling to reach his attackers. Semaj twisted his will to banish the flames but the fire itself resisted. This had never happened before. Surprised, he realized that its nature was feeding from a source of elemental fire on one of the ships below. Semaj turned his full will against the blaze and in another instant the flames were out, the salamander not caring whether incidental flames burned or not. The Oldest Companions dropped out of his bottom side to attack, their terror forgotten. No more arrows were hitting him. Semaj's awareness swept through his own body and discovered that only two bladders were punctured. A third had been hit but only a glancing blow. It was weakened but holding. He had enough lift to remain aloft with minimum ballast. A moment later a jab of pain went through him as the fouled sail was finally cut away by the Youngest Companions. Pulling away, reassured of his continued maneuverability, Semaj had time to feel anger at the effrontery and outrage at having been attacked. He turned to parallel the ships determined that they would regret their actions.

Vonya burst into the wheel room, dagger in hand, struggling to keep her balance. Naked and disheveled from sleep, bruised and bleeding from fighting her way through frantic hivelings to reach the wheels, she stood swaying on the deck searching for Cly.

He was clinging to the wheels, an expression of horror on his face like nothing she had ever seen before. His arms were clenched around the shaft, slightly bending the tough drorwood, and he was staring over the port side with his head craned around at an impossible angle.

Vonya grabbed his arm and tried to pull it loose but Cly's grip was maniacal. Dropping her dagger, Vonya grabbed his head with both hands and forced it around to look at her.

"Cly, what's happening? Answer me! Answer me, or I'll ground you!"

She was shouting practically into his face. Cly's answer was mumbled, the only words she could understand were fire and attack. Then his eyes focused and she knew that he was seeing her instead of whatever terrible vision had held him. He gasped, choked, and one arm came loose from the wheels to clutch her shoulder to him. Vonya realized that he was crying. His expression relaxed, then hardened in determination.

"HE'S MINE! I HAVE TO STOP HIM!"

His words were frantic and nearly incoherent but now he was turning to face the schooner, using one hand to balance against the wheels as his other hand moved in staccato patterns he called "*Bed cancell! Retn originia - Dag!*" Whatever terror had gripped him before he was acting now. The one thing *she* understood was that someone was attacking Se-maj. Grabbing up her dagger Vonya sprinted aft heeding Kara's calls for help as she and the two chirpies tried to deal with the pirates that had made it on board.

The fire disappeared from the schooner's deck as quickly as it had come, leaving the survivors stunned, staring at charred decking and sails scorched and useless. They had only seconds to recover before their erstwhile prey attacked *them*. Lead by their portly captain, the merchants cleaved through the pirates left on deck, hacking their way aft toward the enemy captain. The hivelings didn't know the difference between merchant crew and pirate's but the galleon's crew and passengers were on the decks of the ships or crouching behind any solid cover they could find. Most of the pirates were in the rigging trying to reach the cloud whale. The hivelings went for the closest targets.

For the pirates already aloft, screams from their fellows higher in the rigging announced the next part of their nightmare. Black winged mon-

sters, all claws and cutting jaws, were dropping out of the belly of the cloud whale. Already archers and severed rigging were falling past, cut apart by the flying horrors they hadn't had time to defend against. Arrows from the merchantman were still striking here and there among them. The pirate's resolve wavered and broke, the captain realizing too late that his greed had cost him both prizes, and might yet cost him his command and possibly even his life. Swearing in fear and anger, he darted to his cabin.

Cly was still shaking with reaction. He had needed two tries to dismiss the elemental but finally it was gone. Gripped with determination not to loose control again he sprinted aft to join his crewmates. Four burly pirates had the two women backed against what would someday be Semaj's loading ramp. Panicked at the realization that the cloud whale was no longer fouled on the schooner and that it was up to them to capture it or die trying, the pirate's cutlasses would have made short work of Kara's and Vonya's polished bone daggers but for the two chirpies. Screaming with rage and far too agile for the desperate pirates, the chirpies took advantage of every opening to savage the pirates from behind.

Cly skidded to a halt and spent a heartbeat composing his mind. He palmed out a little wooden cross with two crossbars. Unhooking and taking the top crossbar in his left hand he muttered "*Šinull demonnan marionette! - Dag!*" – and used the ghostly control that flashed into existence in front of him to target a spot just behind the pirates.

An enraged roar behind them stunned the four men. Three whipped around to find the chamber occupied by a terrifying demon a dozen feet tall and grinning toothily from ear to ear as he prepared to launch himself at them! Cly chuckled as he manipulated the marionette control.

This was one advantage to being of Keldane's line – most thaumaturges tried to get out of sight as they used the puppet spell to manipulate a seeming, otherwise it would be too obvious what he was doing and it would be harder to fool anyone. But Keldane himself had come up with the cloaking part of the spell – as he moved and swooped his hands around, anyone looking at him would see him standing there perfectly still. It was a simple snapshot of him as he was when the spell started – you could actually see the marionette control palmed in his hand if you looked closely enough – but hopefully the pirates would be too focused on the demon to see he had apparently frozen in place. Did sometimes give one a reputation as a coward, though.

Kara parried the fourth pirate as Vonya lunged at one of the three, taking him in the heart as he gaped at the demon. He sagged to the floor as the three remaining pirates tried to disengage and regroup.

Mortally frightened now, the pirates tried to back into a corner to defend themselves but the grinning demon leaped over them to block the way. Kara caught one pirate unawares with a lethal thrust as Mru and Vil swarmed over another, bringing him to the floor where they clawed him furiously. The last pirate backed against a wall, throwing down his cutlass.

“*Call zem uff! l giff up! l giff up!*” he begged.

Kara and Vonya wrestled him down and tied him as Cly dispelled the seeming with a casual wave of his hand that also returned the marionette control to its’ pocket. The demon image wavered and vanished like smoke. The Magician stole a moment to enjoy the pirate’s expression.

Cly thought that had gone very well. The jump was the only thing he really still needed to work on. At the apex you could still see it sort of dangling by the strings. Well – you could if you didn’t think a demon was toying with you. *Misdirection* – that was the key.

The pirate captain reappeared on deck, quaking with the fear every bully knows when his victim turns on him, but clutching a handful of glowing gemstones. As the cloud whale swung back toward his beleaguered ship he grabbed a gem at random and used it as he had been taught.

The stone burst in his hand spewing out blackness that rimed his skin with frost. The captain fell backward out of the way of the cloud forming itself into a batlike blot of utter darkness. The sinister shape began to wing its way toward the cloud whale.

Terrified at what he had done but more afraid of losing his ship – or his life – the captain selected another gem and triggered it as well. His hand lit with a fell red glow and the captain grinned as he touched an attacking hivelings. The foul insect was blasted to bloody shards!

Grimly purposeful, Semaj glided back toward the pirates. Hivelings were diving back and forth across the schooner cutting the last of the remaining pirates from the rigging. With careful directing thoughts Semaj guided them toward the pirates and away from merchant crew, aiming the attack at the real enemies. He sensed the Youngest Companions had fought off the invasion within and knew he was safe from that quarter. Then he saw the winged batlike shape heading toward him. Recognizing evil magic Semaj whistled for help.

Cly dashed from the hold as he heard Semaj’s call followed by Vonya and the chirpies, leaving Kara to guard the trussed pirate. Semaj whistled again as he felt one of his hivelings die from some evil spell and Cly and

Vonya burst out on the upper lip as he surged to port to avoid the black shape trying to intercept them. Cly identified it immediately.

“Shadow demon! Vil, back us off!” he shouted, then grabbed for a handhold as Semaj obeyed with alacrity. Cly squinted at the approaching horror trying to think of a weak spot. It was *so* obvious that Cly almost laughed – the demon was already in broad daylight! And clearly spending a great deal of effort to do so! Cly grinned. Somebody down there did not know what he was doing! He composed his mind and intoned “*Simulan incandesol intensius pento + dax!*”

The pirate captain was just reaching for another of the filthy insects when the sky lit with a blinding glare. Instinctively he grabbed at his own eyes. . .

The fight was over quickly. Archers in the merchant’s rigging pinned the surviving pirates to the deck while the hivelings dove down to cut at heads and necks. Burnt, cut, shrouded in their own falling sails and bereft of leadership, with their own ship overrun and with the cloud whale heading toward them spewing out more of the giant carnivorous insects, they stopped fighting and ran anywhere they could to get away. A few, wounded and terrified, managed to get below and close the hatches behind them. The rest of them died on deck.

Cly scanned the sky as the glow from his light spell faded and nodded approvingly. He *much* preferred a sky clear of shadow demons. The situation below looked improved, too. The fight was over. Cly did a quick double take at the pirate deck. Yes, the fight was definitely over, hiving foragers were beginning to ferry slain pirates back to Semaj. Well, at least the cloud whale would get a decent meal. He leaned heavily against the wheels near fainting from reaction.

A hand on his arm brought Cly to the realization that he had been standing there several minutes without doing anything. He turned to find Vonya looking at him, her eyes bloodshot and dark rimmed with fatigue, but still concerned.

“Are you all right?”

Remembered terror washed over him but distant now without the power of surprise. Cly gripped her shoulder in thanks.

“Yes. Of course...” Cly said, turning away from the implied question. “It looks like Semaj will eat well tonight.”

Vonya wrinkled her nose. “Ick. Well, I suppose the foragers don’t care and I doubt Semaj can tell the difference. But we don’t want him to get into the habit! It might bother customers.”

Vonya seemed about to probe more but Kara interrupted, “Vonya, you’re bleeding. How did you get those cuts?”

Vonya glanced down at herself bewildered, then flushed as she realized that she wasn’t dressed. Cly hastily withdrew his hand and turned away as she answered Kara.

“I had to push through the hivelings to get up here. It must have happened then.”

“Well, we’d better get you below and see to dressing them before anything else happens.” Kara’s tone was old wife-ish but her glance at Cly held bright curiosity as she bustled Vonya away.

Needled, Cly called after them. “There are punctures in some of the lift bladders. I saw flames before we pulled away.”

Kara stopped dead in her tracks and whirled around scanning as much of Semaj’s interior as she could. Then she nodded in determination and took a firm grip on Vonya’s shoulder.

“We’re not burning now that I can see and since we’re still in the air the other damage can’t be too bad. Vonya is more important right now and you’d better sit down. If I’m any judge you’re about to fall over.”

That was certainly true. Cly let himself slide to a sitting position as he watched the two women disappear below. Even bruised and bleeding Vonya’s non-fiscal assets were still worth watching and he didn’t want to lose the opportunity by fainting.

The galleon captain hailed them before Vonya reappeared. Semaj had dropped down to just above the water and was slowly circling the two ships. The drop in altitude had worried Cly until he realized that it was deliberate. The cadet cloud whale was loitering as close to the ships’ decks as he dared watching everything that happened.

Vil was back on deck displaying the same kind of curiosity. Cly called to him to bring Semaj alongside the galleon on the downwind side so they could talk to the Captain. The chirpie nodded vigorously and repeated the order in pigeon before disappearing toward the wheels. Semaj was already pulling ahead to bring himself in alongside the galleon by the time Cly waved to indicate that he had heard the hail. Vonya was back before Semaj had himself warped around to bring his starboard side up to the ship. His port side had taken most of his battle damage and hivelings were busy repairing rips.

Cly answered Vonya’s implied question after only a look. “The merchant captain wants to talk to us.” He couldn’t help needling her again. “At least you look a proper Trader Captain now. Before we would have given him the wrong idea.”

She answered with only a hint of a blush, "Well, you don't. You look like someone had to cool you off with a water bucket."

Cly realized that she was right. His hair was plastered to his forehead with sweat and his clothes were streaked. He acknowledged the comment with a nod, not wanting to talk about it. Vonya looked like she wanted to say something more but then thought better of it. Instead she walked to the lip edge to watch the galleon come along side. After a minute Cly joined her to help secure the line thrown by one of the galleon crew.

"I sent Kara aft to 'explain' to the hivelings what constitutes proper cloud whale food. It simply won't do to have Semaj eating some customer's deceased grandfather before they can bury him," Vonya said. Cly grunted an assent.

10. VOYAGE TO IMRI

“To victory!” toasted the captain.

“To victory!” agreed the three whale riders. Cly took a sip of the icy liqueur that burned its way down his throat and exploded into tingling warmth as it hit his stomach. The captain was pulling out all stops for this little victory celebration and the three whale riders, in borrowed finery, were going to help.

The merchant captain, Torkwil by name, tossed off his drink and attacked the roasted fowl that was the centerpiece of the meal. His accent was atrocious, but he seemed to be fluent in Assuran. Mistrustful of such strange fare but keenly conscious of their social responsibilities the whale riders emulated him with a bit less gusto. Torkwil was in an expansive mood and hardly noticed.

“Dam’ rotten fo business! The’s who ‘tis!” Torkwil punctuated his point with a wave of a gnawed leg. “Mus’ be tousands o’ em, *patrollin’*, if n ya c’n b’lieve it, *patrollin’* the sea lanes! H’v’ever?” he demanded, dunking the leg into a bowl of gravy.

“Never, Captain,” agreed Vonya, setting an example for the other two with a big mouthful of – well, never *mind* what it was. Outlandish grounder food!

“Huntin’s been good, ‘s clear. Carried booty, she did. Na’ ‘nuff to mek us rich, unnerstan’ - but wuth puttin’ in yer pocket, right ‘nuff.” Torkwil said, his mouth temporarily empty as he reloaded his plate. The rotund master seemed to have a large capacity.

“*Pirates*,” Torkwil went on, making the word a curse. “Hupped we’d dojjem ‘em b’swimpin’ dis fah south, buh hit’s *wuss* heah den it was *dere*! Dojged two ovum ofore’n dis one run us down!”

Vonya and Cly frowned. That sounded like a fleet – operating in the area – that certainly seemed to match what they had seen thus far! And stranger, why would piracy be *worse* to the south of Imri when logically it should be worst on the major trade routes east and west of the island nation? Were they looking for something in particular? Or was there new trade coming from Krumm’s Mote? Were the pirates just so numerous they were hunting further afield? Or – and this thought troubled her – were they getting organized? Pirates cooperating? *That* was a scary thought. Vonya decided to probe the tubby captain a bit.

“How did it get so bad? What of Imri and her navy? Surely the Regent would not sit still for this abuse!”

“Gah! Deq trq! I’ll p’re ‘em thet. But ‘em *pirates*, deq allays seem to know, ya fallah? Like deq wen’ to the nevq staff meetin’s, sometimes seem loike.

De're org'nized now. Got 'emselves a *King*, if ya c'n believe *that*." Vonya perked her ears.

"A King? A pirate King?" she questioned, glancing at Cly. Cly, glad of an excuse not to eat the bread he'd found cooked in the middle of the bird, nodded importantly.

"It has happened before. About two thousand years ago, in the Sea of Charms, piracy hit such a level that they wound up setting up a bureaucracy to keep out of each other's hair. They elected a King, who eventually led a pirate attack on Calthis. He won. Founded the present dynasty – though they don't like people to recall that." Cly carefully hid his reactions to all this. The pirate king of whom he spoke was, of course, crowned in Kenekra. "His name was Sea Reaver, as I recall."

"*Dis'n* calls h'self, Ship Smasha. Hen the's it - *nd' thet da damm pirates'll* tell much. Ya c'n sure believe *that*!" Torkwil shook his head angrily and signaled for dessert. The whale riders almost sighed with relief to recognize good honest fruit and dug in with more enthusiasm than they had had for the previous courses.

"Ship Smasher," thought Cly to himself. One who smashes ships and *then* loots them. It figures. Though where in the Ancestor's names did the fiend get his magic *from*? There was more here than met the eye the magician thought.

"Where is this Ship Smasher based, Captain? Why hasn't Imri ended his reign?" Vonya asked.

"None know, *Lady*. 'e hits. 'e loots. And 'e's gone like *vestidd'y*. *De'y say*. . . *de'y say*...ah, whatzit matto whoa *de'y say*?" Torkwil asked rhetorically, tearing open an orange as if he could hurt the pirates that way. By unspoken consent no one mentioned the pirates – or the lost city – again.

"Twas given me to *unnerstan' yer a mapish'n*, 'sthet de way of it?" the merchant asked Cly as they finished the meal.

"I have studied the art for some years. I don't count myself a Master by a long way." Cly replied, carefully.

The merchant nodded and took a small leather pouch from his pocket. "*Mapichery meks me real nervous*. I'd ratho na'have ta deal w'it. So *dis is yer worry*, *Ma'sta' Mapish'n*. Teh it, o'luck w'it, an' tell me na'of its w'uth." He passed the pouch to Cly who promptly opened it and poured four glowing gems into his palm. Vonya gasped.

"Mage stones! How did you come by them?" she asked.

"We foun' 'em by de *pirate cap'n*, *Lady*. Hen it was him, ennyhow. Ha' 'is head blowed clean off. He was lyin' nex' ta one of yer buys, dead d'same way. *Mapic*, right 'nuff. *You worry bou'd'ill*" the merchant said heavily.

"Got me *own* worries and I don' wan' no magic ta mek'em worse'n dey are awready!"

Cly understood the man's reluctance. Mage stones stored powerful magic and it must have been from this pouch the shadow demon came. Still, magic attracted almost everyone and mage stones would fetch a good price in any civilized land. Perhaps the memory of the shadow demon was too fresh in the merchant's mind for he was clearly ready to forgo any profit from these stones.

But the gems laid Cly's mind to rest. He had been very nervous that there might be a magician amongst the prisoners chained below. It was clearly not so.

"Where away now, Torkwil?" asked Vonya.

"Imri. Damage t'fix, cargo t'sell - an' a prize ship wha'll fetch a fine price! Half the's your'n o'course," he bowed from his seat. "foine hanh' a work! Too bad yer wha'le got so tore up. C'n ya fix it up? Or ya have ta kill 'em, loike hosses?"

"Kill him?!" sputtered Kara, but she subsided as Vonya's foot slapped hers.

"He's not that badly hurt. More exhaustion than anything else," Vonya noted cheerfully.

"Well, s'plad am I ta help. Buh by Shewa's liddle green fins, we'll be a whoile a'towin' d'prize an' you toppedder!" He squinted at the huge map that covered one wall of his cabin while he munched his fruit. "We needa change currents. Lessee, tree days to Balinum Current, norf' - Id'll be a week, An' a day. Dere'bouts."

Once back on board Semaj, the three relaxed.

"A week!" Cly said. "Well, it could be a lot worse, 'if ya c'n blieve it!"

"That'll leave us gone almost three weeks on the Wild Ride with no word back to Cloudhome. They'll probably give us up for dead," Kara said worriedly.

"Perhaps not. Imri's a busy place. We'll get whatever cloud whale is in to relay a far band message saying we're all right and headed home. Droi was gone for ten days, I don't think they'll give us up that easily!" Vonya said.

"Do you really think we'll find a Khar cloud whale in Imri? Maybe we could get a tow the rest of the way!" Kara said excitedly but Vonya waved her down.

"I didn't say that. It *might* be one of ours, but it could also be a Ch'yoan, or even a Thenten cloud whale. Imri is the major clan-to-clan

transfer point – sometimes even other clans put in there, it's all set by treaty. They're not allowed *past* Imri into *our* territory, but Imri itself is okay. So, if it's not one of ours we'll pay for the message and get back under our own power. I'd rather have it that way, myself." Despite their distaste for hiring another clan the others had to agree that it would bring them more status to return with an intact cloud whale.

"I find that remark about currents kind of curious. Do you suppose sea captains have something like the streams?" Vonya wondered.

"Who knows?" Cly said. "Ingarde collects mysteries like an old lady collects cats."

Several hours later, with Kara and the chirpies safely occupied aft, Vonya hunted up Cly. She found him in his favorite spot just aft of the hive, curled up with the book he had taken from the slain magician aboard the derelict. Vonya, sensitive to his obvious need for privacy, made a little noise tightening an already tight knot in the hive rigging.

Cly looked up and sighed when he saw who it was. "All right," he said, motioning her in. "I was expecting you."

Vonya entered somewhat diffidently. "You know I have to find out, Cly. Despite the fact that your magic saved the day the thing is – you froze. You froze during that battle and I need to know why. And I need to know why you risked us – and *Semaj* – by attacking the pirates with *fire*! I didn't know you could even *do* that." She took a deep breath and waited, hating herself for having to throw her weight around, but keenly aware of her responsibilities as captain.

Thankfully, Cly did not seem inclined to make it harder. "Von, to explain all that, I'll have to give you a little bit of a lesson in magic. Will you bear with me?"

At her nod, he went on. "You know that everything around us is made up of some combination of the five basic elements, air, water, earth, fire and lightning. A magician deals with a great many different effects. Even my own college – Thaumaturgy, illusions and seemings, and the like – must achieve its effects in a variety of ways. So a magician must be able to manipulate *all* the elements. Anything less and he is not a full magician. You follow me so far?" He rubbed at the old burn scar on his hand as he waited.

Hiding a smile at his didactic manner, Vonya agreed.

"Now, every living thing that is born has one of the elements that form its body in the ascendancy. We call that its 'aspect.' It is generally very difficult to determine a person's aspect. Not an easy thing at all. But it usually doesn't matter. If you're air, say, and I'm earth, it really makes

no difference in the way we live. Not really. Still with me?" Cly took a firm grip on himself at her nod.

"I'm about to tell you a Guild secret. You do know what that means?" he asked, just to make sure.

"Die before revealing the confidence of another." she quoted, frowning. This was getting complicated.

"You can probably tell from what I have said already but I had to make sure. You see, the primary difference between a magician and a mundane is that a magician *has* no elemental aspect. He cannot, for otherwise he would only be able to manipulate the one element he was aspected to. It's like being color-blind – if you see red as green, how can you paint a picture? The colors look all right to *you* – but they are *wrong*. You follow that?" he asked.

"Yes. What are you trying to tell me, Cly?" she asked, with real concern in her voice. "So you were born without an aspect. Is that a big thing?"

Cly said in a small voice, "But I *was* born with an aspect, Von. To become a magician, I had to give that aspect away. Get rid of it. The first real spell any magician ever casts gets rid of his aspect, and the only way to do it is to create an elemental. I created an elemental..."

"A . . . *fire* . . . elemental?" she asked quietly.

He nodded miserably. "Yes. A salamander."

Vonya dropped to the floor and gave a long, shuddering gasp. "That was yours? Your...aspect?"

"It was," Cly said, rubbing the scar again. "It nearly killed me. A magician's elemental, his fetch, is supposed to be a powerful aid and ally. It's supposed to protect you and help you. It's a partner, really. But I never called mine. For obvious reasons." He smiled without mirth.

"Cly, if you felt like that then why *did* you call it? Why now?" she almost pleaded.

"But I *didn't* call it!" Cly jumped to his feet and began pacing. "I didn't call it, I never even *thought* of calling it. But it's never far away, Von, and it knows. It knows where I am and it sometimes knows what I'm doing. I was out of it, Von! *My* cloud whale was being attacked, my *crewmates* were being attacked and I couldn't *do* anything! All I could do was *hate* it – hate my helplessness and hate the pirates. The salamander knew. He sensed. He came. And he destroyed. That's what salamanders *do*. They're really good at it."

"Can't you control it? What if it were to come on Semaj...?" Vonya demanded.

"I *can* control him. He will not come so long as I do not lose control again. And I will *not* lose control again, Von. The salamander will wait – for the rest of my life he will wait. I'm a good magician even without him – and that is good enough for me! I know my limits." He stopped pacing and searched her face. "Do you understand, Von?"

Vonya pulled herself together. If Cly had suddenly sprouted three heads she could not have been more shocked, but she fought to remember who this was. Her childhood friend and confidant. The object of an occasional afternoon fantasy. Her *de facto* second-in-command. A magician advising her about magic.

"I do. I'll take your word, Cly. After all, you're supposed to give me advice in magical matters." She stood and took his hand. "It must be a terrible burden."

"Master Bosrin knows. Shamyir suspects, I think. Gods! How I used to envy Shamyir his rapport with the wind! He could summon the slightest breeze or the most powerful gale with a single sweep of his hand – almost like a cleric. How I wished I could do that," Cly said wistfully. "I wonder what aspect Hodly will show us when we get back?"

Vonya kissed his cheek and smiled at his startled reaction. "Fear nothing in yourself, Magician. That is your course and you have to fly it. And we'll find out about Hodly in due course. Me for some real food! How about you?"

With a sigh of relief, Cly gestured, "Lead on, Captain!" Cly followed her from his little sanctum sanctorum. The journal would wait.

As it developed the journal could have waited quite a while. As Cly had suspected, the man *was* a Wizard. That much was very clear. But what he knew and what he did – and how – was more than Cly could puzzle out. His line of magic was very far removed from Cly's. Cly could have read Bosrin's or Shamyir's journals, even Timuron's would not have been beyond him since Clouthome had had extensive contact with his people the material would not have been so alien. But this man – he never named himself in his journal – was far away from that.

Cly did manage to puzzle out some of the basic spells. He was thrilled to discover that the nameless magician was a former earth aspect. He could hardly wait to get to solid land to see if he could summon an earth elemental – a gnome. Not that summoning was thaumaturgic – or even sorcerous. For that matter it wasn't even wizardly. But with some appropriate tools the Magician was sure he could develop a knack for it based on the slain Wizard's research.

The mysterious disk or coin they had found in the lamp aboard the derelict remained mysterious. There was no mention of it in the wizard's journal – a fact that Cly found to be *very* strange. The journal *should* have had a note about how it came to be in the Wizard's possession if nothing else. What was even stranger was the gnome rune clearly etched in the coin next to the jewel, obviously connected with the man's former aspect. Perhaps magicians from his line bound the aspect to a coin? Or was it just chance that he had some other earth-related spell? Cly had to file that one away to ponder. And whatever had this thing been broken off from? The rough spots gave no clue – and the coin was just too worn to make out anything else. It was frustrating. And the gems from the pirate were no more informative. Cly wished he had stolen some time from his studies to sneak a few peeks at *Shamyir's* journal. Information was a sorcerer's specialty and Cly could certainly use some.

But his greatest success came with the contents of his own pockets. Timuron's posthumous "gifts" to Cly included two vials that proved to contain a somewhat flavorful variation of healing elixir. This was relatively standard stuff but the other two vials had the disgustingly healthy hiveling who had "donated" his services for the tests whipping around too quickly to be seen as anything but a blur. One vial of elixir was quickly used to heal Cly's arm as well as Kara's and Vonya's cuts and scrapes. The remaining vials, and the other magical items, were carefully packed away – their worth was great but their value was incalculable for they were all the useful magic they had with them besides Cly himself. Once they were stowed Cly then examined the two packets Bosrin had asked him to report on.

The first contained a fine greenish powder, the second was full of white crystals, almost like salt. The fussy handwriting on each spoke of "fire shield" a name that had Cly wildly excited but incredibly frustrated for it was apparently unusable without "farj," whatever *that* was. He spent the remaining part of the week studying the slain Wizard's journal and trying unsuccessfully to find references to "farj."

Semaj himself spent the trip alternating between deep sleep and restful snoozing. During the occasional periods of calm winds the merchant's rowers wore themselves out towing both himself and the pirate prize ship. While they were under sail he lolled about in a feeling of relative peace and quiet that he had quite missed these last several weeks. For entertainment he listened in on the far band. Droi had made successful landing at Summuskeep, he heard, and was now en route for Point Sbarri – funny how crewed cloud whales started using human references for places – and

Kreen was putting in at Vindolonda. Paschalon was cruising south, apparently looking for some sign of them. Semaj hoped his ol' Dad would wise up and meet them at Imri but he had only a vague idea where Old Pa was in relation to himself. It would work out.

Of greater interest were the thoughts of the Youngest Companions he was carrying. Semaj became excited several times when he sensed the thoughts of the magician beginning to thrum as if he wanted to open a power gate! But the first one was a false alarm, and Semaj was interested but not unduly excited when the "thrum feeling" became a daily ritual. He decided that even the Youngest Companions needed practice to help him fly the power gates, and he was prepared to be patient.

But not *that* patient. Cly always knew when his usual study period had arrived because Vil brought him the Wizard's journal. He was quite amused by the little creature's insistence. The routine was just getting well established when the great bulk of distant Imri came into view far to the north.

II. BACK TO CIVILIZATION

Everyone on the ships and the cloud whale not absolutely required to be elsewhere was perched wherever they could get a view as they approached the gigantic mountain looming out of the sea. Imri is a collection of islands in the Great Nestick Ocean, they were heading for the island of Imri on which – well, actually, *in* which – lay the capital, Auri-ana – called by most just Imri City, or the Mountain City. It was not visible, of course, for the whole of it was actually under the mountain, constructed in the huge cavern at its' base and extending down into the mines, caves, and caverns below. But the view of terraced farms going up the steep mountainside was awe-inspiring and the seemingly endless parade of ships from over a dozen different seafaring nations going in and out of the stupendous cave mouth at sea level was truly fascinating.

Here there were swift Lakoshan merchant triremes and sturdy Drunish caravels dodging past potbellied Nepajan cogs and galleons like the one towing them. Powerful Talusion galeasses, half merchant and half warship, hulked their way along seeming to dare any opponent while fragrant Shaadran carracks, with their spicy cargoes, vied for space with smelly Thalusion ore-ships. Speedy war dromons from Imri's old fleet darted in and out on their mysterious missions and sinister armored steamers from her new fleet loitered about like tough old policemen guarding a happy get-together.

Clouds of raucous gulls and terns escorted each ship, wheeling overhead hoping for a free morsel or two, and many of the deep-water ships had schools of dolphins leading them in. Each incoming vessel joined one of several lines of ships that led into the great cave that housed the city. A truly marvelous city she was, too, for she really was nearly as important in reality as she felt herself to be. Imri anchored one end of a vast trading hub that stretched for uncounted thousands of miles to distant Calthis far, far to the east.

Semaj's little crew manned the wheels as he cast off from their tow-ship before entering the city proper, and Semaj stroked his sails for altitude as he headed for the cloud whale staging area halfway up the side of the mountain. He did not have to get very close before they hit their next disappointment.

"By the grounder's Gods! Eleventy-million ships from who knows how many places and they haven't got *one* single solitary cloud whale!" exclaimed Cly as they rounded the promontory.

"Rather, they *have* only one – us!" remarked Kara. "So much for telling Cloudhome we're all right."

"It does sort of fit in with our present run of luck, you know," added Vonya, her eyes sparkling. "Well, no matter. We enter with money, we exit with cargo, and in between we make profit, 'if ya c'n b'lieve it!'"

"You seem to be inordinately happy with all this," said Kara, eying her captain suspiciously.

"Look at it this way, Ka," said Vonya. "We have money – or we will when we collect our half of the pirate bounty money, half of the pirate booty that isn't claimed, and sell our half of the prize ship – so we can hire grounder artisans to help us refit Semaj without having to get back to Cloudhome. *Then* we can buy a cargo, and return from our Wild Ride with a healthy profit. Not a bad start for an 'unlucky' cloud whale, eh?"

"Let *grounders* work on Semaj? You're joking! Why those..." began Kara but Cly interrupted.

"You know, we would have to hire them sooner or later anyway, Ka," he said mildly.

"For *what?*!" demanded Kara, disbelief dripping from every vowel and consonant, but she had to wait for her reply as Semaj nosed into the largest of the several slips. The slips were really only for tying down mantas for Imri was routinely served by very large cloud whales who used their escorts to ferry cargo rather than land themselves. Semaj was several sizes too large for any of the slips here so tying down became a chore. It was an hour before Kara got an answer.

"For what, Cly? What do we need grounder artisans for?" she asked again in a baiting tone.

Cly smiled. "For the main spring, Ka. Surely by now you have figured out that drorwood, no matter how well-treated, no matter how fine, no matter how well-carved, is simply *not* going to serve as a mainspring! You saw how quickly it gave out when Semaj put some strain on it! It lasted less than half a day! We'll have to get the grounders to make us a metal spring."

Kara's eyes flashed, "That was a *temporary* rig! Granted, it didn't last as long as it might have but a full-sized and well-carved spring will certainly do the job. That's what the Ch'yoons use! Take my word for it."

Cly nodded cheerfully, "Okay, I will. Someday we'll limp back to Cloudhome and we'll get a drorwood spring. And I'm sure it'll hold, just like you say. And then in five years, or maybe ten, we'll get a bigger drorwood spring, and then a bigger one yet. According to my calculations, by the time he's thirty years old, Semaj will be getting his main springs from drorwood trees about, oh, three hundred feet high." He grinned. "Any Ch'yoons whales doing that, yet?"

Kara looked like she bit into a very sour fruit indeed. She had to admit the light-rig required much longer springs – though she had to wonder how *Cly* knew that – and the Ch'yoan clan test whale had ganged springs which quickly ran them into diminishing returns. And worse – there were rumors that the rubbing of the wood in the array not only wore them out quickly but *could* be a fire hazard. Rubbing two sticks together is one of the ways grounders make fire!

“All right. Fine! They don’t grow that big and I know it! But that doesn’t mean *metal*! Don’t you know how they shape that stuff? *Fire*! They mix it with fire until it runs like water! Now tell me how they ever manage to get *all* the fire out? They can’t! There will always be some fire in that stuff. Give me good, honest drorwood – or a worthy replacement. We’ll need it someday. But not grounder metal! We put that in Semaj and he’ll burn!”

Cly sighed. “Be reasonable, Ka. Didn’t you see those metal-clad ships in the harbor? Surely if there were fire in that metal those ships would be surrounded by steam!”

Kara resisted, but being basically honest she was soon forced to admit that metal would have to serve. “If it is light enough. And if I am convinced that *all* the fire is wrung out of it!” she added.

Once assured that Semaj was thoroughly tied down the crew decided to head right into town. It was still mid-morning and perhaps they could round up their prize money and check out some of what Imri City had to offer.

The manta docks were situated far above the actual city so the three-some wound their way down a stone stair to a terraced landing a hundred yards below. Here they found a pair of huge wooden doors, each a dozen feet high and reinforced with straps of bronze. Here, also, they found their first problem. They were closed.

“I guess they didn’t get our note,” Vonya noted wryly. Kara did not deign to reply but Cly pointed to one side. “Bell cord. We should announce ourselves.” He assumed a herald’s voice as he tugged at the cord intoning, “Semaj of Clan Khar requests entry and seeks customers for his fine cargo of toothpicks and assorted premium kindling!”

“Oh, are they importing *that* now? Fine maple toothpicks, two for a ha’penny? Half an ounce of imported kindling for the merest silver coin?” The voice, dripping with sarcasm, issued from a grill near the bell cord – only slightly tinny-sounding from its trip through the pipe and sporting the blurry accent of a Drun. “Well, we had best expedite this shipment!

The gentry will be falling all over themselves for this one!" A loud clunk ensued, and one door began to creak open.

Kara looked startled, "Von, do you suppose they really would buy..?" But Cly's choked laugh cut her off. She gave him an angry look as he coughed it out. Vonya suppressed her own smile and shook her head.

The door swung back to reveal a stone staircase five yards wide descending out of sight. The Drunnish doorkeeper himself, short, very bald, and thin to the point of emaciation, limped out on the landing.

"We usually exempt such luxurious goods from duties but have you anything else less exotic to declare? Imported spit? Genuine Calthian dog hair? Live Lakoshan gnats?" He glared at them belligerently, arms folded.

Cly replied immediately. "We have some of the finest Vindolondan air you ever breathed! Four pence a lung-full and cheap at the price!"

"Are you selling stock? Now's my big chance! I've never gotten into an opportunity like this before! Imagine!" snorted the doorkeeper. Kara was looking from Cly to the keeper in utter bewilderment while Vonya giggled.

"I'm sorry, we really couldn't let our stock out of the clan. It would compromise our impeccable quality," grinned Cly.

"Crushed again. Well I think I'll head up to the dock and hurl myself off it, then. Have a drink in my memory." With a final scowl he pulled a duty form out of his belt and headed up toward Semaj's berth.

Kara was genuinely alarmed now and started after him but Cly grabbed her arm. "No, no! He's just going to do a duty inventory!" he explained.

"But he said..." she started, but Vonya, still trying to contain herself, added, "No, Ka. He was just being sarcastic." Kara looked after the doorkeeper but turned away when she was sure he was not approaching the edge. She turned a first-class glare on Cly. "I am vastly amused," she said sarcastically.

"Better," noted Cly. He led the way down as the two women followed. Behind he could hear Vonya amused voice, "You should see one of Master Bosrin's jokes some time."

The stair was obviously very old but it was well maintained and the three descended about fifty yards before the stair turned and stopped at the first landing. It was lit by a slit window ten feet high and provided with stone benches but its main attraction was a counter and a large sign. "First Chance" it proclaimed proudly, over a picture of a foaming mug. A young, sort-of pretty barmaid looked them over curiously but turned away

when they didn't stop. Cly and Vonya spared it only a momentary glance as they crossed the landing but Kara was obviously intrigued.

"First chance for what?" she asked Vonya.

"Ale, I guess," Vonya replied, looking at her. "Kara, how much have you dealt with non-clan members?" Cly did a double take at the delicate phrasing but nodded understanding. It would not be politic to call grounders "grounders" when one dwelt among them.

"Several times!" Kara said defensively.

"Where?" asked Vonya as they reached the next flight of stairs.

"Oh. Downtown. And Ch'yoan Cloudhome," she added after a moment. "Once."

Vonya groaned silently. "Ah, have you ever been to Summuskeep? Or Point Sbarri?" She groaned audibly as Kara shook her head. Cly decided not to hear the rest of the conversation and sped up his pace a little leaving the two talking quietly in his wake.

But he was thoughtful. Kara was the oldest of the three by several years but it was obvious her vet duties had kept her isolated from the rest of the world. None of them had been to Imri before, of course, but he had twice been to Calthis and Vonya had once negotiated a deal with Tilting Rock Town, a protracted affair that had brought her much acclaim, but no cloud whale berth. But Kara was a vetengineer and she had no real need for sharp business acumen. Still, Cly decided to keep an eye on her. Her innocence was charming but it made her just a bit gullible.

Cly reached the bottom of the stairs a little winded and paused to rub his calves. Despite the frequent climbs a cloud whale rider endures daily it was seldom they had to descend a steep stone staircase nearly half a mile. Cly looked out at the quiet plaza before him with interest. "Second Chance," noted a sign over a tavern across the way. Cly chuckled as the women arrived.

"No, Ka, stating the reverse of one's true feelings is just a way to be sarcastic. And Druns are very sarcastic," Vonya was saying as they emerged. Kara looked dubious but said nothing.

"Drun?" Cly asked as they took in the plaza.

"Oh, yes. Bald as an egg, thin and wrinkly. Drunnish folk start looking like that when they are about ten years old and stay that way until they drop dead of old age a hundred years later," Vonya explained. "They trade a lot with Tilting Rock, and the townies hired a Drunnish barrister for that deal I did with them."

Cly nodded thoughtfully as he turned back to the plaza. "Seems pretty quiet, here. Where away?"

Vonya thought a moment, "I would guess the Port Authority. Torkwil will have checked in by now and I expect he'll probably have engaged an assessor for the schooner. I guess we'll have to ask directions," she finished, looking about the deserted plaza.

Cly harrumphed. "Fat chance. Let's try the Second Chance. Over there," he added, pointing.

"Where's the light coming from?" Kara broke in. "I always pictured Imri as very dark. Isn't it supposed to be inside a cave?" Cly shook his head as they headed off across the plaza.

"It is in a cave, but it's rarely dark. We can't see them from here but Imri has its own suns, two of them. The larger one, Irium, is a bright blue-white, and waxes and wanes on a twenty-three hour cycle. The little one, Jot, circles Irium every hour or so and waxes and wanes on a twelve-hour cycle. It's just yellow enough to compensate for Irium's harshness so Imri is well lit. The suns are practically stationary, too." Kara listened with interest. Her schooling had not included such topics.

"Does that mean there's no night?" asked Vonya. Cly nodded.

“Practically. The city goes into a little twilight for five or so hours out of twenty three but it doesn’t get dark except for a three hour period every two hundred seventy-some hours – about ten days.” Someday the suns will fade, of course, but that won’t be for centuries,” he concluded.

“What’ll they do then?” asked Kara.

“Get more suns,” grinned Cly. “Ask me some time how they came to have these two, it’s a great story!”

The “Second Chance” was closed but traffic was visible where the little street by the plaza joined a larger road. Vonya led the way to the intersection, but stopped uncertainly as they entered. Traffic was frantic. Carriages and pairs were dodging centaur-drawn rickshaws; human, humanoid and even completely *inhuman* pedestrians were dodging between massive wagons drawn by enormous, turtle-like trunds; and carts belching acrid smoke and steam and apparently drawn by magic were dodging no one at all. Vonya looked about for someone who was not in a hurry and was nearly run over by one of the latter that came screeching around a corner without warning. By common consent the three whale riders leaped back onto a brick portico. The scaly, inhuman driver yelled something at the whale riders – “*ᠰᠤ᠋ᠭᠣᠨ ᠶᠡᠮᠦᠷᠪᠢᠳᠤ ᠵᠢᠴᠢᠯᠤᠯᠤᠰᠤ!*?” – as it zipped by without even slowing. Vonya looked about helplessly.

2 Gargoyle – "Share the road, outlander!"

“What’s the big hurry? Look, even the people are running!” Sure enough, a young lad carrying a slate was loping past. Vonya hailed him quickly.

“Yeeh, Lad?” he asked, skidding to a halt. Cly noted that he didn’t even seem short of breath.

“Yes. Ah. We need to find the Port Authority. Can you give us directions?” Vonya asked.

“Sure fink, Lad. Hanp left at Wilda, go six blockys and b’ar riph’ by the Bristol Tavern, go unda de bridge, bearin’ lef’ by the pit, turn riph’ at the yel-low house, look sharp fer a lef’ nea’ de willow, down eight levels on de stair, pas’ the Green Gargoyle, two blockys to Wessermee Street and den eas’ sebben blockys, sharp riph’ ‘n’ two lefs. Can’t miss it!” He rushed away.

“Of course! It’s so easy!” Vonya said to the empty air. “What did he say?”

“Left at Wilder, six blocks, bear right at the Bristol, under the bridge, bear left at the pit, right at the yellow house, left by the willow, down eight levels past the Green Gargoyle, two blocks to Wessermee, east seven blocks, sharp right, two lefts. What’s so hard about that?” Cly asked, innocently. Vonya just looked at him open-mouthed.

“What?” she asked, weakly.

“Left at...” he began again but she cut him off. “Okay! Just lead the way, please, and *don’t* try to explain it!”

Cly led off, chuckling, and reflected that Master Bosrin’s snap memory tests and staccato instruction delivery was paying off rather nicely. They found the Port Authority without any trouble but it was quite a walk.

Imri was constructed underground in a huge cavern in concentric rings leading down to a central harbor which surrounded a fairly large island. All this water was most convenient for the navy, which had easy access, and the Merchant Marine, but there was precious little land. With no room to spread *out*, the city spread *up*. Five and six-story buildings were in great profusion and often they reached high enough to permit people on the next higher ring to simply step on to their roofs. Cly would later remember Imri as “The City Of Bridges” for there was a great profusion of them leading to elevated roads or bridging abutments of land of nearly equal height. But Cly knew that Imri had also spread *down* and was riddled with subfloors, basements, sub-basements, cellars, sewers, catacombs, subterranean walkways and the like and that nearly as many people lived and worked underground as above.

Everywhere there was traffic. Most was pedestrian but there were many other sorts of conveyances – although the great trund-drawn wag-

ons seemed to be restricted to the upper reaches. Rickshaws with centaurs or humans were popular, as were carriages – centaur and horse versions – and small, pony-drawn wagons and coaches. Spice was added to this mixture by the occasional steam-driven cart, which seemed to be the latest incarnation of Imri's love of that strange science.

Magic was in evidence, too, though it was seldom used for mere transport. The cloud whale riders paused a moment to join a small crowd before a shop offering magically animated puppets. The store was running some of its wares in an elaborate miniature play in the front window.

But when they reached the wider streets below they could see most of the interior of the cave – and lying on a gigantic shelf of stone nearly a mile across the cavern, overlooking the entire city, was Imri's dragon, Cloughload.

None of the whale riders had ever seen a real dragon before. Calthis had one but it was seldom seen in public and then only on special occasions but Cloughload seemed to care little for that. His scaled head scanned back and forth over the active city, noting every detail, as he idly stirred the gold coins in which he lay with one enormous claw. Cly knew that Imri kept the national treasury up there. Who would be fool enough to try to steal it?

The whale riders' hearts nearly stopped when the dragon stopped scanning about and looked at them. Oh, yes, it was definitely looking at *them*. Even at this distance the shimmering patterns in the facets of his eyes seemed to catch at their own. Vonya felt the mesmeric force of his emerald gaze but took a firm hold of herself. Cly's knowledge of the magical origin of the look protected him – but Kara made a beeline for the dragon.

Vonya and Cly caught her arms before she hit the railing of the parapet and she regained control of herself when eye contact was broken. She was shivering violently. "Easy, Kara, easy," soothed Cly. "Draconic personalities can be very overpowering, he wasn't trying anything. I think."

"I shouldn't have snapped at Master Wold like that," Kara murmured, holding back tears. "It wasn't right of me." Cly shook her gently and she focused on him.

"Kara, don't look at the dragon again. Okay? Don't meet its gaze." Cly searched her face, carefully. She nodded uncertainly. Cly insisted, "Do you understand? It's just an honesty and self-evaluation compulsive. Most dragons do that." Kara heaved a tremulous sigh and nodded again.

"I'm all right. It just took me by surprise, that's all." But she didn't sound convinced.

"May I be of assistance, Sire?" asked a strange voice. Cly turned to find a slender man standing near. He was clad in ankle-length robes of reddish-orange and only his youthful, unlined face was visible beneath his hood. Even his hands were folded into his sleeves. Upon one shoulder was a badge – a bright claw embroidered in spun gold. One of Cloughload's human servitors. A Dragon's Hand.

He looked normal enough except for his eyes. At first glance they were fine, but if you looked closer you could see the irises seemed to have tiny lights in them that moved and rotated.

"No," answered Cly hastily. "With thanks. She is merely stunned by the. . . by your dragon's gaze."

"My Lord *has* a most powerful presence, Sire," the Hand agreed. He looked more closely at Kara and added, "You are quite correct, she is a bit stunned. I would suggest she think about home or her work for a while. Something she has confidence in will help her regain her mental equilibrium."

"Our thanks," Cly nodded as he steered Kara down the walk. The Hand looked after them until a curve in the way took him from sight.

Cly kept his grip on Kara's arm as they walked and she did not object.

"Who was that, Cly?" asked Vonya as they their steps slowed.

"A Dragon's Hand. Someone who has given his mind to the dragon." He did not mention Cloughload by name, to do so might focus his attention on the threesome again. He elaborated, "They have strange powers from the association – not magic, but something else, I don't know what. I just didn't want him near Kara while she was disoriented."

Kara took a deep breath and disengaged her arm from Cly's. "Thanks," she said, in a nearly normal voice, "I don't need any more help, Cly." She fell back a step and walked with folded arms, not looking right or left at the city as she walked.

Vonya was eaten up with curiosity about the Dragon's Hand but decided to quiz Cly later. "Gave his mind to the dragon," he'd said. It sounded *creepy*.

They reached the imposing Port Authority building without further incident. Sure enough, Torkwil had already registered and their half of the bounty was waiting as was a legal bond for their half of the schooner. Vonya signed a stipulation giving Torkwil the right to sell their half of the vessel, proudly putting down "Vonya Khar-Semaj" though her name talisman was still not corrected. The bounty was in the form of a draw on the

House Lion Bank which turned out to be right across the street. "Even I could find that!" noted Vonya.

Cly and Kara amused themselves watching the traffic, which had an added dimension here with water-borne craft plying the canals and disrupting the land-based conveyances with their use of the many small draw-bridges, while Vonya settled in with a bank officer.

Vonya threw herself into the haggling with zest. This was her favorite part, to take a so-so hand of cards dealt by fate and work them into something worth having! She found a kindred spirit in the young bank officer she dealt with, and soon the two women had worked out the details of a deal both were pleased with. Vonya left the bank feeling better. They still faced enormous obstacles, and the money she had secured was not overmuch to the task of refitting Semaj, who was himself still an unknown quantity. Things were looking up, but her future was a long way from secure. It was in this thoughtful frame of mind that Vonya nearly bumped into Torkwil standing just outside the bank entrance.

He touched his hand to his cap as she recovered herself. "Hefta' noon to yer, Mizz Vonved!" he announced.

"Why...er...yes, good afternoon to you, as well!" Vonya replied. Her eye caught Cly and Kara still standing at the next intersection, watching the boat traffic. They hadn't seen her.

"Ovah hea'd ya talkin' wíthet bank offissa, M'aam. Míghty foine bit o'dealin'," the captain said.

"Why, thank you," she replied, looking back at Torkwil. "I rather enjoyed it." Privately she wondered why the captain had so obviously engineered this opportunity to talk to her. She did not have to wait long for enlightenment.

"Thought so," Torkwil said, watching her narrowly. He seemed to consider a moment to himself, and then nodded.

"Ya pot puts, Ladý. Ya pot a tradah's sense. 's'clear to me," he said. "Han'ld yerself right well wíthet pirates, an' ya know how to han'l a deal. Care to lis'n to'a bit o' an oidear?"

Intrigued, Vonya shrugged. The captain laughed. "Yea, don' look too keen, heh? Mlek me wuk fer it! Im game. Tek a liddle walk wíme, Ladý?" he indicated a side street that led to a nearby dock.

Vonya's curiosity was screaming for attention. She nodded, and followed as he led off. The dock was only a few steps from the end of the side street, though they had to wait at a small drawbridge for a barge propelled by two pilot whales to pass by in an intersecting canal.

At the end of the dock, moored with great care, was a beautiful sloop. She was obviously brand new, fragrant with the odor of fresh cut wood, paint, stain, and pitch, with brasswork bright and polished, rope fresh and carefully wound into perfect coils. She floated daintily at the dock, as if awaiting only the order to fly like a cloud whale herself.

Vonya caught her breathe at the sight of it. "She's beautiful, Torkwil!"

He nodded. "Yup. fippered it all out myself. She's moine lock, stock 'n' bowspr't. M̃y num' two, Lad̃y."

"Number two?" Vonya asked, still gazing at the lovely ship.

"Ay'h. Dẽy jus' finished 'er tudday," Torkwil said. "An' she'll need a Cop'n." Vonya looked at him, startled.

"Ay'h. Need a pa'rner, Lad̃y. Gotta be keen. Gotta be quick. Gotta be good wifippers. Gotta have *puts*! Gotta know *banhs*. Gotta be a tradah! Gotta know how ta'mek profit! Ya got thet. I seen it."

"But I don't know the first thing about sailing a ship like that!" Vonya said in disbelief.

"Don' haf'ta know. Getta masto' fer thet. Sailors easy ta get 'roun' Imri. Tradahs, tradahs hard'a come by. Good 'uns, enñyhow." Torkwil waved his arm at the lovely trade vessel. "Ya saved my hide, Lad̃y. Ya got puts. Yer a tradah. So, now I ask ya - ya wanna be my pa'rner?"

Vonya was flabbergasted. Torkwil was offering her a ship and a partnership – the greatest gift he could imagine, she was sure. Clearly he was grateful for being saved from the pirates and the death or slavery they promised, but just as clearly he was impressed with her own abilities. Shrewd trader that he was, he had come up with a way to pay her back and make himself wealthy, too. She looked at him, but he was not watching her, his gaze was on the ship. He was a tiny, heavysset, weather-beaten man in his late fifties, she guessed. And he was a quick judge of character, something she should have realized about him. She remembered how he gave the magic stones to Cly without a second thought. His accent and demeanor were a clever disguise, he might speak like a rube, but this man was nobody's fool.

She turned to look again at the sloop. She noticed the vessel had no nameplates. Of course, she thought. Naming the vessel was the captain's prerogative. She caught her breath as she looked up and down the length of the ship. Despite its relatively small size, she knew such a vessel could easily carry a hundred times what even a large cloud whale could. Perhaps a thousand times what Semaj could. What profits could she make with *that*? What lands might she travel to? And this was guaranteed, she

realized. No strings, no ifs, ands or buts. Just her own skill. As close to a sure thing as life ever offered.

But could she actually live aboard such a boat? For life? Replace the spicy smell of cloud whales with the tang of salt air, for life? Could she leave everything she knew behind?

Could she leave Semaj, or Cly, or Kara, who were depending on her?

Somehow Vil had come to *her*, to her and Cly out of all the dozens of candidates. Semaj, alone among the cloud whales crewed in the clan, wanted *her*, had called *her*. *Specifically* her. Could she leave him?

In a moment, she realized she could not. She was *already* a captain and she had already taken on a responsibility not so easily discharged. In another moment, she shook her head. She was still shaking her head as she turned back to Torkwil. He was looking at her with no surprise at all. He nodded.

“Thouph’ so. Bes’ luck to ya, Lođy.” He scratched his head thoughtfully for a moment and then added with a pleased grin, “Cleoh skjies!” Vonya had to laugh as she heard that from a grounders lips.

“Good wind, Torkwil. And thanks.” Torkwil nodded again and sauntered off, whistling some sea shanty tune to himself.

Cly startled back when a 30 foot long pilotfish suddenly leaped partly clear of the water right in front of the dock he was standing on. He leaped back, raising his hands to protect himself from the splash – hardly worth the effort, he was soaked.

The pilotfish – misnomer, that, even Cly knew they breathed air – was still wearing its’ harness but it had been released from the ship it towed, evidently given leave to rest. The cloud whale rider never knew what had startled it. It just circled for a minute and then became inert again a little way from where it started. Back to sleep, he guessed, as he watched a while.

“#### ## #### ##,” said a feminine voice behind him, in a language he didn’t recognize. Cly turned and looked but no one was there! Then his gaze travelled down and he beheld a very comely young lady mermaid leaning over the edge of the dock – and, quaintly, she was wearing two shells on her chest.

“Hi. Can I help you?” he asked.

She lifted her hands and Cly couldn’t help but notice she wasn’t actually *wearing* the shells. Being human – and male – it was a moment before he saw her waggle the shells at him again.

“#### BUY FISH - ####-####?³”

Cly belatedly realized she was holding a couple of some sort of live shellfish. Cly tried Tradetalk.

“SORRY, NOT GET ALL. NOT BUY FISH.”

She frowned a little and said, “No espika!⁴ ### ## LANGUAGE-OR-THE-WATER?”

Oh, boy. She wanted to know if he spoke the elemental language of water. “No, not very well,” he said. “Uh...NO . . . LAUGH?”

“### ## NOT ###. ### ##### ## STAND ##### MY #####!⁵”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand,” Cly said, shaking his head. “No. Fish. Err...NO! SHARK?”

She sighed and rolled her eyes a little, and spoke with elaborate enunciation, “No! ##! Door!⁶”

“What?”

“Door! Door!” she pointed to his feet.

Cly looked down and saw a painting of some sort of shellfish partly visible beneath his left foot. An arrow, drawn in perspective so it always pointed *down* no matter which way it was seen was indicating a latch in the deck. It was a trapdoor.

He was standing on the door to her shellfish store.

Cly jumped back hastily, embarrassed. “Sorry! Sorry, didn’t mean to. . .interrupt commerce.”

“Sokay,” she said, and disappeared below the water with a flash of her tail.

Apparently it was as busy below the surface as it was above.

“Ge' ŷ'R FISH! FLAT 'n' FRESH - RIGH' heah!” called the fishmonger. Vonya had been gone some time and Cly and Kara had time to grow bored, loitering about a public dock near the main navy yard, just opposite a fish market wafting the scents of fresh salty fish. Cly noticed quite a few people using the trapdoor to get shellfish. Now that he knew what to look for, he saw there must be quite a few shops under the dock.

The two conversed little, each occupied with their own thoughts as they idly watched the traffic. But the magician came to the alert when he overheard a rough voice below coming from a jetty to the left. He couldn’t quite see who was speaking.

3 Aquamantic – “You buy fish-(in)-shell?”

4 Pidgen Assuran – “No speak”

5 Aquamantic – “I’m *not* laughing. Then, please don’t stand on my door!”

6 Pidgen Assuran – “No. Stand. Door!”

"KAR! EF uh hed thet kind uf nerf, Oid swoipe thet cloud whayle up top and git the reward!"

Cly stiffened at the words "cloud whale," and replayed the argot in his mind until he made out the gist of it. "If I had that kind of nerve, I'd swipe the cloud whale up top and get the reward..." is what he decided he'd heard. The magician decided eavesdropping was the preferred route. Casually, without turning to face the men, he leaned forward on the rail and concentrated, trying to cut through the thick accents.

"Oy ta thet, then. More gold in the clouds then in fish, heh?" came another voice.

"What good'll gold do a dead man, I ask?" said a third voice. "Kenekra's not on moy charts, is it, then? Goin' ter get a navy chop on thet, are ye?"

"Oy, yer take'n yer chances, it's truth roight 'nough," the first voice replied again. "Don' know if Chip Smasha'll give out for 'is whayle or not. Likely not, ef'n the damn things float'n thar whoile yer haq'lin', eh? Prince of a proce 'e's off'r'n, though, ain't it? Getcha self land, women and turtles, fer thet color gold, couldn't ye?"

"Wouldn't hefta eat fish no more," replied the third, a fisherman saying even Cly had heard before. But just then, the men were hailed.

"You there! Break's over, isn't it? We don't pay for talk!"

"Comin' roight 'long, Skippa! Comin' roight 'long!" replied the men. Cly turned, peering into the crowd on the jetty trying to catch sight of the men, but he only managed a glimpse of the backs of them in their cabled sweaters, tweed caps and canvas trousers, the universal uniform of an Imrian fisherman. The magician threw looks to either side but no means of following presented themselves before they were lost in the shuffle.

Cly felt a coldness in his chest as he considered the words he'd overheard. Looking toward Kara, he realized she had not heard anything – likely as not unable to cut through the fishermen's thick accents. He decided not to let on to her that Ship Smasher was trying to buy a cloud whale. That was something he needed to think about. Because for the life of him, Cly could not imagine what a pirate would want with a cloud whale! Cargo? But a cloud whale carried almost nothing compared to even the smallest merchant. Speed? What could be so important to a pirate? Reconnaissance? Perhaps. The magician was still deep in thought when Vonya finally reappeared. She appeared very pleased with herself though she also appeared to be empty-handed.

"Well?" demanded Cly.

"I have arranged an account in the name of Khar-Semaj with the bounty money. It gives us a legal trading permit and exempts us from the

merchant tax, although we can't spend the money outside of Imri," Vonya said. "But that isn't the best part. I showed her the schooner ownership warrant and talked her into setting up a line of credit against the value of the ship. Then I set up a side bet and secured the line against the final sale price!"

"Miracles upon miracles," said Cly bemusedly. "What does that mean, really?"

"Basically, I just sold the ship. The bank guaranteed a minimum sale price, which was the bet-credit line. If Torkwil takes a bath on the ship the bank loses money, and if he makes a profit, we get some extra money but the bank still keeps our bet," said Vonya, proudly.

"Sounds like a rotten deal for the bank," said Kara.

"Not really. I bought a five percent true-credit line at the same time and this is a seller's market for ships. The bank made a good bet, and so did we. Didn't you ever deal with apLion before? They had a branch at Tilting Rock that I worked with. They *love* betting. You can't get a Calthian bank to bet whether water is wet."

"Calthis has some of the best magicians anywhere. I wouldn't bet that, either. Not with them. So what does this all mean? Don't we get the money?" asked Cly.

"We get it but, basically, I promised to spend it all here in Imri. It'll go further that way. Oh, I also got a good reference for a smith and directions to the silk merchant the clan normally deals with in Imri, so we can start repairs right away." Kara brightened up considerably at that.

Kara decided it would be easier to work on Semaj if they did not have to live in the clutter, and despite his newly acquired misgivings about hijackings, Cly had to agree. He didn't see how anyone could get Semaj to leave even if they *did* get on board – the chirpies would certainly not tolerate strangers and then trying to kill them would be a very noisy procedure – and Semaj was less than a bow shot from the duty office. Presuming they managed to kill the chirpies and seize the whale without raising the alarm, there was the sad fact that Semaj was all but completely crippled. Cly decided they were safe enough for the moment, though he resolved to communicate his misgivings to Vonya at the first opportunity. Perhaps they would hire a guard.

A quick check at the Port Authority for lodging advertisements led to a small flat available near the shipyards. It was convenient to a main thoroughfare that made commuting to the stairs more practical than the quick but roundabout route given them by the messenger boy. It also had a window, which was unusual, they learned. It provided but one room, but

whale riders had little body modesty and found grounder nudity taboos rather amusing. The room was furnished with an oil lamp, which they ignored, and two smallish beds with straw mattresses – which looked iffy but smelled clean – so Vonya and Kara took one and Cly the other. The room even had direct access to a back stair leading to a wash area with an inside well. But all the whale riders were dismayed at the price.

“When she said five crowns I thought she thought we wanted to *buy* it!” exclaimed Kara.

“The part that really hurts is that I got us a price break by guaranteeing payment from apLion Bank,” Vonya replied. “That really was the best possible price we could have gotten. Phew!”

But the food was good, despite its suspicious grounder origin, and there was plenty of it – a spicy vegetable stew sort of like their own verka but served hot. Once justice had been done to that, all three repaired to the bathing area in the cellar of the house to overcome the ravages of nearly three weeks of poor toiletry facilities. The unlimited water was an unaccustomed luxury and the whale riders even managed to get their clothes tolerably clean – no small matter when one is in an urbane city.

Much refreshed, they decided to check out the local silk merchants. The sooner they had rope, the sooner Kara could begin to heal Semaj. Kara hastily scribbled out a shopping list while Cly checked Vonya’s directions.

As it turned out, they were a mere stone’s throw from “House apTarg,” a large establishment on a small street quaintly named “Multi-Legged Way,” right across from the alchemist’s pharmacy whose sign was their landmark. It was late afternoon, and the traffic on the roads seemed scarcely diminished, but little of it used this street it seemed. “House apTarg” was strangely quiet.

The building was obviously quite old – massive slabs of masonry placed with a delicate – almost fussy – precision, without mortar. A large pair of wrought-iron gates depicting some spidery-looking creature – the apTarg totem, probably – stood open, providing access to a tiny brick-paved courtyard. At one end of the courtyard Cly caught a glimpse of a sculpture – a stylized spider and its web over a tiny waterfall and pond. A large metal and glass door faced the iron gates, with spools and bolts of material visible inside.

The store was open and they found within a wide but not very deep room laden with bolts of fine silk and festooned with spools of rope in many grades from the merest twine up to spun silk rope an inch in diameter. Vonya shuddered at the likely cost of that. There seemed to be no one

about but the jingle of money could wake even a dead Imrian merchant prince. They were shortly greeted by a handsome young man.

“Greetings, Outlanders! Welcome to our house, for here you will find the finest and strongest silk in all the known world!” he announced grandly. “At least, it’s the best in town, so you can take my word for the rest,” he added.

Kara stared openly at the merchant. White hair was quite common in Imri but she had not known that many of the Imrian upper crust also had tiny vestigial antennae just over the bridge of the nose. This comely young merchant was so equipped and she did not know whether she was intrigued or repelled.

Vonya noticed Kara’s sudden interest but covered her own reaction. “Good afternoon. I was beginning to wonder if you were open but it does seem too early to close up.” Rule one of haggling, she thought to herself, keep the other fellow off-balance.

“My apologies, but I was involved in a bit of veterinary surgery.” Kara’s eyes lit up at that.

“Vetting? On what?” she asked. “Do you need help?”

“Actually,” the young man said thoughtfully, “You might be able to give me a hand at that. Come in back.”

He lead them through a maze of small, interconnected rooms – living quarters, storerooms, work areas with spinning wheels and looms in an unbelievable variety, and kitchens – and eventually they reached a large, round room several stories high. The details of the room hardly stood out, for it was occupied by the strangest-looking thing any of the cloud whale riders had ever seen.

It was attached to a large, spherical bag that floated near the heavy wooden ceiling beams. At first, it appeared to be some sort of device, like the powered carts that were so popular here. But a closer inspection revealed delicate-appearing limbs, a thorax, and, eventually, a head – somewhat improbably, located near the bottom of the thing. It was some sort of enormous insect or arthropod. At that size, perhaps a pseudo-arthropod.

“This is a floater targ,” said the merchant. “The silk it produces is used to make that bag up there and to make a little net that it uses for picking up prey. They live in the gigantic vertical shafts in the lower caves.” He watched Kara with interest.

Kara was taken much aback but was obviously interested. She stepped closer and began to examine the beast, which seemed to ignore her.

"Does it bite or something?" asked Vonya nervously, staying well back.

"It would cheerfully make a meal of you but it has been somewhat subdued," responded the merchant.

"Magically," noted Cly.

"Yes, Magician. Trust one to know one, I suppose. I believe Uncle Tharn calls it a thump-spell, since it makes them stiffen up for an hour or so," the merchant said with amusement.

"Fungus infection in the lifter. Poor thing must be in enormous pain," said Kara, distractedly. "This part here shouldn't be shaped so," she pointed to the distended abdomen. "Its vents are nearly swollen shut and it's blowing itself up trying to get pressure into the lifter. I need some small, sharp knives, an awl, three clips about so long." She indicated the size with a quick gesture. The merchant said nothing, but produced the requested items from a toolbox by the door. Kara worked for several minutes before the beast suddenly hissed and sank to the floor, the distended abdomen collapsing even as they watched. The merchant jumped forward.

"Careful! It's gravid!" he said urgently. "Don't burst the egg-sack, right here." The merchant pointed to a piece of anatomy that meant nothing to Cly or Vonya but which must have meant something to Kara, who glanced at it once and dismissed it with a short nod.

Kara did not turn. "It's not hurt, but keep your eyes on the lifter bladder and tell me when the wrinkles disappear." She continued to work, carefully pushing aside the delicate legs that tried to hold the silk lines even in unconsciousness.

"They're going...they're gone," said the merchant, looking impressed. Slowly, the beast rose to the limit of its tether and hung there.

"It will be very sore. You should smear an antiseptic over the gas-maker and keep it near the ground for the next few days. And the next time you knock one down *don't* let it roll over in the dirt! Keep it upright!" she said severely.

The merchant looked sincerely astonished. "You mean, it'll *live*? That's all you have to do?"

"Of course. The anatomy is different, obviously, but it's not all that strange," Kara said, checking the beast once more. "When the infection subsides, gently pull out the clips. I don't think the infection is the big danger, just the fact that it closed the vent and sealed off the bag. Hold the vent open with the clip, and keep the bag open, and the pressure can't build up to a rupture."

“‘Rupture?’ We use the word ‘explode’ around here. Makes a *big* mess. Well, I *am* impressed. We very seldom manage to save any floaters that get that infection and it’s a darn shame – they are now very rare. And we used to make a fortune selling you folks that silk! From the dirt you say?” he went on in a bemused tone. “That’s all that was causing it?” Kara nodded, her amused expression speaking volumes that her mouth did not. The silkman heaved a chagrined sigh and said “My thanks and those of my house. And I’ll remember that trick! Now, what of your needs?” he asked, turning to Vonya.

“Well, Master...ah?”

“Carl. Carl apTarg the twenty-second, to be utterly formal, but merely Carl to those who are less than impressed with such, Lady Vonya Khar-Semaj,” he finished slyly.

Vonya was startled but refused to show it. “Yes. We need rope and bolts of silk. I believe our vet has the list?” she said turning to Kara.

Kara had been thunderstruck at having been recognized for she did not realize how the merchant houses of Imri kept each other informed. But she nodded and produced the list of the different grades and amounts of silk sheet and rope that she had made out earlier. There were centuries of the clan’s veterinary experience tied up in that list. Carl scarcely glanced at it.

“Seems most straightforward. You’ll be wanting it by tonight, of course?” he asked, handing the list back to Kara. Kara took the list by reflex, then looked surprised again at having it handed back.

“That should be good enough,” said Vonya.

“I believe the bottom line will come to two hundred ninety one crowns, four shillings and two pence. I do have a money changer’s license or I can take a draft on apLion.” The silkman turned to a speaking tube and removed the cap. “Ed! Tal! Hello? Yes, add half a coil of #3 light rope and two eight-by-twelve tarps of #6 silk to that shipment and get it up to the cloud whale before supper.” He listened for a moment to the in-audible reply and turned back with a questioning look.

“A draft, please,” supplied Vonya. The young merchant smiled and added to the tube, “Pick up the draft at apLion.” He replaced the cap and turned back to the whale riders. “A pleasure, Sir and Madams. Can I help you with anything else?”

Vonya smiled. “No, Master Carl, I think that will do. Thank you very much.”

“Thank you, Madam Vonya. And you Madam Kara! Clear Skies, Journeyman Cly!” He showed them the door. Kara seemed ready to rupture – or explode.

“How did he *know*? He didn’t even hardly *look* at this list, not really! How did he know?” she demanded as they stepped into the street.

Vonya shook her head. “Ka, Clan Khar has been buying silk from these people for six hundred years and more. They must have a pretty good idea by now of what we need! He probably took a look at Semaj after hearing we came in with damage. They are most professional people.”

Kara said, “But...oh, skip it. I probably should have charged them for that work, I suppose.”

Vonya shook her head. “Your little demonstration knocked about three hundred crowns off the price of our order. I think that was payment enough, don’t you?”

Cly paid scant attention. It had suddenly come home to him what enormous new responsibilities he faced, for until Carl apTarg had bid him farewell he had not realized that the moment Semaj had left on the Wild Ride he was no longer an apprentice. He was now in Imri, a part of an official crew of a clan Khar cloud whale. He had realized this only intellectually up until now, but the idea hit him emotionally all over again being addressed so by an outsider. He must now he must comport himself as befits a professional Journeyman Magician of the Khar clan. They were now all *representing* the clan to the outside world.

Cly had a great deal to think about for the rest of the day. He managed to draw Vonya aside later that afternoon and appraised her of what he had overheard while Kara worked on her sketches and lists. To his surprise, Vonya was not surprised.

“Cly, something like this *had* to be going on. That has to be why the pirates were so eager to board Semaj when we fouled our rigging in theirs. I was planning to try to ask around but you saved me the trouble. The question is, what can we do about it? Not much, aside from not losing Semaj and getting the word out to the rest of the clan. Well, Semaj can’t be stolen in his current condition and we can’t inform the clan until he’s fixed or his far band voicebox heals up, if it ever does. So we do what we planned to do, don’t we?” And Cly had to admit she was right.

12. A DIFFERENT ASPECT

It was a rotten night.

It would not be quite correct to say they felt bad when they woke, for that implied that they had slept and they most assuredly had not. None of them had ever slept away from Cloudhome or a cloud whale before. The gentle sway of those aerial beds had cradled them from earliest childhood. The grounder beds were soft, but they were totally immobile and all three were thoroughly nauseated by the time morning broke.

Even that would have been tolerable but the worst of it was all three were almost totally crippled with fierce muscle spasms in their lower legs.

Cly groaned and staggered to the window bench where he collapsed and rubbed his legs tenderly, gazing sourly out at the mist-shrouded bay, quieter now, though still not silent. It looked like a painting by an old master. Of course, an old master's painting would not have felt so dank and cold.

"Ka, can't you do anything?" Cly pleaded, again.

"Cly, I told you, I don't know what to do!" Kara gritted as she gingerly flexed her legs. "I never heard of anything like this, I have no idea what's causing it!" Cly groaned aloud. "I'm half ready to use some of our healing elixir right now!"

Vonya winced as she shook her head. "We'll want it more later. If we live that long."

With nervous stomachs and pained legs both, they quickly decided to skip breakfast altogether and headed for the alchemist's shop they had seen across from the silk merchant's. With much suppressed moaning, the threesome tottered off.

Luckily the chubby brown-robed alchemist was just opening up his shop when they arrived and he sized them up as he unlocked the bright yellow door set in the windowless wattled wall that comprised his shop. Liniment should be in demand today, he chuckled to himself as he held the door for the whale riders.

"Miramas Yothar at your service, Sir and Madams! Pray, tell me what my mean and humble shop might provide such illustrious visitors?"

The line might have sounded sarcastic but Cly suspected it was more a ritual. Still, the dusty exterior of the shop belied its interior. The smell was indescribable – not unpleasant or overly strong, but an admixture of scents that refused to meld, each coming through clearly and separately to his nose. He identified mint, cinnamon, and something citrusy, but there were things here he had never smelled in his life – a very metallic kind of smell he felt in the back of his nose rather than by actual odor, something

that gave him a slight feeling of heartburn – even something that smelled. . .yellow? Cly had no idea how anything could smell like a color, but that was the impression he got clear as day. Case after case of shelves, some freestanding, some built into walls or in nooks and crannies, and all of them crammed. Many were containers of various types and sizes, there were lots of envelop packs similar to the ones he carried from Master Bosrin's chest, as well. There were many, many books, and Cly could sense most of them dealt with magic somehow. He could feel it from across the room. Their slightly musty odor kind of underscored the other smells of the shop. A quick glance at the titles in the nearest case showed a much wider selection than just alchemy books. Master Yothar was more than just an alchemist, it would appear. This was a very large place and Cly nearly forgot the pain in his legs as he gazed eagerly around. Vonya, however, was not so easily distracted.

"Master Yothar, we would be interested in some of your medicinal preparations," she began, but winced as a particularly nasty jolt stabbed through one calf. "Something for muscle spasms?" she asked, tossing professional trading rules out the window.

"As it happens, I do have an excellent ointment of my own manufacture and at a special rate. Say, one crown a bottle?" the alchemist asked, as he doffed his cape onto a convenient stand.

"Fine. We'll take three." said Vonya quickly.

Chuckling, the portly old alchemist fetched three small bottles from a wooden cabinet behind a counter, handed them to Vonya and pocketed the coins. "At least you could *try* to haggle, Lady Vonya. After all, what about your reputation?" he grinned.

Vonya passed two of the bottles to Cly and Kara before hiking her tunic and applying the ointment but she laughed aloud at the alchemist's jibe. She refused to be surprised at being recognized again, Imri's grapevine was obviously having a field day with the three greenhorns. The creamy yellow ointment glowed as it sank into her skin and she heaved a great sigh of relief as the ointment, obviously magically assisted, banished the pain. Whatever the regular price of the ointment it was surely worth what they paid for it now.

Kara carefully flexed one leg with a thoughtful look on her face before turning to Vonya. "I want five bottles for my kit," she announced and went back to applying the stuff to her other leg.

Vonya sighed again. Well, it was her job to count the beans. She shot a calculating glance at the alchemist. "Do you have a quantity discount?" she asked.

The alchemist grinned more widely. "Well...eight bottles total, let's call it - seven. One free with every purchase!" he laughed.

Vonya was debating the merits of another round of haggling when Cly spoke up.

"That sounds fair if you'll toss in some information with that," he said with a look at Vonya. She shrugged and counted out more coins as the alchemist rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

"Well. . .if getting it doesn't require any great efforts. . .sure. Why not?" The coins clinked in his palm. "I imagine it has to do with young Hodly. Too bad about that."

Cly felt suddenly cold. "It wasn't, but it is now! What *about* Hodly?" But he had a terrible feeling he knew the answer.

"I *thought* you'd been out of touch. Khar-Kreen was in five days ago. Shamyir released my apprentice bond for the youngster. Died with the power a-borning. Drowned, so I hear, in an undine's embrace."

Cly felt sick to the pit of his stomach. *Another* one. Hodly had been like a little brother – much bother but much caring as well. Seeing his face, Vonya took his arm but said nothing.

Into the awkward silence, the alchemist said, "Well, if that wasn't the knowledge, what was, might I ask?"

Cly silently produced the strange medallion he had taken from the slain Wizard on the ghost ship. Yothar screwed up his face and grunted thoughtfully as he examined the piece. The journeyman thaumateurge noticed it looked different in this light. . .somehow. "Magical," the alchemist said, almost to himself. The cloud whale riders waited expectantly. "Earth magic, I think," he added after a moment. He held the coin so Cly could see it and pointed out a series of runes with his thumbnail. It seemed less indistinct in this light, noted the whale rider.

"I'd guess this is a gnome-summoning device," he continued, turning the coin around in his hands as he spoke. "I don't see a compulsive attached but I don't know what's locked in the gem, of course. I'd guess it summons gnomes but I'd have no idea – no, just one gnome," he interrupted himself. Showing the medallion to Cly again, he indicated another set of runes. "A name. This gnome must be bound to the coin. Can you read it?" Cly nodded, as Yothar went on, "I'd have no idea what this gnome is bound to do without some real research. I'd figure around a thousand crowns to get a really good idea – need about a month." He paused, thoughtfully, still fingering the device. His face went blank for just a moment before he said, "But I. . .I really can't do it this month. In fact, probably not. . .for some time."

Cly squinted at this strange performance but closed his mouth when he caught Vonya's eye. She had flinched when she heard the price and shook her head vigorously at Cly.

"I don't think so, Master Yothar, but thanks for the guess." He took back the coin – noting that it felt much warmer than it had when he first took it out.

"What about these?" Cly asked as he replaced the medallion and pulled out the bag of mage stones and rolled them into his hand. Yothar shook his head as if to clear it as he looked.

"Sorry, Journeyman. Gems *always* need research, appearance tells you nothing, there could be *anything* locked inside one of those beauties" Yothar said without touching them. "Probably about two hundred crowns each." Cly smiled sheepishly and shrugged as he put the stones back in the sack and started to put it away.

"Careful with those, lad. Jostle them too much and they may detonate," Yothar cautioned. The younger magician froze.

"What do you mean? I'd heard that spells could be stored in gems but I've not heard they might explode!" Cly said in astonishment.

"Not surprised, that's why I mentioned it. I didn't think gems were a part of your line's training. Spells live in the crystalline structure of the gem but the presence of spells weakens that structure. That's why you have to use gems instead of any old crystal to do the trick. Otherwise a bit of rock or sugar crystal could be used, and more cheaply too. But you need a *hard* crystal to survive the enspelling, the harder the better. And the enspelled gems become brittle – handle them too roughly and. . .boom!" he spread his hands wide to dramatize the extent of the result.

"Like a magical battery, but worse, is what you're telling me," Cly said. "I understand."

"Just so. When you use a gem for a battery, the magic is diffuse, stored in every nook and cranny of the gem, no great stress at any one point. Not as strong, but not outright fragile – or heaven knows we couldn't trust apprentices with them! But spells are different. They're hard, spiky things, they push hard at some parts of the gem, leave others alone. If you put them in right, and take them out right, no problem. Damage them, and all the power is released in one burst."

Cly nodded his thanks at the impromptu lesson and pocketed the bag more carefully.

"Well," he said with a sigh, "How about something more your own way?" He pulled out the little green and white packets of fire shield and

passed them over. Yothar's eyebrows went up as he read the note on the back.

"Timuron's work! Now *he* was a top-notch chef and no mistake! I've heard of this stuff, too," he said slowly. He leaned toward Cly, "This is worth good money. I'll make you a real offer if you want to sell this..." he trailed off as Cly shook his head.

"No, thanks. What I want is this 'farj' stuff. The activator," he said, quietly.

"Agent, not activator," Yothar noted.

"What's the difference?" Cly asked, always alert to new magical lore.

"These two packets can be mixed with any amount of farj you have and it will make that much fire shield. Add it to a spoonful, you get a spoonful. A gil, gives a gil, and so on."

Cly shook his head, forcing Hodly to the back of his mind, calling forth that single-mindedness that was the mark of every true magician. "Good! That's even better than I dared hope for!" Cly said. "How much does farj cost?"

"Sorry, but I haven't got any. Haven't had it for a year," the old alchemist said with real regret in his tone. He indicated a wall covered with shelves nearly obscured by hundreds of jugs and bottles of every shape and kind. "See for yourself. And if I don't have it, you can't get it. I take pride in that." Cly disengaged his arm from Vonya's and walked over to the wall and checked. Sure enough, a tiny jug labeled "farj" stood empty at one end.

"So why do you want to buy the shield, then?" asked Cly over his shoulder as he scanned the labels on the other jugs.

"Well. . . I *might* get some – but more likely I'd find a use for it in some other preparation. You have any training in recipes?" Yothar asked. Cly shook his head. "Thaumateurgy is my Art. But you can see why someone who lives with the whales might want some of this stuff."

"Ah, yes. Pretty obvious, I guess. But unless you can sparkle up some farj those little packets will do you no good at all."

"Oh, come now! It can't be *that* hard to get. Where is it found? Perhaps I can gather some myself," said Cly, nervously rubbing the burn scar on one hand. The alchemist burst out laughing.

"I'd like to see that! I'd *pay* to see that!" he chortled.

"What's so funny?" demanded Cly.

"You. Somehow, I can't see a skyjammer landing in or near a *volcano* and fighting his way down into a fire ant colony!" he said, laughing even harder as Cly's befuddled expression really hit him. "You'll dine in

Caerleon's Great Hall, first!" he wheezed, tears of merriment gathering in his eyes.

"You really don't know? I guess not. . .farj! Farj, my dear colleague, is fire ant royal jelly. F-A-R-J. It's a standard abbreviation," he finished.

Later, as they were searching the streets near the docks for the smith's shop, Cly was philosophical.

"I guess we ought to sell the stuff but I can't help feeling that would be a bad idea. Maybe we can get farj in Calthis," Cly mused.

"Maybe," Vonya said, doubtfully, "But let's keep him in mind if we need more funds. This place is so expensive! I had no idea."

The threesome walked silently for a bit following some sort of cook wagon that took up most of the street. As it turned down a side street, Vonya cleared her throat and said, "Cly, how could Hodly drown? What did he mean by 'died with power a-borning?' Forgive me if I'm prying, but it seems so sudden!"

Cly nodded. "I shouldn't tell you much. Too much of that kind of knowledge is very, very dangerous." He squeezed his eyes shut for a moment as he walked. "As Hodly found out to his sorrow."

Vonya did not speak again, but in a moment, Cly said, "Not everyone can work magic, *real* magic. Hodly was going through what everyone who aspires to the power must, the same thing that almost killed me." He swallowed before continuing, "It kills perhaps eight or nine out of ten. If it were not so the world would be chest-deep in magicians. As it is, well, only those who truly wish the power dare to seek it." And he refused to say more.

They found the smithy just as the lunch whistle blew and an "Out to Lunch" sign appeared in the door as if teleported there. Vonya silently implored her ancestors.

"Oh, well," Cly said. "I was getting hungry anyway. See any place where we can get lunch?"

The threesome looked but there was little to see. The smithy was at the very end of a street that slanted down to a sublevel, and the walls to either side were dressed stone. "We shouldn't wander far," Kara said worriedly. "It could be tough to find this place again."

"Perhaps in that little faire we passed two blocks back..." Cly began, but he was interrupted.

Go left at the top of the street, and proceed three blocks to the Red Heron. sounded Cloughload's amused voice in their minds. Kara let out a yelp and pointed at the dragon on his huge stone shelf nearly a mile away.

He was looking their way. Vonya gave a tiny gasp but composed herself quickly. "Uh...thanks."

~~You're welcome.~~ the dragon sent, still sounding amused. ~~He needs the business and the food is pretty good.~~

The three walked self-consciously in the indicated direction until the dragon looked elsewhere.

"Does he do that often, Cly?" asked Kara shakily.

"I doubt it, Ka. But we're probably amusing him. New folks and all that," Cly said. "I bet he's been checking us periodically since we arrived." He did not add that the dragon's interest was probably due to Kara's reaction on her first sighting of him. She was obviously shaken up enough.

They found the Red Heron exactly where promised. It was in an ancient granite building with a solid brick floor and an immense centrally placed oven of mortared slate equipped with wrought ironwork cooking-gear. The ceiling was intricately worked plaster, beautifully painted and just inches over Cly's head. He was forced to duck the massive stone beams that reinforced it. The room was lit by flames from the oven and by a profusion of brightly glowing oil lamps placed at each table. All the place lacked was windows. Normal enough, in Imri, Cly thought, suppressing a shudder. Solid, unyielding stone seemed to close in around them. The cloud whale riders hated everything.

"Why do these people love to live in such closed-in places?" Kara muttered to Vonya as she stared at the lamp on the table.

"Beats me, Ka," Vonya replied quietly. "Maybe they have dwarven blood in them." Kara shivered.

By common consent the whale riders picked the table farthest from the central oven and sat down just as the waiter arrived. As the waiter recited the day's menu Kara stared fixedly at the lamp that was burning at their table.

Luckily, good honest seafood was the house specialty and they could even get it in the preferred whale rider fashion – pickled – so the visit was not a complete loss. Cly wondered if the dragon's "good food" comment was merely in general or if it realized they would prefer uncooked food and so sent them here. As the waiter bustled away, Cly roused himself from his speculations and unobtrusively extinguished their table lamp.

Cly and Vonya ate quickly, anxious to be out of that dismal place, but Kara fidgeted, unable to eat, casting nervous glances at the oven and at the lamps on the other tables. Perspiration glistened on her brow though the restaurant was not overly warm.

Vonya pronounced her hunger satisfied when Kara began hiccuping from nervousness. Cly quickly agreed and escorted the vet out as Vonya settled the bill.

Kara got herself under control once they were outside. "Outside" was a mere illusion, of course, for they were still in the enormous cavern that housed the city. But it *felt* like outside to Kara and Cly was not inclined to correct her feelings. When Vonya joined them the three walked slowly back toward the smithy. It seemed unlikely the smiths had finished lunch as quickly as they.

"Von, don't these people realize how dangerous fire is?" Kara blurted out as they walked. "They had *dozens* of them in there! I know they use it for cooking but they weren't cooking with all of them!"

"The little ones in the lamps were for light, Ka, but you've got to realize that these folk have no fear of fire at all. Grounders never do," Vonya replied softly.

"Haven't they ever seen a cloud whale going down in flames?" asked Kara in a voice filled with pain.

"I doubt any of them have. Fire just doesn't worry them much. Look at that restaurant. Suppose someone knocked a lamp over and lost control of the fire," Vonya said. Kara hugged herself and shivered violently but Vonya went on. "It would likely burn the table – that was wood and wood burns. But the floor was stone, which doesn't burn; the ceiling was plaster, which doesn't burn; and was reinforced with more stone, which also doesn't burn. Make a mistake with fire on a cloud whale and the whale is doomed. Make a mistake with fire in that restaurant and you've lost a table. That's why they don't care. And as long as we are down here we don't need to care, either." Kara gave her a startled look. "I mean it. Look around us now! See anything that burns?" Vonya asked.

Kara glanced around. To her right was the Magician's Guildhall, built from stone. To her left was a tenement, with an attached stable. Both were brick, with stone porticos. The road itself was slabs of worn sandstone set in mortar. Clearly a fire here would be no disaster. Kara nodded to Vonya.

"I guess you're right. But it's still creepy," she said in a low voice.

As they resumed their trek toward the smithy, Cly whispered to Vonya, "I'm glad you didn't suggest that down by the docks. That whole neighborhood is wood, you know."

Vonya looked surprised as she whispered back, "Really? Then why are they so cavalier with fire?"

Cly grinned. "Fire burns wood much more slowly than a cloud whale. If a fire starts they just put it out. Or let it burn itself out and rebuild the

damaged buildings. Of course, it's not very healthy to be around while that's going on."

As Cly expected, the smithy was still closed when they got back. He shot a glance toward the dragon as he discovered this, half-expecting another helpful suggestion. Sure enough, Cloughload was looking their way, but he did not seem disposed to speak. Cly was beginning to wonder just what it was about them that so interested the dragon. It *had* to be more than just amusement at Kara's suggestibility. Vonya interrupted his musings.

"Well, since they aren't open yet, let's find out what the crowd is interested in," she said.

Intent on his own thoughts, Cly had not noticed the burble of a small crowd from the next intersection until Vonya had mentioned it.

"Okay," he replied. "We seem to have some time to burn." He looked toward Kara who shrugged in reply. The whale riders joined the outskirts of the crowd at the next intersection.

The intersection was really a plaza where three streets, a tunnel and two bridges came together. Most of it was a traffic exchange, of course, but there was a sizable pedestrian plaza decorated with large brass cages filled with birds from many lands. But the crowd was not there to look at the birds, beautiful though they were. They had their attention riveted on a young man wearing the black robes of a Journeyman Magician, who stood upon a low dais next to a smallish crystal ball mounted on a pedestal at waist height. He had one hand upon the orb and was gesticulating with the other as he addressed the crowd. Cly strained his ears as the whale riders came up.

"...can plainly see! What was once unknowable, unobtainable, now simple and easy! And so very inexpensive, too!" he called. "You, Sir!" he said, pointing to an older man near the front of the crowd, "Have you never wondered? Come, come! Is one gold crown too much for such a priceless piece of self-knowledge? Let Ligre's Sorcery work for you!" With much ribbing and laughter from his companions the old gentleman stepped up to the dais and pressed a coin into the Sorcerer's hand.

Cly slid toward the dais eagerly as Kara and Vonya followed. Ligre Masukoh of Berrireth was dead a thousand years but his line of Sorcery – his students, and student's students – was still around and much respected. Clearly, this young sorcerer was of this line and some new piece of magic was being revealed to this attentive crowd.

Cly could see little sparkles and shines of color moving around the crystal – controls, he knew, but since they were focused toward the Sorcerer he could not see or use them.

The old gentleman asked something of the Sorcerer in a voice too low to carry, and the Journeyman Magician shook his head.

“Not at all, not at all!” he cried. “Just put your hand so!” he said, pressing the palm of the man’s hand to the crystal. The crowd hushed and those nearer to the dais pressed forward intently.

Cly held his breath waiting for he knew not what. He felt the power radiating from the crystal but the form of its spell was not familiar. It was not much like Master Shamyir’s magic, Cly thought to himself. That was not surprising, Shamyir was of the line of Messuol the Drayner, who had little connection with this branch of the art, sorcery or not. Nevertheless, Cly watched closely, determined to learn something.

Cly suddenly noticed the crystal was wet! Yes! A thin film of water now covered the orb!

“Water! Water, my dear Sir! The eternal mystery of the ocean, the regard of the denizens of the deep, such is *your Aspect!*” shouted the Sorcerer grandly. Cly was staggered. Here was Sorcery, indeed! Obviously the line of Ligre had made a great advance! Finally, could a living man or woman know to which of the elements they were best attuned! Cly trembled a bit as he rubbed his burn-scarred hand. He imagined Hodly’s sodden body, lying in a pool of water in that horrible cavern so far underground. Finally they could *warn* a magician’s apprentice what he would face at his kindling!

“What is it, Cly? What does it mean?” asked Vonya in his ear. With his voice quavering just a bit, Cly explained quickly as the Sorcerer brought up a young woman from the crowd.

Vonya’s eyes went wide as Cly brought home to her the full impact of what she was seeing. She said nothing but she glanced once at Cly’s hand before she turned again to the dais. The crystal had darkened and turned rough and grey and the Sorcerer proclaimed the young lady aspected to the dark and fertile earth. She blushed prettily as she stepped down.

The whale riders slipped past a pair of centaurs watching the show and spotted the Sorcerer waving off a scaly non-royal gargoyle with a few apologetic words.

“Sorry, m’lord, the crystal becomes uncertain with anything but humans. It’s magic, not a miracle,” he smiled.

By this time the whale riders had reached the foot of the dais just as a young lad of no more than ten summers stepped up. As he touched the crystal it flashed brightly and moments later water poured from its surface, splashing to the pavement in a bright rainbow.

"My congratulations, young Master!" the Sorcerer cried. "See the reaction! Behold, Ladies and Gentleman, a young man destined for the halls of Magic!" The boy stepped down next to a man, obviously his father, who seemed even more shaken than the lad. Cly stared at them enviously. To think if he had had that crucial foreknowledge! If *Hodly* had! But he turned at Kara's choked gasp and his eyes widened at what he saw.

For Vonya had stepped to the dais! She was breathing heavily from the excitement but she held herself tightly in control as she pressed a gold coin into the magician's hand. Visibly steeling herself, she reached out to the crystal. Even before her fingers touched it Cly saw the crystal darken, and in a flash recalled that it had done no such thing as the lad had touched it before. Deep in that quiet spot every magician has, he felt the crystal gather its' power. . .and Cly saw the sparkles vanish from the Sorcerer's hands.

He launched himself at Vonya as her hand touched the crystal and as they rolled to the pavement the crystal burst into a roar of red flame!

"By the *Gods!*" cursed the Sorcerer. As the crystal's flames waxed higher and higher from Vonya's fleeting touch he stepped back and reached to his belt, pulling out a wand.

Cly shook his head to clear it as Vonya lurched to her feet, face white as chalk. She stepped down from the dais toward Kara who leaped back.

"Fire!" she screamed! "You're *fire!*" Vonya shook her head as she held out her hand.

"Ka...Ka, it doesn't matter!" she said. Cly added, quickly, "A person's aspect isn't *who* they are – it doesn't *control* you, it's just something *about* you! It could be *anything* for *anybody*! But it doesn't matter unless you're a Magician – or a Cleric!" Kara was shaking violently. "No! No! Fire is evil! You. . .*you're* evil!" she cried.

"It doesn't matter!" Vonya shouted back. "~~Anyone~~ could be fire-expected, even you!" Kara gasped.

"No! No, that can't be!" she said, staring at Vonya. Her eyes darted to the crystal, still an angry red but quieting as the Sorcerer patted the orb and tucked his wand back into his belt. The sparkles re-appeared as he re-established control. "*I'LL PROVE IT!*" Kara snarled as she lunged for the crystal.

Cly grabbed her as she pushed the Sorcerer aside, he had seen the crystal darken and the crystal's controls vanish once again at her approach. He yanked her to safety an instant after she fleetingly touched the crystal.

For a tiny, eternal moment the world stood still as the light in the crystal shrank to a star-like pinpoint. The Ligre Magician's eyes went very wide and then he threw himself to one side as the pinpoint expanded again to the surface of the crystal. The orb cut loose with a terrifying bolt of lightning!

The crowd screamed and scattered as more bolts leaped off the surface of the crystal dancing here and there about the plaza. Cly's nostrils were filled with the incongruous odor of roasting chicken as he pulled Kara away from the crystal with one hand and prepared a nullification spell with the other. Kara twisted free of his grasp as he struggled with the spell, ducking away into the crowd while Cly tried to calm the orb.

In a moment Cly's spell and the Sorcerer's wand had again quieted the crystal. The Sorcerer slumped next to the dais, mopping his face with one sleeve. Cly looked past him to the now nearly deserted plaza. Nearly, that is, but for the city guard approaching warily.

13. TAKE THE DRAGON'S HAND?

Kara ran, blind with panic, deaf to Cly and Vonya's calls and uncaring where she went, she hurled herself through the rapidly dispersing crowd.

She ran until she found a quiet alley winding its way down to a lower level. Shaking with a sickening mixture of fear and exhaustion the whale rider went as far as the first turn before stopping to lean against a cool granite wall. She would not let herself think about what had happened. She couldn't, and she wouldn't, she told herself firmly. Kara sank down to the pavement and held her head in her hands, squeezing as if she could squeeze out the memory that terrified her.

Priceless pieces of self-knowledge can often be disturbing. Shilaya came into her mind. Kara's heart skipped a beat as the name by which she was addressed seemed to touch her very soul. Only once before had she been addressed by her True Name – when she was taking the vows of her calling, when she swore by it to Master Wold. Since her parents had died, only Master Wold had known her True Name. Or so she had thought. Though she sensed who had sent to her, she covered her face with her hands and refused to look.

Cloughload was silent for a time. The human girl was not directly visible to him from his high perch but that mattered little. Her mind stood out to him like a blazing beacon. Still, a more direct presence might be helpful.

"May I be of assistance, Mistress?" asked a strange voice. Kara gasped and looked up at a young man in reddish-orange robes. She recognized him as the Hand who had offered assistance when she had first met the gaze of the dragon.

"What. . . what do you want?" she asked, unsteadily.

"Nothing, Mistress. I only offer aid. May I?" he asked, reaching out a delicate hand. Kara hesitated, then nodded.

The young man touched her forehead with one finger and Kara felt her fear recede. In moment, it was a memory and she felt much better.

"Th...thanks," she said, faltering. She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her temples before looking at the Hand again. "How did you do that?"

"I merely willed it to be so, My Lady. The way comes from my own mind. The power comes from My Lord."

"Your Lord...? The dragon?" Kara asked, rising to her feet.

"Just so," agreed the Hand. "With My Lord's help even the meager human brain is vastly augmented – able to accomplish much by sheer will. Far more than an unaided mind."

"But what sort of magic is this?" Kara asked.

"Not magic. *Will*. My power works even in areas drained of magic. The mystic force is unrelated to the odyllic force used by magicians. Of course, few people have it – the mystic talents are rare in humans. In most intelligent beings, for that matter." The Hand smiled. "But you have it, My Lady. Your mind is like a complex assembly of multicolored lenses. But they are dark – even the clearest lens needs a light source and you have none but your own will."

"Well, I'm sorry, but that's the best I've got," Kara replied, tossing her head.

"No. It could *blaze* with glory if we could but get more power to it. My Lord can do that," said the Hand quietly.

"What do you mean?" breathed Kara.

"The power is yours if you will open your mind to My Lord," the Hand said earnestly. "Close your eyes and try it!"

But Kara did not trust either the dragon or it's Hand.

"No."

"My Lady, banish your fear! My Lord does not seek *slaves*, he has no use for a mindless puppet! With the power comes great responsibility, not to My Lord but to one's own *self* – the responsibility that comes with *any* great power. The same that your own magician friend must have." The Hand put a finger to his temple. "My mind is my own. I am a Hand by choice. I could choose – *still* can choose – *not* to be. So can you."

"I . . . I don't . . . understand," Kara breathed. "Why me? Why *me*? What's so special about *me*?"

"You have the power, My Lady. I think many of your folk do. My Lord has contemplated offering to empower one of your people for a long time but he knew most of your people would not leave the skies. But you have no affinity for the sky, My Lady. Not the way your fellows do. How *could* a lightning aspect find comfort in *that* realm? How could *that* be. . . *home*?"

The Hand's questions cut deeply. Kara had loved the cloud whales but it was clearly – painfully – obvious they did not love her back. She had loved being a vetengineer but she had not loved the sky – not as the others did, she knew. Was it truly because she was not born to the aspect of Air? Now she knew why the dragon was approaching her. It thought she might stay.

"You have the power, My Lady. But among your own people you have no way to release it and use it. If you stay here, My Lord can empower you – teach you how to use your mind and will to do whatever *you* feel is right," said the Hand.

"Stay? Stay? No. Never! Never!" Kara said, shaking. The Hand was too close to feelings she should never permit to see the light! "I could never leave the clouds, never leave my people!"

"Leave them for what?" asked the Hand. "You have no idea of what I am talking about, not really. Open your mind, even just a little, give My Lord a chance to *show* you what he wishes to give you – isn't that fair? You lose nothing just by being fair!" The Hand closed his eyes and shook his head so emphatically a stray curl of yellow hair fell across his temple. "My Lady, if we truly wished to take you, rest assured we could. But slaves make poor allies and *allies* are what My Lord seeks. Open your mind. . .open your mind just a little. Give us a chance, Shilaya, we *can* give you what you need!"

Kara closed her eyes, confused by the young man's intensity. But she was curious...

Khar-Semaj was idly listening to the babble of thousands of little minds below him. He was momentarily alerted when he detected his crew alarmed about something, but the threat seemed quickly disposed of. Still, one – Kara, he thought, she who changed him – was so upset he could hardly understand her thoughts. Not that human thoughts were crystal-clear in the best of circumstances. The Companions lived at a completely different scale than did his kind. She seemed afraid, but that faded quickly. Then she seemed confused. . .confused and curious all at once.

Well, thought Cloughload to himself, I suppose curiosity could be construed as a sort of agreement. As he felt the confused emotions in her mind opening her up, he began to feed his own power into her thoughts. It was not easy. It never was, he thought regretfully. They just didn't live at the same scale as his kind.

Kara was suddenly dizzy, she fell back against the wall behind her as she felt the dragon's mind touch hers. Her mind was filled with the roar of thoughts from thousands of minds. It lasted only a moment before everything seemed to go quiet. With a tremendous act of will she regained control. But the dragon was still present.

Semaj felt the dragon touch Kara's mind. He tensed but the touch did not feel hostile. He did not interfere. The link the dragon was forging was unlike anything in his experience. It was totally new in cloud whale experience, for that matter, he was sure. It was rather like the link that connected the dragon to certain humans in the city – no, it was that link! Cloud whales have known of that bond for centuries – indeed, millennia! But they had never seen it touch a mind that was open to them as their crews were. Semaj was elated. He watched carefully, eager as always to learn.

Kara looked at the Hand with eyes that saw things she had never imagined. The young man smiled as he saw her look – remembering how it had felt when he was first empowered. Again he touched her mind but at another level of awareness he sensed something. . . a scuffle nearby. In the intersecting alley a well-dressed man accosted by three ruffians.

“Your pardon, My Lady!” he gasped as he whirled away from her, running toward the man. Kara, sensing the same disturbance, followed close behind, bemused and clear-headed at the same time, an inexplicable feeling.

But they were too late. Imri is a generally well-policed city, simple robbers have learned not to waste time subduing living victims. Most just stab their targets and loot their bodies as they cool on the pavement. The ruffians had departed already and their victim was lying in a pool of blood. The Hand could feel his life ebbing as they arrived. He sensed Cloughload's anger, felt him teleport another Hand to intercept the murderers before they could vanish below ground. It took only seconds before the killers were held tight in mental bonds, incapable of motion – indeed, incapable of even thought.

But too late for this fellow. With tender hands the Hand turned the man over. He had been dispatched from behind with a single thrust to the heart. Very professionally done, he thought to himself, bitterly.

Kara could feel everything in the man's body. She felt the hard stone under his body, slick with his own blood. She felt Cloughload's anger, and that he did. . . *something*. She felt the agonizing pain in the victim's chest, saw herself and the Hand looking down – sensed the regret at the sorrow this would bring to wife and daughter and the guilt for taking this shortcut. The terrible feeling of *knowing* he was dying, that his life was ending now. She knew where the blade had gone, could see just where the damage was. It was so *little*, really. The cut was less than half an inch

wide! If only she could hold the tissues so. . .they would knit in a matter of moments!

Cloughload felt her desire but had little conception of what she wanted. He had no idea what human anatomy was. But he had the power. Sensing a golden opportunity to show Kara just exactly what she could do with his help, he examined her desire with great care and then willed it to be so.

The wound closed instantly. Breathing hard, Kara willed constriction of certain blood vessels, driving up blood pressure and bringing the man back from the brink of the last sleep. In a few minutes the man opened his eyes. He was weak but he was alive. He turned his eyes to the Hand, who still held him in his arms.

"My thanks, Hand," he whispered softly. The young man shook his head.

"Thank My Lady, Goodman. I have not the knowledge to do this. 'Twas she who held you to life."

The man looked at Kara. In his eyes she saw his name, Korlen ip Hawke, his soul name, *Melethin*...and his thanks. He was too weak to thank her with his voice but the look was enough.

Later, when Korlen had been taken to the hospital, Kara and the Hand stood together in the street outside. The Hand looked respectful.

"My Lady, I *am* impressed. Few are able to use the power so well, so quickly," he said. Kara shrugged.

"It was mostly Your Lord, I think. But the idea was mine." Kara seemed ill at ease. With her arms folded tightly across her chest she paced back and forth.

Kara was remembering what she had felt when she realized Goodman Korlen would live. The realization of what she could do. She was awed.

But the price was a terrible one! She had to stay *here*, the Hand had said. Cloughload surely had a range, the Hands could not use the power outside it. She could not travel, could not ride the cloud whales, if she wanted to keep the power.

Her thoughts flew to Khar-Semaj, in his uncomfortable berth miles away. She touched his mind and suddenly felt – *home*. With a sudden jolt she realized that Semaj *knew* her! Knew *her*, personally! That he had a mental picture of her and of Vonya and Cly as well. Never had she thought the whales really knew the *people* who lived within them – as *individuals*. Semaj had a *mind*! She could feel it, like a vast presence looking down at her. . .with genuine affection. Even...love?

Kara wanted to explore what she had seen but she already knew she could not leave Semaj or her people and with that knowledge came the realization that she could not use Cloughload's power any more. Kara's eyes filled with tears, but she closed her mind.

The dragon was astonished when he felt Kara withdraw from him. He had thought – was sure, in fact – that her taste of the power and knowing what she could do with it would make her come to him for more. But it was not so! For a moment, the dragon regarded the cloud whale. Something had passed between them. Cloughload realized Kara would not become a Hand. It was sad. Many of the whale riders seemed gifted that way. But this experiment had obviously failed.

As you wish, so let it be. He withdrew the power.

Kara felt the awareness ebb as the power receded. Soon she was alone in her own mind again. But the memories remained.

Semaj lay in his uncomfortable cradle feeling warm and at peace. For the first time in the collective memory of the Last Fleet he had touched a human mind – just for a moment – at their scale. As the link between Kara and Cloughload faded, Semaj relaxed, knowing Kara would return home – to him. And knowing, too, that new things would come to pass – whether the Pod liked it. . . or not. A cloud whale's face is not made to smile, but within his thoughts he smiled dreamily to himself as he pondered every detail of the episode.

The Hand had watched Kara make up her mind. He felt Cloughload's regret and felt the power withdraw. Disappointed, he searched her face but said nothing. Kara was a healer. She knew what she could use the power for – and still she had rejected it. There was nothing more to be said. Almost nothing.

“A dragon will never change its' mind about anything, Kara. My Lord will always stand ready to empower you. Return when you are ready.”

Kara nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She turned away, wondering where she could find Cly and Vonya. She suddenly remembered where they were and how to get there. She smiled through her tears in spite of herself. The memory was a view from the ledge overlooking the city.

14. ELEMENTARY MY DEAR MAGICIAN

“Well, Cly, it’s the damndest thing I ever saw. I mean, *two* magician candidates all at once, *both* of them hot-aspected whale riders. Oh, the Gods *do* have a sense of humor,” Keff said as he swigged his ale. “One of those little surprises they are so very fond of, methinks. Or one of their little jokes!” He shook his head, recalling the scene. “And one of them a lightning aspect! Never ran into one of *those* before. They’re rare.”

Cly and the Sorcerer had repaired to a nearby tavern after dropping Kara and Vonya off at their hotel. Keff had insisted on covering the quite hefty bill for the birds killed when their cages were hit by the lightning – seemed quite happy about it. Far from being annoyed about the incident, the young Sorcerer seemed elated.

“But what about the lad? You proclaimed him magician material,” remarked Cly.

“Er...poetic license, you know. The crystal seems to react to magician candidates by refusing to stop when the touch is withdrawn – but I’ve only seen that effect twice. . .until today. Since it stopped when he stopped touching it, he is not magician caliber.” Keff sipped his ale meditatively. “Might make a pretty good cleric, though,” he added absently. “It was a strong reaction.”

“It’s very new,” he went on. “We don’t know everything about it, how it works, even everything it’s telling us, really. The college wants everyone to try it out so we can get a handle on how it reacts to various aspects.”

“But why was the reaction so violent?” Cly asked. Keff swirled the yeasty dregs of his ale around the bottom of his mug and then signaled the barman for another round.

“With most people it’s very mild. Just a hint. But unkindled magicians affect it strangely. We suspect that perhaps a magician’s aspect is loose – as if it were not fully attached or integral. That may be why some can shed it to kindle the power, and others fail and die. Maybe a magician leaves a little piece of his aspect behind when he touches the orb.” He paused while the barman refilled their flagons. “She touches,” he amended. “I had a bad feeling the instant she moved toward it. I felt I could almost *hear* the lightning in her. A *vet* you say?” he asked.

Cly nodded. “Vetengineer. Not only for cloud whales. She can heal sky mantas, chirpies – even humans, elves, or dwarves. Partly it’s training but partly it’s sort of inborn.”

Keff nodded. “I’ve run into just three lightning aspects until today, and *all* of them were involved in things connected with life. One was a

Naturist – Druid, sort of. *Very* powerful. Knew lots of alternate forms, could even interact with entire communities.”

Cly showed his surprise. “How do you mean?”

“I saw Dorov address an *entire forest* – and it *answered*. Not any *individual* animal or plant – the *whole thing*, as if it were one entity. The other two lightning aspects I know of were *both* healers. And both women, too. Dorov is the only male lightning aspect I’ve ever heard of. Lightning seems to have an affinity for life, Kara certainly fits the pattern.”

Cly was fascinated. He fingered the orb in its little table pedestal – Keff never let the orb leave his sight – and marveled at its seeming inertness. Inert to *him* – to anyone who had already kindled the power. Definitely *not* inert to anyone else.

But another thought intruded. “Keff,” he said slowly, “Exactly how reliable is the orb in predicting magician-class talent? Could Vonya or Kara actually kindle the power?”

“The ladies made an important data point. The positive feedback reaction has only been observed twice before, and both of them – *both*, mind you – *successfully* kindled the power.” Keff shrugged. “In theory, both of your ladies should as well. In theory, therefore, yes. In actuality I wouldn’t bet on it unless they really wanted to. You’ve heard of Maclik the Animator?” he asked. At Cly’s nod, he went on. “Maclik is the only magician my people know of to kindle successfully against his own will. The only one, out of thousands in the chronicles. Have either of the ladies ever evidenced any interest in the art?”

Cly thought for several moments before replying, “Kara – never. Vonya seems to have some affinity for it. Could the process really begin even if they didn’t wish it?” Keff sipped his ale.

“You are of the line of the Master of Reality?” he asked, without raising his eyes from his mug.

“I am,” Cly replied, impressed. He was sure it was not common knowledge that Keldane’s teachings lived still among the dwellers in the sky, for so powerful a Thaumateurge was he that all his students on the ground were hunted down and killed centuries ago. He was not surprised that Keff did not say his name. Keldane’s name has great power.

“You use the Paranthic Ritual then, with myrrh and thyme mixed with sceltover and muscline. It relaxes the nerves and sets the mind into a more suggestive state, but the Ritual governs no magic of itself. Spells are used to help it along and shield from interference by other spirits, of course, but the Ritual *itself* neither summons nor binds, does not help or

hinder. *Will* is all it takes to make a magician. The will to withstand the *pain* of the kindling. But the kindling begins when an inhabitant of the hereafter reaches back into the world of the living and only the aspect, the *kel*, of a nascent magician will do for a handle." Keff drank deeply from his ale and added, "Your two ladies – their power sings to the departed, they will be drawn, enticed. Now, so long as they remain with the cloud whales they are safe. Ghosts in that realm must obey different laws, this we know. But on the *ground*? Many people have died on the ground, Cly. Not all of them accept it."

Cly breathed deeply. Yes, Keff was right. There are no ghosts in the clouds – at least none that a magician need worry about though Cly had heard of manifestations of past crew members working at their posts years after they had died. Amongst the whales such manifestations carried no power, they were bound to the whales themselves already, not free, as they were on the ground. Cly shuddered. Most people found ghosts frightening – *terrifying*. But only magicians knew *why* they should be feared.

And if Vonya or Kara were to meet one it would surely try to return to life. It would seize their aspects and try to cloak its naked soul in them, to become a part of them. Even life as an elemental is better than being dead. But if the ghost failed, it would die – well, not *die*, exactly – but it would be even deader than it was before, and it would not die alone.

"What about scrying ahead? Could you look at their futures and get your answer right away? It would give *me* something to watch for, too."

"I could, but I won't. Without some parameters that would be *way* too dangerous."

"Why?"

"Sorcerers can peek into the future, but we can pay a heavy price for it. Without some pretty well-defined notions about *what* to look for and *when*, we run a real risk of viewing something we really should *not* view. Something really obvious in retrospect could become essentially unfixable," Keff said, sipping from his mug again.

"Is there something dangerous about viewing something you didn't set out to look at?" Cly asked, puzzled.

"Know the word *paradox*?"

"Yes. Something that both must be and must not be. Something self-contradictory."

"Precisely. Too much mucking about in the future without some kind of a tightly focused goal, and you are running a real risk of creating one of those. We don't fully understand them. Oh, hell, that's for the public, let me be honest – I won't even take the chance *I might* create paradox. It

makes Magicians disappear, sometimes. I *don't* want to disappear. Frankly, I wish I *didn't* know how to look into the future. I think it's a common way for Sorcerers to die."

"You *think*?"

"You die that way and you not only cease to be, you *can* cease to have *ever been*. My best friend could vanish that way and I'd never miss her. But sometimes we find clues that suggest *something* is no longer the way it used to be. It's scary. I won't go there."

"I guess I can't blame you." Cly rubbed the scar on his hand as he thought, his ale, forgotten, warming in his mug. Keff, too, seemed lost in his own thoughts. Cly gazed again into the crystal wishing he could delve into its secrets.

Deep within the crystal Cly suddenly saw a figure. He started, glancing around and turning the crystal left and right to see if it was a reflection – it was not, the figure rotated as he moved the crystal, and no such personage was in the room. It was a still image, a knight in archaic fighting gear with a bare blade, in a running position.

"Keff! What's this?" he handed the orb to the Sorcerer who looked curiously at Cly, then at the crystal.

"It's a crystal ball," he replied, with an odd look on his face.

"No, the image! The image inside!" Cly said, tapping the crystal. Keff looked, but shook his head.

"I see nothing – which is as it should be. This is not a scrying crystal, it has no imaging spells," he said.

Cly took the crystal again and looked deep within it – the image was indeed gone. But within seconds it reappeared. This time Cly showed it to Keff but kept it in his hands. Keff's eyes widened.

"*That* isn't supposed to happen. Who is he?" asked the Ligre Sorcerer.

"I have no idea. Never seen him before," said Cly. "He's wearing a Vindolondan sigil on the chestplate, though," he observed. Keff looked again and nodded.

"That he does. Old armor, too. Some sort of Paladin, I think. I wish I had more tools with me, I might be able to find out something about him. But my real concern is the orb – it's picking up an imaging spell from somewhere," said Keff.

"But where?" asked Cly. Keff only shrugged.

"I couldn't say without tools I haven't got with me. *Unless* it's something obvious. . .hmmm – are you carrying anything magical?" Keff asked.

Cly went through his pockets showing each item to Keff, who shook his head at each until he came to the coin. The coin felt distinctly magical now. Almost shiny. Within a few moments, Keff had shown that the image of the knight always faced the coin.

"There it is," Keff breathed. "Now *what* is it?"

"You're the Sorcerer," Cly responded. Keff frowned.

"I am, but as I said, I don't have my tools with me." Taking the orb he murmured several small spells over it. A few sparkles responded. "The orb seems fine when you aren't touching it, Cly." He gazed intently into the crystal for a moment, then shrugged. "And it definitely has no imaging spells in it. It's responding to the *coin* – almost as if that *knight* was the coins' own aspect. This is truly weird, it has never responded to an artifact before." Keff bit his lip, gazing at the coin as it lay in his hand. "I don't suppose you would sell me this..." zzzzzzzzzt! "Ow!" He snatched his hand away and the coin spun for a moment on the table before slowly – deliberately – rolling over to Cly and then dropping, spinning, in front of him. A single tiny yellow flash shined off it for an instant.

Keff cradled his hand tenderly but his eyes never left the coin.

"You're under a geas, Cly," he said. Cly could only nod. That much was obvious.

"I know nothing about them. What can I do?" he said, finally.

"I have no idea. It's got something to do with you. . . and that knight. That coin is *up* to something – but it doesn't want *me* fooling with it. That's a specific shield against sorcery, which means it has secrets locked inside it. There is subtle magic here. But I don't sense any evil – normally I would, I think – so I don't think it's out to *harm* you. At least, not *deliberately*. You have two choices – try to break the geas or go along with it," Keff said. "I have no idea which way would be smart. Depending on how much power is in it. Trying to break it *could* easily kill you. And, obviously, it won't let *me* help you decide." He shook his head. "Things that specifically protect themselves from Sorcery kind of freak me out. Nothing else says 'I'm *up* to something' like trying to hide it from a Sorcerer."

Cly picked up the coin and looked closely at it. Once again it appeared duller – exactly as if it *were* trying to hide its nature from the Sorcerer.

"Any idea where it came from?" Keff asked.

Cly put the coin back in his pocket. "None at all."

"Tough call," said Keff. He returned to his ale and again contemplated his orb. He shook his head and muttered to himself something about a new series of tests. Cly, too, looked into the orb, but in his mind's

eye he recalled the knight. So they sat until both were startled by Vonya's quiet approach.

Cly fetched a chair from the next table and seated her as Keff signaled the waiter with one hand and swept the orb off the table and into an inside pocket with other. The Sorcerer looked closely at the woman as she seated herself.

"How are you?" he asked. Vonya gave a wan smile.

"Isn't that a loaded question coming from a man in your profession?" she asked with a half-smile.

"They're *all* loaded questions, My Lady. I don't know any other kind," smiled Keff, never taking his eyes off hers.

"Oh, I see. Well, I'm fine, all things considered," she replied in a tired voice. "But there is a lot to consider." The Sorcerer nodded and sipped his ale. Cly wondered how much ale he was going to drink.

"And Kara?" Keff asked, as Cly opened his own mouth to ask.

"Lying down. She doesn't seem affected much. I was surprised," Vonya said in a puzzled tone.

"I think she decided not to remember the whole incident," Keff said. Cly agreed privately. Kara had shown up of her own volition shortly after Cly and Keff had finished with the Guardsmen. She had seemed tired but quite normal. She had even managed to look impatient at the guards' "harassment."

"Perhaps it's for the best," Vonya said, shaking her head sadly. She looked at Keff. "I wish we could reimburse you for those birds. Khar always pays its debts."

"Nonsense," Keff said, dismissing the issue with a chop of his hand. "Consider it research costs. That's the whole point of the exhibition, to get as many people to touch the thing as possible, so I can gather data about the reactions. The fee covers expenses, and I consider a few electrocuted birds to be just more expenses. I've gotten more information about this thing today than I have in the last four months. Believe me – it would be worth it at ten times the price." He hunched forward a little, "However, *if* you feel the need to reimburse me, you *can* do it this way: if you or Lady Kara ever decide to become magicians, and do so successfully, please send word to me in care of the Magician's Guildhall here in Imri. That would be a most illuminating data point. And," he continued, with a glance at Cly, "I wouldn't turn down your. . .views. . .on how the crystal has worked in your eyes."

Cly looked blankly at the Sorcerer and then nodded as Keff's meaning came through. It's *your* choice to tell others what you've seen, but tell *me*, too. He nodded to Keff.

"Cly said only one or two people in ten can become full magicians, Sir Sorcerer!" Vonya said, missing the interplay between the two magicians. "Master Yothar says Hodly just *died* trying it! It doesn't seem likely I'll ever try!" Vonya protested.

"Maybe not. If not, no matter. But if so, that data point would be most helpful in our analysis." Keff stood up, tipped the last of his ale into his mouth, bowed slightly to the cloud whale riders as he wiped his sleeve across his face, and then left without another word.

Life goes on no matter what we find out about ourselves, Cly mused to himself later that day. He turned his options over in his mind. Tell Vonya and Kara about the mysterious Knight? They'd simply want to know what it meant, and he had no clue – no clue at all. It was a question of what the coin was trying to accomplish. And how could he explain to a non-magician how a *coin* could be trying to *accomplish* something? In the end he said nothing.

Some time later the whale riders, more or less recovered from their adventure in the plaza, finally reached the smithy by mid-afternoon. They were promptly admitted.

Cly kept a close eye on Kara. She had talked volubly since she woke up in the early afternoon but never mentioned the incident in the plaza. She replied to a slight probe from Cly with such a glare that he decided to stay away from the topic, too. If she did not want to discuss the matter, that was fine. But she did not seem as one who has forgotten something too horrible to remember. Rather, she was like someone who has decided that something never happened and did not care for suggestions to the contrary.

Despite her forced cheer, both Vonya and Cly were nervous and were made more so when they entered the smithy and realized it had no meeting or sales area – it was a single enormous room, perhaps a hundred feet long and a good twenty feet wide. Ten huge forges were spaced around the perimeter of the room, each a freeform sculpture of fired clay filled with crackling flames. Panting boys wheeled coke to each forge to restock the brawny men shoveling fuel into the fires. More boys manned great bellows, one on each side of every forge. Men and dwarves, all dressed identically in heavy leather and a sheen of sweat, dredged metal in the flame drawing forth brightly glowing shapes. Powerful arms rose and fell,

hammers rang through the roar of the flames and the hiss of the bellows. It was remarkably similar to the whale rider conception of hell.

Vonya entered confidently at first, then hesitated at the sinister scene that greeted her. Cly bumped into her, startling her into motion again. Kara froze on the verge, looking about with wide eyes. But in a moment, she had taken ahold of herself and stepped into the smithy with seeming confidence.

A huge man, dressed like the others in a leather apron, stepped forward as they looked timidly about. His massive frame topped six feet, his receding shock of greying red hair nearly reached the low ceiling, and powerful arms rode ready on the broad, muscular shoulders. He surveyed the little group with an impassive face. Cly noticed his hands – hard, gnarled, covered with burns old and new and armored with calluses, two leathery tree-stumps at the ends of his massive arms. They hardly seemed capable of motion at all – until his eye traced the fellow’s path back to his bench and saw the intricate scrollwork they had interrupted.

“Well?” the smith rumbled.

Both Vonya and Cly were speechless when Kara snapped “We need a recurve spring and associated support equipment.” She pulled out a sketch she had prepared earlier, putting it down on a nearby bench. The smith reached out one bent finger and traced the outline as a look of concentration crept into his features.

“Hmmp,” he rumbled. “A fancy piece, that.” He picked up the paper and held it up, not to catch the light from the door but the flickering and ruddy light of the forges behind him. A hint of a smile played about his lips as he studied the drawing. “Compound, double recurve, multiple leaf. With reinforcement here?” He fixed his pale blue eyes on Kara. “Why do you want reinforcement here? The strain in the system is perpendicular to the main member, not cross-wise.”

Kara’s intense sapphire gaze did not waver, “That’s bracing for a torsion effect from the tertiary anductor muscles.”

The smith smiled as he placed the drawing down carefully. “Jennes!” he called over his shoulder, “The slate!”

One of the apprentices arrived posthaste with a wood-rimmed sheet of slate and a handful of plaster sticks. The huge smith took one of the sticks and passed it to Kara, gesturing at the slate. “Show me.” Kara sketched the relevant portions of Semaj’s anatomy on the slate as the smith looked over her shoulder.

“Yes, I see,” he murmured as she worked. “You’ll need fine steel for that, lady. Or perhaps not,” he said, as he looked at the drawing again.

“How much do you want this to weigh?” Already he had grasped one of the most important issues a vetengineer can face.

Kara said, “As little as we can afford.”

Vonya, hearing a discussion of price coming up, stepped forward to join them. Cly left the ladies to their work and gazed about the smithy.

Cly sensed something unusual going on at one of the forges. He would have been hard-pressed to say *how* he knew, exactly, but every magician can sense the power of the Art. Cly drifted closer to one of the forges.

An ancient dwarven smith was working there with a sword that was unlike any Cly had ever seen. The curved blade was about three feet long, sharp only on the outer side, with a thick reinforcing spine down the other. The length of the tang told Cly the pommel would follow the curve and would be a good foot long itself. But it was not mere physical configuration that drew the young magician. To Cly the blade glowed with more than just heat.

The dwarf gave the blade an experimental swing, showing it off to his audience, and then thrust it into the fire. Cly gasped as the flames took it from his hands.

Cly squinted into the heart of the blaze and realized that the flame *itself* was looking back at him! Two tiny glowing eyes were visible, and in a moment he made out the manlike, reptilian body of a small salamander. A fire elemental! The dwarf had help to forge his magical blade, it appeared!

Cly gazed at the salamander with burning curiosity. It was smaller than he expected and seemed somehow ill-formed. Bending his ears to the task Cly made out a low chant from the strange being as it worked to enchant the blade. Its’ speech sounded like the clicks and pops of wood burning as it crooned its’ song.

MIND AND WILL, POWER TO KILL

SEEKING MARK, UNENDING WILL.

DEADLY BLADE, TINY KNIFE

SHARP AS DEATH, QUICK AS LIFE

THROUGH THE NIGHT AND THE DAY,

HEAT AND FIRE AND FEAR.

There was more that Cly could not catch. He felt the heat beat against his own face as the dwarf’s hammer beat time on his anvil. The power gathered within the forge, tiny sprites appeared within the flames, dancing like animate sparks, drawn to the magic. The salamander took the blade and assumed a fighting stance, twirling the sword through an intricate se-

ries of moves. It held the sword aloft in triumph, then brought it down as if to sheathe it. Cly saw the blade shrink to the size of a large knife, shimmering an icy blue as it did so. The salamander laughed in delight and flourished the blade again, reveling as it again grew to its former size. The elemental flipped the blade to the waiting dwarf, who caught it on his hammer and transferred it back to the anvil in one smooth move. He waited a moment as the magical glow faded from the weapon. The magic receded and soon the blade lay quiet again, faintly glowing by heat alone. The dwarf tempered the weapon in a tub of clean water, raising clouds of roiling steam – Cly marveled at that, too, knowing that confined steam was the source of many of Imri's mechanical miracles. The smith ran a thumb along the sharp edge, humming a strange tune in the back of his throat. As the spell's glow faded, Cly saw many tiny runes glowing on the blade, precisely and beautifully done with a fine hand. Despite that, they were etched deeply into the metal. He edged closer as the dwarf traded his hammer for metal scribe, but he had to retreat as the smith motioned him back with a smile. Cly smiled back, understanding. It was, after all, a matter of professional courtesy. He looked again at the magic blade, a touch of envy in his gaze.

Here was a new aspect of the Art, magic not as a process controlled by an active mind but as an aspect of some physical object. It was eerily unlike the magical toys he had seen for sale elsewhere in the city. That was mere sequential manipulation, spells cast *on* something, even if they were embedded in the device. In this blade was something else, something. . .integral. The spell was not *added* to a finished blade, but was part of the very process of creation, intimate with the metal itself. The sword was not *alive* – but it was surely no longer dead!

A FASCINATING EXERCISE, IS IT NOT, YUVANISCH? came a thought unbidden into Cly's mind.

Cly, startled, turned back to the forge, though he knew not why. The words came straight to his mind, no voice had spoken them. The flame was larger now, fiercer, the heat battered against his face and body. He made out the old smith's salamander, cowering near the back of the forge pushed aside by. . .by. . .

Cly suddenly realized the whole of the forge was occupied by a huge humanoid figure of pure elemental flame! A hulking monster, nearly ten feet tall, stooped to clear the top of the forge and taking up nearly the entire width. There was nothing vague or ill-formed about *this* being, it was clearly humanlike, built like a powerfully muscled man, with a faintly ca-

* Russian – "Comrade" – yes, that's an Earthly Russian influence. "toe-va-reesh"

nine face surmounted with a pair of great curling ram's horns. The flames that formed its body were shot through with hundreds of colors, many of them visible only to those with the True Sight. Two huge pairs of fiery wings arched over the salamander's back. The creature was crouched, kneeling on one knee and resting its chin upon a hand whose elbow was propped on the other.

Kourishand, Cly thought. He did not speak the name aloud, no magician speaks a name without thought and intent.

IT IS I, MY BROTHER. HOW ARE YOU?

"Well," Cly said wryly, still a bit stunned from the suddenness of the meeting, "Pretty well. Though things are kind of complicated, now."

SO I PRESUMED WHEN FIRST YOU SUMMONED ME. I HAD WONDERED IF YOU EVEN WOULD, the huge salamander replied.

"I didn't mean to then," Cly said.

I KNOW. BUT THE WAY WAS OPEN, AND I SENSED A GREAT NEED. I PROTECTED SEMAJ-BORN-IN-FIRE, BUT I DEALT WITH THE HUMANS.

"Semaj...born in fire?" Cly said, stunned anew.

YES. DID YOU NOT KNOW THE ONE'S NAME, BROTHER? I FOUND IT A MOST AMUSING TRICK, *Kourishand* said with a grin that made him seem far less formidable.

"No, I didn't. But it does explain some things. Me for one. A former fire aspect. Kara, a lightning aspect. And Vonya, another fire aspect. Semaj called all the hot-aspected whale riders for crew, didn't he?" Cly said half to himself.

SO IT WOULD APPEAR.

"But how did it happen? His fire aspect, I mean?" Cly mused.

THIS, I KNOW NOT.

Cly suddenly noticed the old smith, avidly following the conversation. He turned to *Kourishand* and said, "You understand why I never called you." It was more a statement than a question.

I DO. BUT YOU FEAR TOO MUCH, MY BROTHER. WHAT I WILL TO BURN WILL BURN. WHAT I DO NOT WILL TO BURN, WILL NOT. MY POWER IS COMPLETELY UNDER MY CONTROL. THAT IS MY NATURE. *Kourishand* suddenly reached a mighty arm out to Cly, his palm upwards. ***TOUCH ME,*** he commanded.

Cly froze. For a moment he could not breathe. He swallowed, and with a vast effort willed his hand to move...to move toward the salamander.

With infinite slowness he reached out. He held his burn-scarred hand over *Kourishand's*, felt the inferno that formed his body, tasted the sweat

that was not all from the heat. For a moment, he paused, and then with a final effort, he touched Kourishand's hand.

Nothing happened. Though hot to the touch, the salamander's hand did not burn his.

You see, commented Kourishand. *~~I could stand within your cloud whale and bring no harm.~~*

Cly released his grip. "We must talk. I have much I want to learn."

~~Gosh. I will wait for you. Look for me in flame. Or call me, as you have learned. 'Til we meet again, Yovanisch.~~ The huge salamander nodded and then seemed to step back into the flames. He vanished, leaving only the tiny fire sprite the smith had called.

"Sure, with such a companion, 'twould be almost anything you could make," said the dwarf with a trace of envy in his voice. "A pity it is. Wasted among the clouds, so he is. Without him, just a shadow your power can be." The dwarf sighed. "With such an apprentice, what wonders could I teach..."

Cly thought the old smith might be right. Even if Kourishand did not burn Semaj, surely the cloud whale could not be sanguine about carrying a fiery salamander aboard him. And what could such a being do for him in the clouds? Nothing, really. Too bad he *wasn't* a smith. Cly could see what the old dwarf meant – and he saw a waiting look in the old smith's eyes. The young magician suddenly realized he was being given an invitation. Here was an opportunity to turn aside from the path of Thaumaturgy and learn another Art. He imagined what the dwarf felt as his hands caressed the blade, sensed the love that forged things of power from inanimate metal. He imagined himself as a master of that Art, living in the fiery dark and creating things of power and wonder.

But there was a price. Always, there is a price. To attain mastery of this Art, he must sacrifice his own. He would never attain Master Bosrin's level of skill – his power to create illusions so powerful that they could become real, seemings so well-wrought they could assume a reality of their own. He recalled the old stories about Keldane's powers – the power to create not merely objects but entire worlds! Perhaps. The road he trod had its pitfalls, few ever got as far as Bosrin and none had yet equaled the Master of Reality. But then, few would find this old smith on the road *he* traveled. Commitment, Master Bosrin had told him, so long ago.

"What is it named, Old Master?" Cly asked the dwarf, quietly, gesturing at the magical sword.

"Tenrun," he replied. He gathered his own power and reached for the blade. As his hand reached the sword, he turned a questioning look at the

dwarf. The smith sat still for a moment and then nodded. Cly closed his eyes and intoned, "~~Replicate simulum + dag~~!" The power came with a new feeling to it – agile and quick – and he grasped the hilt of the blade and felt his spell spill into the metal, rushing through its substance. This spell had no controls but his touch. He sensed it wrestling with the magic in the blade, not as a foe but as one sibling with another. In a moment he drew his hand back and a shimmering twin of the blade came with it, sliding smoothly away from its' gleaming parent. Cly choose the rune *katro* to bind it to, so he could pull it up later when he wished. Cly held it aloft for a moment, then moved as if to sheathe it and it grew tiny in his grasp. With a grin of delight, he flourished the blade again and it grew large and weighty in his grip.

"Tenrun," Cly hummed to it. His sword faded and evaporated like smoke in a high wind. He looked at the dwarf. The old smith nodded, understanding. As the whale rider turned away, he saw just a touch of wistful envy in the old dwarf's eyes.

15. AN UNTRADITIONAL REFIT

The following week was a very busy time. After their uncomfortable night on the ground the whale riders decided a little clutter was not a bad thing and moved camp back to Semaj. This also gave them a bit more cash to work with, which was good, as Cly's prediction about the need for grounder help soon came true. Semaj would normally have been refit at Cloudhome when he returned from the Wild Ride, a process that could take weeks – had, in fact, taken nearly three months for Khar-Droi. Cloud whales frequently needed major work at this point as the Wild Ride often severely damaged them. It was unavoidable work, however – the initial alterations were incredibly painful for the cloud whale, and bolting, the “Wild Ride,” was inevitable. But once the initial work was done the whale riders had access to all the major internal organs and they were able to administer anesthetics to prevent the extraordinary level of pain the first alterations had caused. The refit, therefore, can afford to take more time, and so is done with more care.

Kara supervised every aspect of the refit, keenly aware that she had no experienced vets to back her up. Semaj was totally dependent on her. Grounder help was enlisted as much as possible but Cly and Vonya, the only other people with intimate knowledge of the cloud whales, found themselves working like slaves. But progress was astoundingly swift. Within a fortnight, Semaj had nearly completed his refit. All that remained was to install the new springs.

The springs were the cause of a most entertaining time. Kara had explained Semaj's anatomy to Kor, the giant Master Smith they had hired to build the springs, to help him understand what they were for. The idea was to help him calculate the stresses, to insure the springs worked properly but they had not counted on the resourceful smith.

Kor had quickly figured out that Semaj would outgrow the initial springs and had showed up at the cloud whale on the third day of the refit with another master, three journeymen, eight apprentices, and a fistful of drawings with ideas to avoid this problem.

To the whale riders this was not a problem. It was a normal, accepted part of cloud whale operation. Heavy rigs required different types of springs altogether, they were always carved from drorwood and were ready to be replaced by the time the whale outgrew them anyway. But Semaj's light rig required much larger springs, to boost the power of the downward movement of his wingflukes. Master Wold's original design simply allowed more room to reposition the booster springs, he had not really addressed the problem of growth.

But the smith was a perfectionist. Not only had he identified the problem, he came up with a way to build the springs in permanently, with new springs being added to the existing ones in a modular fashion every ten to twenty years. His lightweight, mithril-gold metal springs, with their magical reinforcement, would *never* need replacement. The cost of these beautifully made articles *was* high initially – but by the time Semaj hit his first full growth at 50 or so, the total cost would be less than half of drorwood. And when he started his next growth phase, the savings would pile up very quickly.

Kara had a deep suspicion of this new idea but she had to admit she couldn't find anything wrong with it – and the benefits seemed immense. Overhauls could require weeks or months, and had to happen every ten to twenty years, sometimes even less. Even worse than the time was the material. Drorwood was the only thing light enough and yet strong enough to serve but it was always in short supply. In fact, Clan Khar was unusual in that they were actually in a position to *sell* drorwood to the other clans because their fleet was so reduced they didn't need so much. Imagine not having that major overhaul every ten years! And imagine, Vonya thought to herself, how much profit there was in selling *all* the drorwood they grew to the other clans.

Once Kara had decided to accept the Master Smith's idea, progress was rapid. Semaj's interior was cleaned out and rigged to Kara's satisfaction, and the new springs bolted in just as the Master Smith had promised. Vonya, for her part, was surprised and pleased at the costs – though labor was expensive, Imri City excelled at producing manufactured parts of any kind, very quickly, and amazingly inexpensively. And metal wasn't all they had to offer, either. Semaj picked up a number of parts of a marvelous resin-impregnated material from an amusing fellow who told them with a smile that it was really just a fabric made from glass – of all things!

The single riskiest factor about the light-rig was the repositioning of the wingflukes. The whole point in removing the 6th sails was to make their muscles available to the wingflukes for the downstroke, and to use the springs for the upstroke. The problem was, the additional torque on the wingflukes pushed them back, interfering with the flukes proper and rendering it all pointless. So the wingflukes *had* to be swiveled forward. And that was risky, *because*. . .

The wingflukes depended on a harness of bone which needed to be cut nearly all the way through and then wedged to force it forward. This worked, but it tended to cause long-term pain while it healed, meaning the cloud whale was unable to fly for up to a month after the refit. This was

one of Sorva's biggest complaints about the rig, though it would certainly be something else if that was addressed since it was the rig itself he objected to, really.

Wold had also admitted to her that this was one aspect of the light-rig that worried him as well. As far as he knew, it hadn't happened, but he deeply feared that the additional muscle plus the flaw in the bone caused by the wedge, would leave the cloud whale open to breaking the wingfluke collar at the very moment when it would be called upon to do the most.

Kara worried deeply about this operation and finally broke down and asked a *grounder* – one she had come to both respect and trust, Kor – if he had any thoughts.

The big smith nodded gravely, and suggested she call in his cousin Cosar – a finish carpenter. He suspected that the bones might be more like wood than metal and thought Cosar might have some ideas.

Cosar, Kara found, was a very busy man. He – and his apprentices – were in demand from virtually *all* of the wealthy Houses producing some jaw-droppingly beautiful heirloom furniture and art in his studio. Kara couldn't even get an appointment. She continued to worry about the situation, despite how well the rest of it was coming together, though she tried very hard not to show it.

Despite the newness of it all, Kara never allowed anything to be done that she wasn't absolutely sure she understood. Whenever she doubted whether something might work, she would rig a test and take Semaj around Imri mountain on a trial flight. What she felt worked, she adopted, and anything else was tossed.

Even so, what was shaping up was a distinctly *different* rig – neither light nor heavy, resembling Wold's rig no more than it did the traditional one. The Imrians were the world's most enthusiastic inventors, they loved things that were newer, better, faster, stronger – and they absolutely *loved* having a chance to try things out on a cloud whale. Soon nearly every major guild had at least one representative on the manta docks, and Kara had her pick of a thousand suggestions from some of the world's greatest experts whenever she seemed the least bit indecisive. For *free*!

They even had a short, unannounced visit from the Empress Imriana, the underage monarch destined to rule Imri when she came of age and the Regent stepped aside. Aware of the impact her guards and retinue had on people wherever she went formally, she and another young Imrian lady showed up *sans* retinue, visited for a bit and had vanished shortly there-

after. Vonya didn't know what an honor they had had until she overheard some workmen talking about the big visit she hadn't noticed!

But, as it turned out, the young Empress had talked with many of the workmen aboard Semaj who had nearly all of them mentioned how much Kara's worrying about the wingflukes was affecting progress, and passing along Kor's suggestion that they needed Cosar. The Empress smiled and said she'd look into it.

So Kara was measuring the wing collar – again – trying to determine the best place to cut when a handsome, middle-aged man came limping into the propulsion room. She was very startled.

He nodded to her, smiled and said, "Fair winds, M'Lady. I am Cosar apT'wynin. My cousin tells me you have some questions I might be able to help with, and it would be my pleasure to do so." He neglected to mention that he was not referring to Kor but to his *other* cousin – the Empress.

"Oh! Yes. *Thank* you for coming! I had about given up trying to reach you," she said, flustered and trying to recover.

"I do regret that, M'Lady. Fortunately, I have ways of finding out when I can help for any worthy cause. You have concerns about cutting a bone?" he asked, gently.

"Yes! This bone, actually, right here," she said, indicating the wingfluke collarbone. "Port and starboard. I need to swivel the wingflukes forward to clear the flukes proper – the new power will tend to torque them and foul the flukes."

Cosar studied the bone with single-minded attention, tapping it, pushing on it in various directions, sighting along it, and then following it back to the keel it braced from. He also took himself a long look at the geometry of the flukes and wingflukes.

"It's hollow, M'Lady?" he asked.

"Yes. Of course. Although it *is* filled with. . .well, 'bone bubbles' is the only way I can describe it. If you break it open it looks like bread inside, with bone instead of bread. But it's *very* light."

Cosar tapped thoughtfully on the collarbone. "It's also quite flexible. Most of the bones seem to be, is that right?" Kara nodded.

"Nothing about cloud whales is *ever* brittle. Far better to bend with the wind than break from it. That's why this cut is so critical, it puts a brittle spot right in the middle of the bone."

Cosar raised one eyebrow and said, "Well – it isn't carpentry, but I *think* I might have a solution anyway."

Kara was startled. "Really?"

He nodded, smiling. "Yes. I'd like to try something."

With Kara's help he obtained a block-and-tackle and some silken rope (the apTarg's best #3 line) and tied one end to the bone near where it exited the room, and the other to the keel.

"Now, which is the sturdiest bone as perpendicular as possible to these?" he asked.

Kara caught on quickly. "Just forward of this bulkhead is the gastralium – kind of a rib cage supporting the gut. We can loop it around the series of ribs to get the whole thing to share the strain."

Cosar looked impressed. "*Excellent* suggestion, M'Lady."

Soon they had the tackle rigged to the gastralium and allowing them to pull on the outer end of the collarbone. As he tightened the rig, the bone began to slowly bend forward.

The carpenter said tightly, "I'm going for about 15 degrees here. . . M'Lady. . . figuring for the reaction when we release the tension." Kara nodded.

Soon the bone was bent. Kara was utterly delighted, she could easily see how the stress on the bone would stimulate growth for reinforcement, but that they no longer would have – or need – a weak spot. They rigged the other side much more quickly.

This bending concept sparked another idea.

"Semaj had a very hard birth," she said to Cosar, pointing to an area of heavy internal scarring above the collarbone. "His bones are turned a bit from their proper angle because of the scar tissue pushing on them. Could we do the same trick and just kind of spin the bone forward, lifting the trailing wing edge and dropping the leading edge?"

"I don't see why not, M'Lady, it certainly seems amenable to this approach," he said.

They soon had it accomplished. The propulsion chamber was now a rat's nest of criss-crossing ropes, but they would only be needed for a week or so at the rate cloud whales could grow bone. She was so delighted she laughed aloud.

"This whole thing took less time than the bone breaking alone would have. And it can't be hurting Semaj in the slightest, there's no spot where we are abusing any nerves. And no long recovery period. He'll be ready to fly by the time we finish the refit! How did you come *up* with this, Cosar? It never occurred to us at all!"

Cosar smiled. "We use something similar to bend steamed wood into shapes that it doesn't like being cut to. But actually, I learned it while I was in the service."

"How did *that* teach you?" she asked, now genuinely puzzled.

"I was in the Marines. We were stationed outside of the village of Comfrey, on the Thermia mainland – a show of force to keep certain locals from. . .taking advantage. . .while they were transferring the Kingship from the elder to the son. There was a t'emp'nchiche hive there I used to visit. I liked watching their craftsmen at work in my spare time – it's what lead me to my current profession when I was accidentally retired," and he tapped his bad leg.

"Anyway, I don't know if you know about t'emp'nchiches, but they often modify *themselves* to do jobs better. They were adapting a member of a truck caste – basically a *huge* sort of bug meant to drag things – into something they called a *hoist*. This meant bending the legs, essentially making them bandy-legged on all six legs – so they could carry loads slung underneath them. They were to be used for logging. This is exactly the method they used. I noticed right away the bone had the same feel and consistency as t'emp'nchiche shell." He chuckled. "Fascinating creatures. They are constantly designing or adapting new castes to do various jobs better and better. Quite intelligent, too, most of them. The basic design isn't dissimilar to your crew people." He pointed up where a couple of hivelings were scraping a section of backbone discolored by a bit of fungus – one of their favorite foods, as well as an inconvenience for the whale.

Kara was very surprised at the idea that hivelings might have relatives on the ground, but quickly realized it only made good sense. Everything that lived with the whales had to have come from *somewhere* so it was only logical.

"There are now a couple of t'emp'nchiche hives within the Empire, too. Two of them right here in Auriana City. The Princess's idea. I told her the same story and she thought they were cool and somehow persuaded some to start a local hive," Cosar, added, smiling. "Have you ever heard the term 'force multiplier?'"

"No, I haven't."

"It's a military concept. You have a force of, say, 100 men, and you add 10 more, you've improved their ability to fight by 10%. But suppose you have a force of 100 men, and instead of adding more, you find some way to make every one of them a *better* fighter by, say, 10%. It sounds like it should add up the same, but it doesn't. The second way is a force multiplier, and instead of getting a force that's 10% better, you come up with one that might be as much as *twice* as dangerous."

"I think I understand that. It's like using blocks and tackles to shift distance and force."

“Yes, exactly. The Princess’s father taught her that, and she likes to try to apply it to, well, virtually everything. She thinks the t’emp’nchiche – around here, they call them ‘pickamups’ – might become a force multiplier if she can figure out a way to integrate them somewhere in the Empire. She’s probably right, too. She’s a very fast study. So, as you folks say, ‘bottom line.’ Are you comfortable with this method we’ve invented here? I know the sky folk *do* tend to be pretty conservative, and this *is* a new idea. . .”

“Cosar, you have taken a *huge* load off my mind and I am *delighted* how this worked out. Better *is* better, and there’s no arguing with that. And we are well past the point where we can any longer afford to pass up better to preserve tradition. So, yes, I’m comfortable, and I think Semaj will be the better for it, and that’s what concerns me most. What do we owe you for your invaluable help?” she asked. “Clan Khar *always* pays its’ debts.”

Cosar laughed. “My Lady Kara, don’t be absurd. I couldn’t *charge* for an opportunity to experiment and learn. I will be more than adequately compensated if you would invite me back aboard next time you make Imri so I can see how it healed. Who knows? Maybe this kind of thing might be a new business opportunity for me! The idea of a ‘force multiplier’ applies in business as well as the military.”

“I really should pay you *something*,” Kara said earnestly. “Fair is fair.”

“Dear Lady, give it no more thought. Learning and trying new things are rewards in themselves, and I am satisfied knowing you could avoid that bone cut. That would have *really* compromised the structural integrity of the whole assembly. If an emergency arose, and the cloud whale had to fly hard, that is *precisely* the time it would break.”

“You learn fast,” Kara said, impressed.

“Pity I didn’t pick up hand-to-hand combat that way,” he smiled. “But then, I’d still be a Marine. M’Lady – clear skies, the best of luck, and do let me know how this all works out.”

“I’ll do that,” she promised.

All this novelty weighed heavily on Kara but, somehow, so far from home, it didn’t seem so *bad* – and it certainly was a great improvement. Semaj’s rig was surely as light as Wold would wish it to be – but when combined with the other ideas they were adding, Semaj could now carry at least as much and usually more payload than any heavy rig his size. The young cloud whale was always a sport, a loaner, and this rig would

surely reinforce that – but better *was* better. Only a fool would close his eyes – or her eyes – to these kinds of improvements! Perhaps the Clan really should think seriously about getting grounder help for *all* their whales. . .and Kara giggled at the image of herself explaining all this to Arvin, as he stood in Semaj's afterdeck gawping at Kor's gangsprings. Not to mention selling the idea to the cloud whales themselves! Kara had already figured out that Semaj was *much* more tolerant of her messing around with his insides than was normal for a cloud whale. He seemed to take every modification in stride.

In some ways, his very equanimity worried her. With every flap of his sails he moved further away from tradition. This did not seem to bother *Semaj* – but it surely would bother even the other Khar cloud whales, and never mind the other clans! It it could easily get them shunned, even if they didn't provoke a cloud war. Having finally stepped over the line between tradition and innovation, she now found herself with no way to decide what might be *too* innovative – no warning when to *stop*. Shunning would make them pariahs among the clans, but at least it could be *dealt* with. A cloud war could not.

While the work was going on, Cly took an opportunity to slip away to a library to do some research on the figure in the crystal and the mysterious coin. He could not do much on their available funds - libraries cost money – though he did find a record of the sigil on the knight's armor. It was Vindolondan, as he suspected, and it indicated royalty. But what house – or even which kingdom in that vast land – was not so obvious. The sigil most resembled a royal standard of Krithala but that silent land had not been heard from in two thousand years – not since the dragon took its capital, Caerleon. It seemed an unlikely coincidence. Besides, Cly had no intention of tangling with Evenshade. The Icy Wym, unlike Cloughload, was no friend of humanity, and would destroy Clan Khar as ruthlessly as it had Clan Hisseka, which used to run routes across Vindolonda, connecting the Khar Cloudbome with Caerleon – before the dragon came. If this was the connection, then Cly had to fight the geas – somehow. But how? Cly knew little of the College of Enchantment, but what he did know scared him. Even tossing the coin, or giving it away, might not break the geas – and it would deprive him of what seemed to be the major nexus of the spell.

What, thought Cly, was this thing *up* to? And what did it want of *him*? There were no answers here.

By the end of the second week, Semaj was beginning to look like a professional cloud whale. Not like any cloud whale they had ever seen – but there was no denying he looked like he could do the job, and more. He was still getting used to the alterations to his body but Kara was pleased that he was feeling no pain and nearly no discomfort. Things were going as well as anyone could hope for. Vonya even had enough money to begin selecting a cargo...

16. SKYJACKED

Droi cruised low to the ground, scanning ahead for any sign of Point Sbarri. He was tired, his insides hurt, and he felt heavy with the cargo they had picked up from the dwarves at Summuskeep. Though he knew his human crew had been bitterly disappointed at what they had gotten for their first expedition, secretly, he was glad they had not done better.

Wearily he probed ahead with his mind once more and this time heard the hubbub of thoughts that identified a human town. They were nearly there, and perhaps he could rest again while his crew traded with the humans. He needed to rest. Never had he felt so tired and so sick. And always the pain, especially now, when he was no longer fresh. Old Pa had said he'd get used to the changes the humans made, but now Droi suspected that the old whale had merely meant he'd get used to the pain.

Slowly, Point Sbarri crept closer as Droi pumped his way along steadily despite his discomfort. His crew become aware of their approach to the town, and felt them dashing about inside, preparing ropes and other apparatus for landing. He sensed Trock telling one of his chirpies that they would land outside the city. Normally, Droi would not have liked that idea. But now, it didn't seem such a bad idea – to just lie down and rest. Yes, that's what he needed. Exactly.

As Droi closed on the big field east of Point Sbarri he relaxed his mental scanning, reefed his sails, and just coasted. He sighed, glad to take a bit of a break – even sensing grounder minds was taxing, Droi thanked the Pod he didn't have to try to read them, too. Beyond the field lay the town itself and beyond that the thin blue line that was all he could see of the Great Nestick Ocean, though even from here he could hear the crashing of the surf on the western side of the town.

Droi glided to a halt over the field, noting the considerable number of humans to meet him. Trock seemed a bit surprised, too, but Droi could feel her conclude the town was bigger than she remembered. The rest of his crew dropped mooring lines.

Droi hooted as he vented gas and slowly dropped to the ground. The grounders grabbed hold of the lines and helped pull him in and in a few more moments, he was down, lying full-length on the cold field. He relaxed a bit as he watched the humans tie the ropes to things stuck in the ground so he wouldn't drift away, and when they seemed to be finished, he loosed all his muscles in a subsonic groan inaudible to everything within range, and settled himself for a nap.

He was just dozing off when he suddenly sensed alarm from his chirpies and his crew. He felt strange feet pounding around inside him.

Droi roused himself with an effort, looking around the field that was suddenly less-well populated than before – most of the grounders seemed to have run inside him just after they finished tying him down – and the rest were running away! Alarmed now, Droi brought his mind to bear on the thoughts of those inside him just as he felt a chirpie die. The shock of it shot through his mind like a searing bolt of lightning, leaving waves of nausea in its wake. He had been boarded! His crew was fighting the grounders!

Bewildered and terribly frightened, Droi tensed himself and prepared to launch. Acid poured from his lifters onto the spongy bone beneath releasing the lifting gas locked within. He bucked against the ties, pulling one free. With the extra room, he began to roll and pitch, trying to pull the others free. Never, he swore to himself, would he allow this mistake to be made again. Never again would he allow himself to be tied to the ground. As he struggled he sensed the thoughts from inside – the alarm of his crew and the strange and almost unreadable thoughts of the boarders. Greed was there, he sensed, anger and fear, too. Droi felt his second and last chirpie die, spitted on a grounder's blade, and felt, too, the pain of wounds already given his crew. The Oldest Companions, the hivelings, were fighting savagely, but in the close confines of his own interior they were no match for the sword-wielding invaders.

Droi snapped another line, then another. He stroked his sails against the ground, trying to wiggle forward to free himself. The combatants within were hurled about by his struggles but they did not cease fighting. He was nearly free when suddenly he felt himself stiffen, held by an invisible force. He sensed a ferocious battle near the wheels that controlled many of the cables strung throughout his body and realized the invaders had seized control of this critical section. They were holding the wheels, fighting his attempts to control his own sails, their tiny, compact bodies so loaded with muscle that he was nearly overwhelmed. Then, just as quickly, the force vanished as the invader was struck away from the wheel – and agony lanced through his insides as a crew member paid for that freedom with his life.

Droi switched from pitching to pushing himself with his sails. The rocky ground tore them cruelly but he was able to crawl out from under two more lines. Buoyed by the gas now swelling his lifters, he bobbed upward, held now by just one line. The battle within redoubled in fury, and Droi shuddered throughout his entire length as he felt another of his crew die. Seconds later, a sword cut through the body of his hiving King, and to Droi it seemed as though the sword had cleaved through his

own vitals. The King went down, badly, perhaps lethally, hurt. Droi gasped in pain, nearly paralyzed, swinging in the sea breeze held only by the line tying down one aft sail. But he just couldn't pull it free. Again, the icy chill of another crew member cruelly skewered on a grounder sword jabbed his mind. Some invaders had died but his crew was totally outnumbered. In a few more moments, it was all over. Alone amongst the hivelings, chirpies and humans that he had thought would stay with him for many, many years, only Trock remained, injured, bound, and gagged. Soon he was in a similar state, held motionless as the bandits lashed his wheels.

A few minutes later, the invaders cut the last rope holding him and Droi, still helpless, rose to nearly a thousand feet. He stayed that way for several minutes while the bandits seemed to confer. Then they loosed his wheels. Droi promptly turned toward Cloudhome but he was savagely wrenched around to point northwest. Again, he tried to turn and again he was forced back to the bandits' choice of heading. Droi breathed deeply as he considered what to do, but soon any choice was taken from him. He felt the stinging blow one of the bandits delivered to Trock as if it had struck his own face, and he sensed the meaning of the bandit's words. Go where they wanted, or Trock would die. But she would not die quickly, was the promise.

Bewildered and frightened more than he thought possible, Droi turned to the northwest and began stroking his sails. In a few minutes, the bandits moved Trock, still bound and gagged, to his small hold and settled themselves in around his salon. They were pleased, overjoyed in fact. Their delight made Droi's blood run cold. They figured the trip would take a few days.

As they moved out over the Nestick, Droi tried to compose himself. As he pulled himself together, he remembered that he was still not completely helpless. He opened his throat as wide as he could, pulsing the far band voice box:

"(AM BEING SKYSACKED. ALL MY COMPANIONS BUT ONE IS DEAD. TO ANY KRAA CLOUD WHALE WHO HEARS THIS MESSAGE, I HAVE LEFT POINT SBARRI HEADING NORTHWEST AND I HAVE BEEN SKYSACKED. PLEASE HELP. PLEASE. . "

17. HELP IS ON THE WAY

Vonya surveyed Semaj's compact number one cargo hold with a satisfied eye. Of course, for a cloud whale Semaj's size, the number one hold was all he had, so there wasn't much to see. Nevertheless, the transformation from the tattered, badly damaged, half-finished cloud whale towed into Imri three weeks ago to the smartly-outfitted, trim little transport that Semaj had become was extremely gratifying. Of course, some elements seemed a bit out of place – Semaj had glints of bright metal here and there in his construction and quite a bit of the ropework was distinctly new-fashioned, not very traditional since much of it was done by grounder Naval-reserve craftsman rather than whale riders. But Vonya found it did not grate as much as she thought it would, Semaj had a sleek and functional modern look she found she rather liked. It harmoniously blended the homey elements of traditional cloud whale rigging with the unusual grounder pieces in a light-rig. Vonya made sure the stays on the cargo were tight, and she smiled as she worked, feeling quite fortunate to have pulled the cargo of mail and small magical appliances bound for one of the elven kingdoms in east Vindolonda. It was only slightly out of their way to Cloudhome, but it would let them get back with a significant profit – unusual and very gratifying for a first voyage, never mind the Wild Ride! Aside from the still-damaged far band voicebox, Semaj was as healthy as anyone could wish and all that was needed for that – it was hoped – was time to heal.

Vonya was feeling uncharacteristically content, and she was also pleased at how well Kara had adapted to all the novelty. They had just that morning released all the stays rigged in the prop room, and the wingflukes swung into line just a hair's breadth from where Kara had wanted them. She decided not to try to correct it further because it seemed to her that it actually worked better at that angle now that the wingfluke rotation had been corrected as well. Semaj's last test cruise was positively exhilarating – a word Vonya had never found a use for in describing cloud whales before. Semaj also proved he could turn in faster than they ever thought he could. He seemed to have worked out some sort of sideways kick with a wingfluke that rotated him as it pushed him forward. Even compared to the much smaller Droï, he was positively agile.

Cly entered the hold from the salon, resplendent in his new black Journeyman's robe and cloak, and he, too, looked around with obvious approval. "Shipshape and ready for the sky, Captain!" he said.

"I think so, too. But the vet gets the final say!" she winked. Cly grinned and stuck his thumbs in his new belt. "Yup," he said. "That's her

right. We're all veddy proper aboard this cloud whale." Vonya smiled more widely and then saw Kara over Cly's shoulder in the salon. She was bent over something, her voice a low murmur.

Sensing trouble, Cly and Vonya headed forward.

"Easy, Vil, easy," Kara was saying as the others entered. Both Vil and Mri were in the salon as well. Kara was crouched by Vil, but Mri seemed to be hiding behind the hammocks, burrowing into their personal effects – such as they were. Vil was shaking, wrapped up in his own pata-gia and swaying back and forth uttering miserable little peeps. Kara was massaging his neck but he did not seem to respond to her touch. She looked up as Vonya and Cly came up to her.

"Something's wrong," she said, worried. "*Seriously* wrong. Semaj's heart rate is up and neither of the chirps can tell me what's going on!"

Cly listened for the telltale bip-bip-bip of Semaj's diaphanous major heart, near the upper middle of his back. Its' rate was obviously faster, just as Kara had said, and the major artery from it was distended from the pressure of the gaseous blood. Stepping into the wheel room, Cly checked the secondary heart near Semaj's brain. It, too, was pumping faster, the veins near the front of the skull were pulsing with the force of the arterial liquid. The wheels were twisting ten degrees left and right, over and over as Semaj flexed his propulsive sails.

Cly came back to the salon. "Semaj is really keyed up, he's pulling on the wheels. It's not just excitement, the secondary heart is just pounding." Vil moaned and muttered something in the whistling chirp speech but no one could understand it. All three whale riders heard the sharp in-take of breath reverberate down Semaj's windpipe, followed immediately by the Khar clan departure call.

"Semaj wants away, but *something* is horribly wrong!" Kara gasped.

Vonya thought quickly. They really had no reason to stay.

"Ka, is Semaj okay for departure?" she asked tightly.

"Well, yes, but we need to find out..." Kara began, but Vonya cut her off.

"We have no reason to stay, Semaj is physically healthy and he wants very much to leave for his own reasons. Let's let him have his head!" She waited for Kara's uncertain nod and went on, "You clear the aft stays, Cly you take for'ard port, I'll do starb'd." Normally Vil and Mru would have helped with such preparations but they were clearly in no condition to do so now.

Luckily, Semaj was not that large a cloud whale and ten minutes later he surged free of the dock. Stopping only to gulp water ballast from the

bay, Semaj headed away from Imri toward the northeast. The normal creak and pop of the rigging was punctuated by the twang of his metallic cables and springs. Semaj accelerated to a speed far in excess of any cloud whale the three whale riders had ever heard of. The huge mountain that housed Aurica city vanished astern more quickly than any of the whale riders dared to imagine.

18. KENEKRA

Vil had stopped shaking but he was still curled into a tight bundle. Kara worked her hands around his shoulders and head, trying to get him to tell her what was wrong. Privately, she was certain it was connected with Semaj, because she'd never seen Semaj – or *any* cloud whale – so upset, either. But she had no way to talk to Semaj directly. Only the chirpies seemed to be able to do that. “Help, help, help, help,” Vil murmured into his stomach hair.

“Help what, Vil? Help who?” Kara asked quietly. “Tell me.”

“Droi. Droi not good!” Vil wailed, unrolling himself suddenly. “Bad men! Bad groun’ers!” Kara heard him gritting his squirrel-like teeth.

“What bad grounders, Vil? Have the grounders hurt Droi?” Vonya and Cly waited tensely, hoping Kara could get the story out of the chirpie.

“Bad, bad, bad groun’ers! Take Droi! Take Droi away!”

“Take Droi away?!” Kara asked. “How?”

“Run in! Kill all! All dead!” cried Vil. “Groun’ers take Droi! Make him fly!”

“Dead? They killed his crew?” Kara gasped.

“Yes. All dead! Not Trockie. Trockie hurt. All dead!” Vil said. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut and curled up in his own belly again, stretching his patagia over his body until he looked like a furry sphere.

Kara wiped at the tears on her face. “Droi’s been skyjacked. He must have been surprised by grounders, they got on board and...” her eyes widened.

Cly nodded grimly. “Yes. They got to his wheels and killed his crew. Except for Trock, to tell them what to do. Those pirates we fought were trying that.”

“So they definitely were trying to skyjack us,” Vonya said, still having trouble believing the idea, despite her suspicions. “The Ship Smasher. It *has* to be. . . and you overheard those men talking about his offer.” Kara looked at Cly.

“Yes,” he said nodding to Kara, “I overheard some fisherfolk down on the docks in Imri kidding one another about trying to steal Semaj. It all makes sense in retrospect but it doesn’t answer the question: *why?* What-*ever* for?” he asked rhetorically.

“I can’t imagine,” Cly went on. “But obviously he wants a cloud whale and let out the word he’d pay for it. We escaped. Droi, it would appear, didn’t.” He rubbed the burn scar on one hand as he thought furiously. “We’re heading northeast. Semaj must be trying to intercept him.”

"Most every cloud whale we *have* must be by now! Figuring his schedule, it must have been at or near Point Sbarri. The call would've have covered nearly our entire trading territory before reaching Imri," Vonya said. "Cloudhome is closer than Imri to that position but I can't remember if there are any cloud whales there now. Maybe Kreen? She was last at Imri before we arrived."

"There aren't," Kara said, grimly, "Master Wold told me I could plan a holiday around this time. Kreen was supposed to drop her Imri cargo at Summuskeep and go on to Torsheim. In fact," she calculated rapidly in her head, "*All* our cloud whales will be there – to take Prince Vorn to Calthis."

"Terrific. Which means that if any of our cloud whales respond to the call it will be a bloody international incident! Without that delegation the cease-fire between Torsheim and Calthis will collapse and *we'll* be to blame. It might wind up being a *three-way* war," Cly said. But Vonya shook her head.

"Arvin wouldn't let it come to that. He'd drop the delegation somewhere and then respond but it will delay him. Wait, wasn't Paschalon supposed to carry the Prince?" she asked.

Kara said, "Yes, but Semaj is Paschalon's son. He'll be looking for us."

"For this long, Ka?" Vonya said. "I don't think so."

Kara wasn't sure how she knew this, but she knew and she was sure. "Pa is around somewhere, searching for us. I'm certain of it."

Vonya thought for a moment. "Pa's crew is ten, plus ten chirpies – say fifteen cabins. If I recall correctly, Arvin told me he was expecting no more than *five* spares. If Pa's in this area, then Arvin has not only has no extra capacity at all, he's already short. Vorchula must be carrying the prince and the retinue, which means Kreen must have the delegates. . .most of them, she won't have enough cabins."

Cly nodded. "Arvin *can't* let them off, it would wreck *years* worth of negotiating. He must've grabbed Sholi and Renn, and split up the delegates, he wouldn't have had any other choices. He'll avoid an international incident but he won't be able to send *any* help for Droï! Smudge and blazes, I hope none of our whales bolt!"

Vonya took a deep breath. "Well, Prince Vorn and the entire delegation might be along for the rescue but we'd best assume we need to handle it ourselves," she finished. "*And* be thankful to the Elements and our Ancestors we actually *can*!"

Semaj continued northeast, angling more north as he proceeded, obviously picking up newer fixes on Droï from the far band as they approached. This concerned Cly, for due north lay the great peninsula – almost a sub-continent, really – of Vindolonda. He was sure there had to be a connection.

When Semaj began gaining altitude without direction, Cly didn't know what to do. When Semaj lurched as he reached a jetstream – how did he even *know* about them? – Cly finally revealed his quandary to Vonya and Kara. “I hated to keep it to myself but I have little more than feelings and hearsay to go on – but that Knight was Vindolondan, and that's where we seem to be headed. Somehow, the coin must be connected to all this. But I just can't see how!”

Kara shook her head in bewilderment, while Vonya frowned and said, “I agree. It's another piece of information but it doesn't seem to fit anywhere.” She sighed and shook her head. “I guess we go on. . .try to look out for more pieces to this puzzle.” The others could only nod.

Semaj's pace did not slacken, though it was stunningly fast to begin with, and that speed was now added to the speed of the jetstream. Kara, remembering Old Hamero's sad demise, climbed into places inside Semaj that Semaj didn't even know he had – but she found no damage. The light rig held, none of the structural members showed any sign of strain though Semaj's major heart was beginning to develop an occasional flutter by the second day, likely from the effort. Kara did not dare touch it, Semaj ignored a suggestion to Vil to stop for a quick bypass, and she could not operate with the heart running flat out. On the third day, they reached the World Wall – the southernmost bastion of Vindolonda itself.

Semaj abruptly nosedived as it came into view, leaving the jetstream and spinning once wingflukes-over-head and came up again properly oriented – he'd done this before, that was obvious. His pace slackened as they approached the wall. It was, they knew, an enormous fault, nearly two miles high and stretching across the southern shore of Vindolonda for close on a thousand miles. Semaj's heart flutter subsided as he slowed, though Kara kept a close eye on the organ as they went. All the whale riders expected Semaj to gain altitude to pass over the wall into inland Vindolonda but instead he dropped down, turning almost due east to parallel the wall.

By the evening of the second day, he was angling southerly again, moving further from the wall, obviously having underestimated his own speed and outrun Droï – far band was notoriously difficult to use to navigate. The whale riders, who had thought it at least made *some* sense why

they were heading for Vindolonda, were left now at a complete loss. Cly's frustration was a palpable thing. *Where* could Semaj be going? There was nothing between them and Point Sbarri now but for a double handful of completely uninhabited volcanic islands. Uninhabited for a good reason, too, the volcanoes were *active*! Not a healthy place for a cloud whale to go!

Semaj once again caught a jetstream and zoomed east.

"I've been going over and over his structural members at all this jetstreaming, but there's no damage I can find," Kara said, returning to the salon from some distant and unknown part of Semaj's anatomy. "Quite the contrary. The whole rig is holding better than I could've dared hope for. We haven't so much as loosened a stay!"

Vonya took a deep breath. "Just imagine – if this rig is the secret to using the streams like this *all the time*. By the elements – we could trade almost *anywhere*. And *fast*."

Cly said, "Let's keep our stays tight. We can always hope."

They traveled at only a slightly slower pace through the night and by dawn came the lurch-and-spin as Semaj again dropped from the jetstream, and they discovered they had reached the Fire Mountain.

Where in the fire chain they were, Cly had no idea. But without question they were approaching a volcano. He prayed to his Ancestors and the Elements for *some* sign to tell them what was going on.

What, can you hear me? sent Semaj as they approached the fire mountain.

Fire-Born! Can that be you, or have I lost what few wits I have left? came Droi's thunderstruck response.

It is I, cousin. I could not respond until now, my fan voice is gone since I left the fan. Semaj replied.

It is good to feel your presence, cousin Semaj. Are you badly hurt? Surely you cannot have completed a refit so quickly! You should not damage yourself so on my account!

I am already refitted. My crew worked with grounder artisans in the Mountain City. I am made new and I am strong. My crew is most clever, my cousin, and we shall free you. Semaj said, with just a bit more confidence than he really felt.

**I hope so, Semaj. I have never imagined such fear. It is one thing to travel either and son at the behest of the*

YOUNGEST COMPANIONS FOR I KNOW IN MY HEARTS THEY'D NOT MAKE ME GO WHERE I DID NOT WISH TO. BUT THE GRABNDERS HAVE NO CARE FOR ME, NO PITY. THEY FORCED ME HERE, TO THIS TERRIBLE PLACE, LIKE NONE I'D EVER IMAGINED COULD EXIST. MY CAPTAIN IS NEAR MAD WITH FEAR, SHE BELIEVES SHE IS DEAD IN HELL. PERHAPS SHE IS RIGHT.*

Semaj eyed the fire mountain as they approached. To his eyes it positively glowed with heat, with an evil-looking plume of black smoke pouring off the summit. Was the glow increasing?

WHERE ARE YOU EXACTLY, COUSIN? Semaj asked the younger cloud whale.

I DON'T KNOW. I REMEMBER PASSING OVER A GRABUNDER TOWN NEAR THE MOUTH OF A STREAM JUST EAST OF THE FIRE MOUNTAIN, THEN THEY FORCED ME DOWN INTO A VALLEY THAT GLOWED. AS I DROPPED, I SAW BUSHES AND TREES IN FLAMES AND SAW A RIVULET WITHOUT WATER, SO BRIGHT WITH HEAT I COULD NOT GAZE UPON IT. THEN ALL WAS BLACK, AND WHEN NEXT I COULD SENSE, I FOUND MYSELF IN A HANGAR LIKE NONE I HAVE EVER SEEN. THE WALLS GLOW, THOUGH NOT AS BADLY AS OTHER PLACES ON THE ISLAND, AND I CANNOT SEE THROUGH THEM AT ALL. WHEN I CALL ON THE NEAR BAND, MY VOICE IS DEAFENING, AND I CANNOT HEAR MY FAR BAND VOICE AT ALL.

CAN YOU SEE AN ENTRANCE OR ANY KIND OF OPENING? Semaj asked.

NO. EVERYTHING AROUND ME IS THE SAME RED GLOW — BUT I CAN'T SEE AFT, AND I THINK THEY MUST HAVE PUSHED ME IN NOSE-FIRST. MY WINGELOCKES ARE A BIT COOLER THAN THE REST OF ME. I TRIED PUSHING ON THE HANGAR WALLS BUT THEY ARE ROUGH AND SO VERY HARD, SEMAJ. I COULD MAKE NO IMPRESSION.

Semaj decided Droï was describing a cave near the fire mountain. He didn't mention his conclusion, he could sense Droï was fighting panic already. Only his cloud whale logic and pride had kept him sane this close to the fire mountain, telling him he was probably underground might snap that. Better to wait.

PA IS COMING, TOO. HE IS NOT SURE WHEN HE WILL ARRIVE, HE IS STILL OVER THE GREAT WESTERN OCEAN AND HAS PASSED NO LANDMARKS. I HEAR NO ECHOES OF HIS VOICE, SO HE MUST BE CLOSE.

THAT IS GOOD, SEMAJ, said Droï in a fuzzier sending. ***I CANNOT HEAR ANYTHING OUTSIDE THIS PLACE.*** Semaj realized he was weakening rapidly.

REST NOW, DROI. I WILL RECONNOITER. SLEEP IF YOU CAN. SOON WE WILL HAVE A PLAN. Semaj put as much assurance into his sending as he could.

DON'T LEAVE ME, SEMAJ. IT'S GOOD TO FEEL SOMETHING OF THE OLD MEAR.

I WILL NOT, REST. WE WILL DEAL WITH THE PIRATES. Semaj had no doubts about that. Droi's kidnapping was something for which the pirates would pay very dearly. Very dearly indeed, he promised himself, grimly.

Semaj skirted south around the fire mountain, keeping a nervous eye on the plume. While the young whale lacked the paralyzing fear of fire that is common in his kind, he was not stupid. He had long ago discovered that he could "will" fires to go out, or at least not to burn him but he also knew that trick wouldn't work if he was burning in too many places or too fiercely. It was a gift of his unusual birth, Semaj knew – though it was a lonely one.

Semaj dropped low to the water coming in just fifty feet off the beach as he rounded the mountain. Sure enough, he made out the skyline of a small town or large encampment some miles southeast of the mountain. To his heat-sensitive eyes the mountain literally glowed. In the ruddy light he made out the rich forest cover, still largely intact, though showing much damage from recent showers of ash and cinders from the mountain. As Droi had described a blinding stream of something that was not water flowed from a vent halfway up the mountain on its southeastern flank. Semaj kept the minds of his crew uppermost in his thoughts, monitoring their reactions. In Kara's mind, fear, though kept tightly controlled as she expended the nervous energy monitoring his internal condition. In Vonya's mind, wonder and fear in equal proportions, with consternation as she looked toward the town. In Cly's. . . Cly had identified the mysterious liquid as "lava!" Rock, it was. . . rock so loaded with fire that it flowed like water! Semaj nearly stopped to examine this wonder but Droi's barely controlled terror kept him focused.

Suddenly he was wrenched hard to port as both Cly and Vonya hit the wheels. Semaj had a fleeting impression of several grounders moving about in the growth below from both Vonya's and Cly's minds. He relaxed his lifter muscles, allowing the pressure in his lifters to fall, and buoyed up to a hundred feet. He did not flap his sails or wingflukes, knowing from Cly's mind the sound would carry.

"Blazes, I hope they didn't see us!" Vonya gasped. "Who would have expected them so scorched close to the fire mountain!"

"Who would've expected *anyone* to be on the island in the *first* place, let alone long enough to have built a town!" Cly retorted. "Just what we needed to make this mystery complete – a whole *island* full of crazy people living next to an active volcano! I would never have thought even *grounders* would do such a thing!" He moved away from the wheels, feeling Semaj rising and noticing the cloud whale had quieted the sound of his sails. He peered into the brush below and aft through Semaj's nearly transparent belly membrane looking for some sign of the men. They were invisible in the foliage but in a moment a running man broke from cover. He skidded to a halt, pointing at Semaj and shouting back over his shoulder.

"No luck," said Cly. "We'll have to deal with them."

"How?" Vonya gasped, "All we have for weapons are our bone knives! Besides there's no place to land and we have no manta to take us down!"

Cly looked levelly at her. "There *is* a way."

Vonya looked back with worry and frustration in her gaze. Slowly, her eyes widened as she saw what Cly was thinking.

"By the grounder's Gods, Cly!"

"We have no choice, Von," Cly said quietly. "If they bring back word of another cloud whale in the area the pirates will inevitably assume it's some sort of rescue expedition. If they were clever enough to skyjack Droï, they are clever enough to know we are no prowling feral, even presuming they didn't know a cloud whale wouldn't go this near a fire mountain voluntarily!"

He turned away from Vonya, moving aft, past the salon and hold, to a catwalk that brought him to Semaj's aft observation cupola. The pirates were no longer visible but he knew that they knew they were here.

Kourishand, he sent, mentally.

~~*I HEAR, GROUNDER. HAVE YOU A NEED?*~~ came the silent reply.

A pirate scouting party has seen us. We cannot reach them, Cly sent.

~~*BUT I CAN. LEAD ME YOUR WILL, MY MAKER,*~~ sent the salamander. Cly concentrated, willing his mind to the clear spot visible below.

Sensing magic from inside, Semaj allowed himself to drift to a stop, uncertain what his Thaumateurge was trying to do but wanting to help.

Flame flickered below and in a moment a billowing roar of flame erupted in the clearing. In a moment, Kourishand's fiery form rose up from the foliage, his flaming wings flickering as they took him airborne. He skimmed the trees a moment and then suddenly pounced.

Cly sensed rather than saw the battle. To his eyes, a spreading dome of flame seemed to engulf the copse, but in his mind's eye he saw the startled pirates suddenly faced with the flaming apparition he had sent to them.

Six of them, Yovanish, came Korishand's calm thoughts.
Now five.

The battle was short and one-sided. Soon five of the pirates lay dead, burned beyond recognition. But they were not home free.

Freezing well. The last one now, said the salamander, appearing again over the trees. He scanned back and forth in a search pattern. **I cannot see him.**

Semaj sensed the battle, and felt Cly's consternation as he realized one of the pirates had escaped. Quickly he ordered hivelings overboard to search the jungle. Blessedly, they were too unintelligent to feel fear at their proximity to the fire mountain. They scattered, searching.

There is nothing more you can do, Kourishand, sent Cly.

I am sorry, Yovanish. The one moved with more speed than I have ever seen, he was too fast for me.

Cly felt the salamander's annoyance as it vanished away to that place salamanders lived when they did not dwell in the land of men. Cly blinked as the import of Kourishand's last statement suddenly came to him.

Cly sprinted forward to his personal spot and dug out the wizard's journal. Feverishly, he paged through it. Yes, here it was. A spell for speed! They were pursuing a wizard!

But why did he not just teleport away, Cly wondered? A wizard had all sorts of such spells, why just haste? Ah, a wizard would have such. . .but a man with a Wizard's gem would have only what was stored in it. The pirate had magic.

Watching through the eyes of his searching hivelings, it was not long before Semaj found the missing pirate. He was already more than five miles away, just a couple of miles from the town. He sent the knowledge to Vil.

“Man near town!” Vil warbled. “Run fast!”

“Where, Vil?” Kara asked. “Tell us.”

“Near town! Nearby!” Vil bumbled and added a few chirped phrases in his own language. He sat hunched, waving his upper forelimbs about while he rubbed the lower ones together nervously.

“I think he’s saying the man ran toward town,” Kara said, doubtfully. “He keeps saying ‘near’ town, but I think he means ‘nearer’ town.”

Vonya nodded, “Let’s get moving that way.”

Semaj felt frustrated. Despite his growing facility with interpreting the human minds he carried, he was unable to communicate very effectively back to them. Vil simply did not understand the concepts he was being asked to relay. Semaj hurried southeastward, trying to catch up to the pirate before the man reached the town but knowing in his hearts the man had too much of a head start.

“It’s hopeless,” Cly said to the others after some minutes had passed. “Even if we managed to run this guy down we’d have to try to kill him within sight of the town, they’d still know we were here.”

Vonya nodded unhappily. “What can we do?”

Cly thought but nothing came. “We need to do something they’d never expect. Hide someplace where they’d never look.”

It was Kara that took the plunge. “Then we must head for the fire mountain. They would never, ever predict that. Hide near the north slope and try to raid the pirates holding Droï before word can get back to them from the town.”

Cly looked at Kara’s bright eyes with new respect. “Yes.”

“Let’s do it,” Vonya said.

Semaj turned away from the chase, angling back north toward Droï. In another hour they had retraced their earlier course back toward the eastern side of the mountain. Semaj kept many sharp hiveling eyes out for more pirate patrols but he moved quickly knowing the pirates would soon know he was here.

As they approached the fire mountain the ground became rockier and the vegetation became straggly and sparse. There was much bare rock, mute testimony to past eruptions.

The glow from the ground was getting noticeably brighter. Semaj began to fear the fire mountain was close to some kind of action, perhaps an out-and-out eruption. That would not be good, Semaj thought. But he was

again frustrated by his limited communication with his crew. Vil just couldn't get this idea across to the humans, either.

Semaj thought about the problem as he traveled. Slowly, a better idea began to form...

They left the vegetation behind completely as they approached the fire mountain. Here the land was peppered with twisted outcroppings of igneous rock and cut with enormous gullies and cracks. Some seemed rounded, as if they had served as conduits for lava, others were sharp, pulled asunder by some unthinkable elemental force. Nearly all ran radially away from the mountain but one in particular lay almost perpendicular. Even so, it would not have been remarkable were it not for its size, almost three hundred yards wide, nearly a quarter-mile deep. Far below, Cly made out the sheen of water. It was not running, he decided, this crack must connect with the sea. But that was not the most remarkable feature.

"Look!" Vonya shouted. They ran to the observation deck above Semaj's upper lip to see what Vonya had shouted about. Below them, in the side of the great cleft was an intersection with one of the smaller radial cracks. The side nearest the fire mountain had an enormous curtain stretched across it.

"Droi there!" shouted Vil as he peered down. "Droi inside!"

"A hangar for a stolen cloud whale," Vonya said grimly.

They could not make out what the curtain was, though it did not move in the breeze from Semaj's sails. Canvas weighted with metal most likely, Cly decided. He eyed the local sun, its purplish light lending an even more surreal touch to the whole experience. It would be getting dark soon.

"Can we take them from here, Cly?" Vonya asked him. "Perhaps with your fire magic?"

It was tempting, Cly admitted to himself. The pirates on guard surely had no clue they were there and with Kourishand's help they could probably overpower them, if there weren't too many. That was the real problem, he had no idea how many pirates were guarding Droi.

Cly had almost decided to recommend an attack when suddenly Vil piped, "Men coming! Many men!"

"Where from?" asked Kara.

"That way!" said Vil waving his right upper limb toward the downhill side.

"Too soon to be a search party!" Vonya gasped.

“Probably supply or relief but no matter that. Too many of them. Let’s get out of here, come back later!” Cly said. He noted the position of the sun as best he could through the pall of soot over the mountain. It would be well to know the pattern of the relief or supply so as to time the attack later.

Vonya loosed the speed lever, tugging the wheels to help Semaj set a new course. Semaj moved away, keeping a close hiving eye on the approaching pirates. They were still a comfortable distance away, at least ten minutes.

“Maybe we can find a cleft like that, too,” Vonya said. “That would hide us pretty well.”

Cly looked carefully at the other intersections but thought the chances did not look good. Semaj was quite a bit bigger than Droï, and Droï was parked in the largest crevice they had yet seen.

“Maybe,” he said doubtfully, “But not so close to Droï, no telling how many pirates travel though here.” He looked at the hovering hiving escort that had been with them since the encounter with the patrol. Privately he kicked himself for not realizing they would be needed earlier. A magician needs to be able to plan! “Let’s travel up this cleft and then angle north or northwest,” he said. “Maybe we can snug down in a smaller cleft and I can cast some kind of camouflage spell.” It was, he thought, just possible that he might be able to cover Semaj with an illusion that matched the cracked, baking landscape beneath them, though it would leave him with little magic for helping free Droï.

Suddenly, a loud crack made them look up at the fire mountain. The whale riders gasped at what they saw.

The fire mountain had released a huge plume of gray smoke in the evening light. It boiled out of the top of the mountain, lit from within by myriad sparks of burning material.

Cly looked at some of the shrubs and trees visible below to check the direction and strength of the breeze. It seemed to match the direction of the plume, which meant the plume was not being ejected under pressure – or, at least, not a lot of pressure.

“It’ll go south of us for now,” he said, “but if the wind changes we could be in more trouble than we can handle. Droï would be safe but my magic can’t protect Semaj from flame!” Suddenly he remembered Master Yothar.

“Somehow, I can’t see a skyjammer landing in or near a volcano and fighting his way down into a fire ant colony!”

Cly's magic could not protect Semaj. But if there were any fire ants around this "volcano," perhaps Timuron's *could!*

19. FARJ, MY DEAR COLLEAGUE

"We need to search the mountainside. Quickly," Cly said. "We're looking for ant-like creatures, six to ten feet long."

"Whatever for, Cly?" Kara asked, but Vonya caught on immediately.

"Fire ants," she said. "The old alchemist mentioned something about paying to watch you fighting your way down inside a volcano or something. Too bad we can't sell tickets. What was the stuff? Some kind of jelly?"

"Royal jelly. It's secreted by many social insects, and usually stored near the royalty. The hivelings make some in mating season when they need to split the hive for a cloud whale birth. It's used to raise new royalty."

"You think fire ants might live around this mountain?" Kara asked tensely.

"I have no clue but it's the best thing I can come up with," Cly replied.

"I haven't any better ideas. Have you, Ka?" Vonya said.

"No. But how can we possibly steal their royal jelly? What are we going to do, march right into the nest? Or maybe we can just drop inside the fire mountain and say 'pardon us, which way to the royal jelly?' They'll *attack* us!"

"I'm sure they will. But maybe I can scare them with a demon or something," Cly said.

"I hope they scare easy," Kara said doubtfully.

Semaj left the cleft behind and began hunting for fire ants. He did not know what they looked like, nor did his crew, really, Cly was describing his impression from the few facts they gleaned in their conversation with the alchemist, plus a very general knowledge of giant arthropods. Nevertheless, there can't be too many kinds of giant social insects that hive near a fire mountain.

The light swiftly faded as night came on, though the scene was still lit with ruddy light from the mountaintop. The eerily luminous smoke continued to boil from the summit, glowing with light and heat, but the sea breeze died with the coming of night, and the plume rose nearly vertically. Paradoxically, Semaj was safest near the mountain, the hot cinders and sparks rising and traveling some distance before they cooled enough to fall. The cloud whale cruised in a tiny safe zone, surrounded by an im-

penetrable curtain of burning debris certain to ignite even him if he tried to leave the vicinity of the volcano.

They spent a sleepless night searching the area but, with the first sign of waxing light from the nearby sun, they found what they sought.

They did not look much like ants, Cly thought to himself. They had searched the entire safe zone and found only one area where there seemed to be any life. The entrance to the hive was on the lower flank of the east side of the mountain itself and trails radiated from it down into the forest far below now being pelted with volcanic debris. The creatures were about eight feet long, shaped rather like the lobsters the whale riders had seen in Imri City's fish markets. They had two slim claws, each fitted with nasty serrated teeth, and a forked tail kept curled underneath them except when they wanted to leap high, which they did, often and with dismaying ability. When not leaping they got about with eight splayed legs, almost skimming along the rock faster than a man could run, and with little seeming effort. They glowed with heat, even to human eyes. Cly thought they had to have a body temperature in the hundreds of degrees. Still, they were undeniably social – the hive must number in the scores – maybe even hundreds. The Ancestors alone knew how hot it was inside. Actually, Cly thought grimly, *his* Ancestors would never be caught *dead* near this place. This close to the mountain, even several hundred feet up, Semaj and his crew were already enervated from the heat.

The area had been inundated by lava many times, and there were pools of standing lava, some of them surrounded with the wink of large crystals, some of which might be valuable gems if they could be recovered, but most of which were just minerals crystallizing out of the lava. In the morning light that occasionally shot through rents in the clouds, many of the crystals were outlined in rainbows so bright it hurt the eye to gaze upon them.

Rainbows, Cly thought. Something about rainbows...

"We can't kill those! Look at the *size* of them, Cly!" Kara said tearfully. Vonya nodded her agreement. "Far too formidable for us. Could your elemental friend help us?" Kara shot her a curious look, then looked at Cly.

"I don't think so. Those things obviously love heat, I doubt if my pet salamander could do them any harm – might even make them feel good." He watched Kara out of the corner of his eye. She seemed to consider a few moments, and then shrugged and went back to watching the fire ants.

"What can we do, then? Without the farj we can't use the fire shield and without that we can't even leave, let alone help Droi!" Vonya said.

"Blazes how I wish now we had kept Semaj tied down until we had more information from Vil!"

"Wouldn't have done any good," Cly said absently as he continued to study the crystals. "He can only relay impressions, and Droï must have fainted when they brought him too close to the mountain, so he wouldn't remember how he got into that hangar. Besides, I think the coin is mixed up in all this. I don't think we *ever* had much of a choice."

Cly's eyes narrowed as he thoughtfully chewed a knuckle. The crystals acted like a prism, breaking white light up into a rainbow of colors. But prisms could work backwards, too, Cly knew, making a rainbow into white light...

The halo that was the light that *would have been* reflected from his invisible body, refracted from the spell that bent the light around him. The spell made him invisible but it needed to be teamed with a reversed refraction spell to make the light white. Could a darkness spell then eliminate it? No, Cly thought, that light must be what he was seeing by, otherwise his eyes would have to be visible and the spell is pointless. He *needed* that light – but he needed it channeled and displaced to his eyes instead of bouncing off the invisibility spell.

That was it! A form of image displacement, inverted! The entire combination should account for his visibility, the light, *and* his vision. Cly saw how it could work! Apothecaries, indeed! "Vil! Have Semaj set us down on the other side of the rise!" he ordered.

Semaj landed them a quarter mile distant, as close as he dared with the heat. The hivelings were taking turns flying a patrol, to conserve their strength and to still be able to spot marauding pirates or fire ants. The whale riders dropped a silken rope ladder over and climbed down.

"Cly, please, tell us again slowly," Vonya was begging, but she bit off her words as she saw him begin a spell.

Cly whisked out the lens again. "*Simulacri intabulan...*"

In a moment, Vonya saw he had faded from sight but he was still outlined in a bright rainbow. The outline continued to gesticulate, and the women heard Cly's low voice still speaking.

"...transfixis photoni ergo..."

The halo turned white, giving the magician a ghostly appearance.

"...inverti portallibri - daq!"

And a moment it faded entirely.

He was *gone*.

"By the grounder's Gods!" came Cly's voice, excitedly. "It works! It really works!"

"We're going to sneak in? Is that the idea?" Vonya asked urgently. "Cast it on me!"

"No, I'm going alone!" Cly replied. "There is no sense risking all of us!"

"Maybe not all of us, Kara needs to stay with Semaj, but you know I'm better with a knife than you, Cly! And you'll need someone to watch your back – not to mention helping search the nest!" Vonya said.

Cly thought, but he had to admit the truth of her words. "I hate it when you're right. Very well." He thought quickly for a moment, trying to see if he'd forgotten anything. He slapped his forehead as he suddenly recalled the haste elixir.

"Von, we'll need that hasting potion, too. It'll help us keep ahead of the beasts – *and* it'll reduce the time we'll be exposed to the heat." Vonya scurried back inside Semaj, returning in seconds with the requested items and with the healing potions, too. She quaffed one vial of hasting potion and held the other out to Cly, who took it and finished the vile-tasting fluid.

"Hold still now," he instructed Vonya. He repeated his new spell, this time much more quickly as he got the hang of it. In a few moments, Vonya, too, was no longer in evidence.

"Be careful," said Kara to the air.

Vonya found being invisible was not greatly different from being visible. She could still see herself, a pale ghostly outline, anyway, but it gave her confidence about her footing. Cly, on the other hand, was quite invisible, and they kept up a running conversation to keep track of each other.

"No, you're quite invisible to me," Cly told her as they jogged. "But I can see myself as a faint outline. That's good, it means I can move more confidently."

"What's the plan, Cly?" she asked.

"Get inside and steal all the royal jelly."

"Ah. One of those complex and subtle ones," she said.

"I wouldn't know a subtle plan if one up and bit me where I sit down," Cly said. "I'm hoping we won't *need* anything too subtle, we don't have time for it."

The two crested the rise and spied the entrance. There were no fire ants around it.

"What luck," Cly said. "They must be nocturnal!"

"Yes," Vonya agreed. "Isn't it lucky they must all be in the nest!"

The invisibility hid Cly's reaction but she noticed his footprints in the gravel as he stepped toward the entrance.

They reached the entrance together and looked down. It was not quite the black hole they expected. It was lit with a fell red light, and it was radiating heat.

"Take my hand," Cly said. "We'll need to stay together."

"*You take my rope,*" she retorted. "I brought along anything that might be useful. I thought we'd need it for climbing down tunnels and stuff."

"Good idea," Cly said, abashed. The woman had a head on her shoulders! He should have thought of that!

With the help of the rope, they did not need to keep talking. This was a good thing, Cly reflected, as the fire ants certainly ought to be able to hear. They tried to mute their steps as much as possible.

The nest was as hot as it looked like it would be but a haste potion effectively stretched out the time one could use to absorb heat, which usually made the user feel cold. It went a long way toward counteracting the ferocious heat. Not all the way, though, and the whale riders were soon soaked with sweat and panting. The walls were too hot to lean against and the clearance of the tunnel was only about four feet, so they had to move about bent double. The walls were rock, glowing faintly from the heat. Vonya had thought Kor's smithy back in Imri was a pretty good imitation of hell. This was better.

They encountered a fire ant straight off. It was standing at the first intersection, a pair of tunnels with one slanting down and the other rising ever so slightly.

Cly paused a moment, holding a hand out to catch Vonya as she came up. The fire ant was equipped with a large pair of yellow compound eyes. It seemed to suspect something was amiss, craning its short neck, and waving its feelers eerily slowly about as it peered toward them. Cly decided not to give it any more time and brushed past the thing with Vonya still in tow. They actually nudged the creature aside as they passed to the steeper tunnel down, the shell of it burning hot even through their clothing and the effects of the haste potion. The ant startled as they touched it but did not look toward them.

The first encounter set the tone for later ones. Confident now the fire ants could not see them, Cly hurried past the ones they encountered leaving them peering around in the reddish gloom for whatever they had heard or felt.

The nest was a maze. Cly marked each intersection with his knife as they passed to make sure they could find their way back. It worked, but he was going to need a new knife, each stroke cost him more of the blade.

There were many chambers, some nearly a hundred feet across. One was full of corpses – horses and ponies, and not a few humans – mummified from the heat, and undoubtedly raided from the town and stored here as food. But they didn't seem to be able to find the royalty or even a nursery. After a time, Cly had to renew their invisibility spells. They found themselves needing to double back and noticed the number of fire ants at each intersection seemed smaller the deeper they went. They also noted the fire ants seemed to be speeding up, which meant the haste was beginning to wear off. It was also getting hotter. They halted in a higher and wider tunnel, panting from the heat and exertion.

“What now, Cly?” Vonya gulped.

“I'm open to suggestions,” he gasped in reply.

Vonya looked about. The gallery opened up before them, the ceiling rising to over twenty feet. The whale riders could dimly make out still forms dangling from the ceiling – a dozen fat fire ants, their bodies grossly distended, nearly ten feet in diameter, hanging from the roof by their claws. The tunnel continued beyond the cloud whale rider's visual range.

“How deep are we?” she asked.

“Don't know. Don't want to think about it,” Cly said, wiping his brow with a sleeve already dripping with sweat.

“Always headed down. Now we can't find any more ways down. So where're the royalty?”

Cly thought for a moment. He had assumed the fire ants kept the royalty and the eggs and pupae in the lowest level of the nest, reasoning that that was probably the safest point and that was the way other social insects he knew of did it. Unless something made it unsafe...

Cly rammed his fist into a palm as the light dawned.

“No! Burn it all, they must keep the royalty up above! If the nest was hit with a lava flow they'd need to evacuate in a hurry and the lower chambers would fill first! The royalty must be near the surface!”

Vonya nodded, though she knew Cly could not see. “That makes sense!” The two retraced their steps, heading upward as fast as they could go.

As they ascended the number of sentries they had to pass increased. They had noted this earlier but now it was clear that the sentries had been reinforced at every location. When they reached the topmost intersection, where there had previously been only one sentry, now there were a full dozen. And there were too many to nudge out of the way.

“What now?” Vonya whispered.

Cly reached out with his hands, feeling the walls. They were burning hot to the touch. In a moment, he removed his shirt, tearing it in half along the seam and using the pieces to wrap his hands. The tough cloud whale leather protected him well, though he could see curls of smoke where his invisible hand, protected by the invisible material, was touching the wall.

“Tear up your shirt and wrap your hands,” he whispered in Vonya’s ear. “Hold yourself high in the tunnel by pressing with your hands and feet on the sides. We’ll climb over them!”

Vonya did as she was instructed. In a moment, she felt the tug of the rope as Cly ascended the wall and began to push himself over the ants below. Vonya followed. It was hellish. Only their aerial lifestyle gave them enough upper-body strength for this feat. Vonya edged herself along, staring down at the backs of the ants she passed over just inches below, feeling the pounding heat from them as she went. She felt like some hapless side of beef being grilled for some barbaric grounder feast. Sweat dripped from her body, spotting the ants below and as quickly vanishing in a little *sszzzzttt* of steam. Alerted, but not understanding what was happening, the fire ants milled about, searching for they knew not what.

Vonya’s arms were trembling with exhaustion when at last she reached the far side of the intersection. She felt the invisible rope go slack as she caught up with Cly and in a moment his fumbling hands found her body and he helped her down.

From this point they could reach the exit or they could follow the tunnel they had ignored when they first arrived. Both moved stealthily into the latter. Twice they had to press themselves against the wall as a fire ant charged by heading for the surface. Cly worried the ants might be able to track them by the smell of their charring clothes.

The tunnel soon opened up into a large gallery. Sure enough, a huge, pulsating body occupied the center of the chamber. It was nearly forty feet long, with the normal-sized fore-body of the Queen grotesquely tacked onto one end. About a dozen other fire ants attended her, dashing off into grottoes in back. The nearest grotto – a pit, really – was already filled with deep red eggs.

They edged around the Queen and found two more fire ants behind her. One was obviously a warrior, the first they’d seen, with two sets of huge side-ways chewing mandibles, one inside the other. More of them were visible further back, near the egg hatcheries. Cly was curious why they were not closer to the Queen but for the moment he was relieved they seemed to be more interested in safeguarding the eggs. The other ant

was also very different from any of the others they had seen so far. Its head was much larger, with a more domed-shaped skull. It was physically smaller than the rest, only some five feet long, and had tiny little jaws, scarcely large enough to engulf a man's fist. Its compound eyes were small, but the simple eyes in between were huge, almost twice human size, and alive with constant motion. It alternately scanned the Queen, then the rest of the nest. Its' two graceful antenna swished about, sampling the air instant by instant. Cly cursed to himself. Giant insect-like creatures, like hivelings or fire ants, usually resembled their namesakes in many details, almost any of which was enough to confer a name that reflected their outward similarity. But always there were two features guaranteed to be different from the tinier real insects. A bellows-like lung that compressed air entering the trachea, the biological innovation that permitted them to attain huge sizes, was one. The other was the presence of a "King" in the nest. And the Kings were nearly always *far* more intelligent than any other caste.

And just behind the King, were a half a dozen rough columns of some foamy brown material ranging in height from one to three feet and brimming with pink cream. Royal jelly. It *had* to be!

"Distract the King," Cly whispered to Vonya. The King peered in their direction. Blast! Abnormally keen hearing, too, he noted.

Vonya gently tugged at the rope and Cly, after a moment's thought, untied it from his waist. He felt Vonya steal away and he himself moved behind the King and his warrior.

The King jerked and peered about into the gloom. It moved a few steps along the Queen's side, with the warrior just a step behind. Cly pussyfooted over to the columns. There was more than he dared wish for. He remembered the tiny jug at Yothar's and compared it with these huge columns. There had to be nearly twenty gallons of the stuff! He tested the consistency, and found it to be very firm but moist. It would not be prone to spillage as he moved, so long as he didn't drop the whole container.

Cly removed his cloak and spread it on the floor of the cave. Working by feel, he packed the columns into the cloak and then closed it around the columns and swung the bundle on his back, suppressing a grunt. It weighed over a hundred pounds!

As he stabilized himself, Cly looked around, and found himself nearly nose-to-nose with the King.

The strange being blinked its three eyes slowly as it considered him. Checking quickly, Cly found he was still invisible and decided the King was looking at the royal jelly – or, rather, at the spot where the royal jelly

had disappeared. Had it seen the stuff vanish when his cloak was closed around it? Was it smart enough to realize what this meant?

Cly backed away, moving down the side of the Queen toward the ovipositor. This was not a good place to be. There was constant fire ant traffic as nurses arrived to carry away a steady stream of eggs. He paused here, watching the King approach. It occasionally twitched and he guessed that Vonya was still flicking it with the rope but it ignored the other distractions as it stalked him. The warrior remained a step behind the King as if glued there.

"Vonya, run for the exit!" Cly shouted and shoved one of the nurses aside. He ran past the ovipositor, nearly slipping as his foot squished though a pile of eggs. Staggering, he headed toward the chamber exit.

Behind him, the warrior leaped over the King, hurling itself at the alien sound but just as it reached the apogee of its leap it came to a halt, spun end-for-end and came crashing down on its back, bursting the few eggs that had escaped Cly's feet. Vonya pulled the knot tight around the warrior's neck and flipped a couple of loops of the invisible rope around the warrior's legs, leaving it to slow the ant down. She turned to run toward the exit, hoping Cly was ahead of her, when she felt a fierce pain in her right thigh as something bit her. She stumbled headlong to the floor, too stunned and surprised to cry out.

She turned on her side, kicking savagely at the fire ant holding her leg. To her further surprise, it let go, backing away and shaking its head from the blows, one of which had bent and damaged an antenna. It was the King, displaying more aggressiveness and intelligence than she had expected. In a way she was lucky – a warrior would not have let go. She pulled herself to her feet with a handhold on the Queen ant, still oblivious to the struggle near her and limped after Cly.

His heavy breathing warned her of his proximity before she ran into him. They reached the entryway together. Cly, glancing back, spotted a posse of warriors heading toward him posthaste.

"Cly!" Vonya gasped as she reached him. "My leg! The King bit me!"

With the wound as invisible as the rest of her, Cly could not tell how bad it was. "Can you run?"

"I don't think so," Vonya gasped.

Cly eyed the warriors heading this way. They had slowed once they reached the queen but one of them was feeling around the floor with its antennae. He suddenly realized Vonya had left a trail of blood, which was

cooking on the hot rock of the tunnel floor, giving off wisps of vile-smelling smoke.

He fumbled out the healing potion and felt for her hand.

“Drink this. We don’t have time to bind it,” he said. Vonya felt the vial and realized what it was. In a trice she had quaffed it, and felt the renewed strength flow through her limbs. The bite gave a mighty throb and then settled into a terrible itching.

“It’s working, Cly!” she said. Vonya gauged the threat of the pursuing warriors with the milling workers she knew blocked their way to the surface. The warriors were obviously the greater threat but if they could get through the workers fast enough, they might make it to Semaj before the ants realized the intruders had left the nest.

“Follow me to the exit in one second!” she hissed to Cly and ran for the exit. Cly, ducking the low ceiling and struggling with the load of royal jelly, followed clumsily, but moving as swiftly as he could. Vonya reached the workers ahead of the magician, who was still staggering under his load. Fear and excitement turned into annoyance as she looked at the fire ants blocking the passage. Impatiently, she began shoving them into the steeper, downward sloping passage. They were quite bewildered by this treatment, most just freezing as they felt her touch. In a moment, she had blocked up the passage one layer deep, but found the beasts were too heavy to lift or toss.

Cly bumped into her as he arrived. He was panting loudly, gasping for breath as he half-ran, half-crawled under his load, bent double to clear the low ceiling. The two pushed their way through the crowd of fire ants like impatient grounders trying to board a luxury cloud whale. In a moment they were through, Cly in front, Vonya following behind and pushing with all her strength. As they reached the exit, she looked back to see the warriors milling with the workers at the intersection. They were nearly home free.

Suddenly, the twosome flickered, their two shimmering forms appeared in mid-air, flickered along their lengths and slowly sharpened up into a pair of exhausted cloud whale riders. Cly’s magic had finally given out. The warriors charged them.

20. THE CLOUD WHALE'S HAND

Vonya pulled her knife with one hand and yanked Cly past her toward the exit with the other. He did not object, scrambling painfully up the incline, breathing hoarsely from the load and from the danger. Vonya stilled her own breathing, calming herself as she watched the warriors work their way through the confused workers. She flipped the weapon end-over-end, catching it deftly by the blade. As the first warrior broke through the workers, she flung the knife. Her aim was true; it sank into the monster's head exactly between the two antennae, hitting the bulls-eye between its three simple eyes. The warrior staggered and then plowed face-first into the floor, blocking the tunnel. Vonya whirled and ran up the slope, grabbing Cly by his elbow as she reached the top a step ahead of him and heaving him up. The magician was gasping for breath, seemingly unable to pull himself erect, but he still had the royal jelly.

With Vonya's help, Cly stumbled toward the hovering cloud whale. They were nearly halfway there when fire ant warriors began to boil from the hive. In the open the humans were no match for the speedy fire ants. Vonya grabbed Cly's knife from his belt, giving him a shove toward the cloud whale, and turned again to face the warriors.

This time she did not throw the knife. She could not count on the others being blocked; it would be foolish to disarm herself. The lead fire ant was on her in seconds.

The monster reared to hurl itself upon the woman but Vonya lunged under it, taking it by surprise. She stabbed upward at the throat area – or what would be the throat if the thing had any. Her knife caught a softer area in the tough hide but the warrior dropped down on top of her, forcing her hand away, and knocking her to her hands and knees.

The fire ant backed off of her just as the second arrived, hurrying past to attack Cly. Vonya spotted it as she rose and hurled herself at it in one motion, surprising her first adversary again, and causing its next lunge to go wide of the mark. With the added impetus of her jump and with just a bit of luck, she caught the second ant fair in the side, the point of her knife sliding between two chitinous plates and sinking into the monster's vitals. She pushed herself against the ant, ignoring the burning touch, adding her strength to the ant's flinch to drag the blade more than a foot along the crack. Scalding yellow blood spurted out with terrific force and Vonya triumphantly jerked the blade free. She and the ant had slewed sideways in the scuffle, leaving her first attacker to climb over its wounded fellow to get at her again but it left her open to a third, which clamped its enormous jaws through the center of her body.

Vonya had never imagined such agony. Dropping the knife, she grabbed the jaws and tried desperately to pry them apart but the warrior lifted her high off the ground and shook her fiercely, then dropped her to the ground to take a fresh grip.

The healing elixir still in her body quickly clotted the blood spurting from the puncture in her belly but even that miraculous potion could not heal the wound. Before Vonya could recover, the beast was on her again, this time sinking its mandibles into her chest.

Vonya's mind seemed to short-circuit. She felt herself stop breathing as the jaws broke into her rib cage, cutting into her lungs. She felt the horrible sensation of the jaw tips grating together inside her body as the monster ground its mandibles deeper inside her. It shook her again; the agony sending blinding sparks flashing through her vision. She had no air to scream. She slipped silently and perhaps a little gratefully into the blackness that has no pain. As awareness faded, she heard a distant hooting, and imagined she felt a splash of water.

"Hit 'em again! Again!" screamed Kara. But Semaj needed no urging. Fluttering his sails to again position himself, hooting for all he was worth to dump lift and return to the ground, he lined up on the remaining fire ants and dropped another shimmering sheet of ballast water across their ranks as they closed on the fallen whale rider. Vonya was lying motionless in a pool of orange, red and yellow with her attacker at her side, shaking and shivering from the watery impact and in shock from the suddenness of it. The effect on their fiery metabolisms must have made it worse than dropping a human into ice water. The warriors broke ranks, leaving three down shivering and one motionless, dripping yellow ichor and retreated to the nest to take up a defensive stand.

Semaj dumped lift again, bringing himself close enough to the ground for his ladder to reach. Cly ran toward Vonya, leaving the royal jelly near the shaking warrior that had nearly reached him. Kara dropped from Semaj's belly, using the ladder only as a rope brake and reached Vonya's side just as Cly did.

The healing potion had postponed death but the wounds were too fierce. Kara turned her over gently but Vonya was bleeding freely and already unconscious. The vet worked grimly, trying to stanch the bleeding but she knew in her heart it was hopeless. Too overcome to speak, she raged at herself to use her skill, she willed Vonya to live, just as she had the injured man in Imri.

Semaj kept the hiveling's buzzing around his crew, hoping the show would give the fire ants pause. They were no match for the ants, and he knew it, but the dowsing threw them off-balance and the hiveling's seemed to be bluffing them.

He sensed the icy feeling of impending death. His captain was dying. In Kara's mind was rage against the inevitable, a fury to do something. Semaj felt her mind reach out to him.

He did not waste the opportunity. Swiftly, he implemented his idea. Suppressing his personal touch, he tried to form a link of pure will, as he had sensed the dragon do. He had no experience with this, no subtlety. He created the link and slammed it home in a single thought.

Kara felt her mind explode! She grabbed her head with both hands and screamed in agony. She felt hundreds of minds drilling into hers, she felt the agony of Vonya's death wounds in her own guts, she felt Cly's misery at Vonya's impending death and his sudden stab of fear for her as she cried out.

But she recognized the touch immediately. Less deft than the dragon's, but just as free of control or compulsion, the raw power flowed into her mind. She sensed Semaj's burning desire to empower her as the dragon had. She sensed his worry about his crew, about his cousin, about his father, cruising helplessly back and forth south of the deadly cinder curtain the fire mountain was throwing up. She felt the fear in Droi's mind, the self-reproach and anger in Trock's, the fading spark in Vonya's, the confusion and excitement in Vil and Mru. In that moment, she was as alive as she ever felt she could be.

She willed Vonya's wounds closed. She saw the woman's entire anatomy in her mind's eye, knew what had been severed, what had been torn or bruised. She reached out with a thousand mental hands, delicately pulling everything back into position. She willed Vonya's repaired heart rate up, constricted the major vessels to drive up blood pressure, willed her metabolism up, raising her body temperature as high as she dared. She was not sure how long it all lasted – Cly said later it seemed like hours but it could not have been more than a quarter of an hour – but she could feel the life returning to Vonya's body. When she felt the stirrings of her captain's thoughts rising toward consciousness, Kara knew.

"She'll live," she whispered to Cly and fell over in a dead faint.

21. SALAMANDERS ARE HANDY, TOO

Cly got them back aboard Semaj before the fire ants plucked up their courage again. The chirpies helped, pulling first Vonya, then Kara into Semaj's salon. Cly brought the royal jelly in last, grimly wondering if the stuff would be worth what they were paying for it. Several fire ant warriors were beginning to approach when he finally pulled in Semaj's boarding ladder, safely out of reach.

Semaj moved away slowly, nearly out of ballast and lift, both. He worked his way around the mountain to the north, slowing as he reached the beach of a small lake so caked over with pumice and debris from the volcano as to be nearly invisible. His approach disturbed clouds of seabirds, nesting here in full view of the volcano against all common sense. Birds were much too formidable for Semaj to eat but they were not for his hivelings. He came to a stop over the rookery and sent out his hivelings to feast and to bring back food for his crop.

Cly was not idle while this was going on. Trusting Semaj to do something reasonable, he first made the women comfortable in the salon, carefully checking their pulses and breathing. Kara seemed fine, just overstressed, which is perhaps not surprising in view of her sudden acquisition of a truly alien magic. Cly wondered about *that*, but his curiosity would wait. But he *did* have one clue to what happened – when he lifted Kara's eyelid to check her pupils, she seemed to have tiny lights spinning in them. But they were *thousands* of miles from any dragon he knew of. How could one have made her a Hand?

Vonya was in very good shape for someone who had clearly suffered at least one fatal wound. Her face was deathly white from the blood loss but her pulse was regular though fast. Her torso showed only four star-shaped scars where the mandibles had entered her body. Cly shook his head in wonder at the location of the second set, stupefied that *anyone* could survive such a wound, her heart had to have been practically *shredded*. Even if they had had another dose of healing elixir, it could not have saved her!

Once he had assured himself that Kara and Vonya were comfortable, he turned his attention to the royal jelly. He acquired some silk sheeting – a good replacement for cloud whale hide – from Kara's supply to make a large container for the pink cream from the columns. Into this he added the contents of Timuron's fire shield, then he tied the bag shut and began to massage the bag to work the powder in thoroughly. The directions stressed that it must be mixed well, so he spent over an hour at the job. The bag began to glow gently as he worked, and when he was done and

peered inside, he saw a smooth, creamy liquid that glowed a bright lemony-yellow. It smelled like the hot metal in the Imrian smith's shop but it was cool to the touch.

Cly knew the cream needed to be applied soon. He had been considering exactly how to deal with it and by the time it was ready he had a plan.

Cly figured he had about twenty five gallons of the stuff but it was far too thick for it to cover all of Semaj, let alone Droi. If it were paint he would simply add thinner but he had no clue what he could add to a magical mixture like this to make it stretch further. Most anything he could think of would probably just break the spell and make the whole batch worthless. But cloud whale riders have a little trick they like to use in their food preparation and the cream seemed to have about the right consistency. Cly measured some of the glowing ointment back into one of the fire ant columns and then whisked it briskly. Soon it had expanded to over five times its normal volume, full of air and able to be spread much further. The air, Cly noted, had not disturbed the spell – that had been a good bet since the instructions had not mentioned taking any special precautions about exposure to air. He divided the mixture into two batches, making another silk bag for the second one. With luck, one for each cloud whale.

Rigging a couple of makeshift spatulas from some packing material, he coached Mru and Vil how to apply the material and sent them out with one bag to paint Semaj. The job took hours, even with the chirpies to help, but at length the entire cloud whale was a light, creamy yellow, glowing softly like some ghostly apparition.

Semaj remained quite still for the procedure, moving only once when his increasing lift required ballast – speedily obtained from the lake once the hivelings had cleared some of the surface. As hoped, more than half of the shield remained once the job was done.

Kourishand Cly thought.

~~*I hear, Tovanista. What is your need?*~~ came the silent reply.

I have applied an alchemical substance to Semaj that will protect him from fire. I hope. Can you test it without burning us out of the sky?

said the magician.

~~*I can,*~~ replied the salamander. In a moment, flames danced along Semaj's starboard sail. They moved outboard and inboard, licking up along his side near a lifter. Wherever they moved, the fire shield turned a bright red, but Semaj never flinched.

~~*I FEEL I COULD BURN THROUGH IT BUT IT WOULD TAKE ALL OF MY POWER TO DO SO, MY BROTHER. NO NORMAL FIRE COULD DO IT, THROUGH,*~~
came Kourishand's report.

Excellent. My thanks, Cly sent.

~~*MY PLEASURE,*~~ replied the elemental and vanished.

Cly thought to himself that he had never *imagined* just how handy a fire elemental could be.

22. HELLDIVER

Their hivering escort reported through Vil there were several bands of marauders to the east and west of the volcano. Cly knew there were no cracks large enough to hide Semaj in the area but he now had a plan to hide Semaj in a place where no one would ever, ever look. Indeed, he thought to himself, where no one *could* ever look. Ancestors help them if any of the other clans *ever* found out what they were about to do. They would leave nothing of clan Khar but the memory of apostasy.

“Tell Semaj to fly to the top of the fire-mountain, Vil,” he told the chirpie. Fortunately, Vil was not smart enough to understand what he was relaying to Semaj. Neither were the hivelings. Only Cly and Semaj, of the conscious beings aboard the cloud whale, knew what a mad thing they were about to attempt.

Semaj summoned all his hivelings back to their nest on board and then headed toward his new goal. They approached the summit of the volcano, leaving the searching bands below, and were soon deep in the smoke. Cly could not see a thing, though he knew Semaj had other senses to navigate. He held his breath as they approached the caldera.

Semaj could not remember such excitement. No cloud whale in history had ever entered a fire mountain; he could hardly believe his good fortune! He congratulated himself on his decision to take a crew. It was proving to be a better adventure than he ever dreamed.

The cinders were too thick to see through but this close to the summit Semaj could sense every stone with his mental faculties. He cruised through the sparks from the caldera, marveling at how they merely bounced off his fine new shield.

Semaj worried about the updraft from the caldera, unsure of his ability to actually enter the volcano but it was not as ferocious as it seemed. It was not the only opening into the interior, other vents bled off a lot of the pressure. He slowed as he reached it, admiring the bright glow within, and then slowly upended himself, majestically performing his famous headstand maneuver. In a moment, he was vertical, and with his wingflukes flew straight down into the volcano. Semaj loved every minute of it.

It seemed a long time to descend into the volcano, though it could not have been so. Cly could feel Semaj working hard to propel himself downward, only his youth, his light rig and – very probably – Kor’s

gangsprings enabled him to fight the updraft. That and a thousand-odd gallons of ballast from the lake.

The throat of the volcano widened as they descended and soon Semaj found himself entering a vast chamber, over a mile across. It was full of heaving lava; waves of it splashed around an interior shore covered with crystals and gems. Here and there were islands projecting above the lava, also shining brightly with crystals and gems. Semaj leveled off, floating just a hundred feet from the molten rock. Cly guessed they were considerably below ground level – probably even below sea level.

Vil and Mru peered about, excited and not the least bit afraid. It was obvious that Semaj was feeling no fear and no pain, the shield must be holding. Cly examined Semaj's sails closely but saw no sign of deterioration in the protection. He knew the foaming he had used to stretch the shield would reduce its effectiveness, though. He could only hope he would have enough warning to get the cloud whale out of here.

Cly recalled his feelings in the smithy at Imri and in the fire ant colony and shook his head ruefully. What ignorance! They were scary places, but there was no doubt in the Magician's mind. . .this. . .this *was* Hell! The real place could not possibly *be* any worse than *this*!

There were several openings around the edge of the shore and a number of connecting passages to further extents of the lava lake. One was easily large enough to take Semaj and, sure enough, he headed for it after a few moments. This cave was even larger than the first and more than half full of lava. The shore was strewn with minerals and gems and crystals, a blinding multi-colored display. In the center of the lake was a large island, with something that looked very much like a castle perched atop it.

Cly was dumbfounded. He had never heard of, nor imagined, that anything might actually *live* in a lava lake beneath an active, seething volcano. As Semaj glided to a halt over the castle, Cly could see it was built of some shiny black material, cut into rough blocks and fitted together with indifferent workmanship. It was surrounded with channels to take the lava back into the lake and Cly could see troughs around the exposed outer surfaces of the castle itself that must be part of the same system. The edifice had an undefinable air of abandonment, as if it had not been tenanted in eons.

On a hunch, Cly had Semaj move to a spot directly over the center of the castle, figuring the obviously cooler island would reduce the amount of radiant heat Semaj was soaking up. Sure enough, it seemed fractionally cooler over the island.

Cly checked Kara and Vonya at regular intervals during this. Vonya regained consciousness as Semaj reached the castle.

"Semaj?" she whispered.

"He's safe," said Cly gently.

"Are. . .we. . .hidden?" she asked with an effort.

"Yes. I guarantee that none of the brigands will find us here," Cly said, truthfully.

"Good, Cly," she said faintly. In a moment her regular breathing told Cly she was asleep again.

It was clear that both women needed rest and time to recover. But he didn't know how much time they had. Cly knew that alone he had no chance to overpower the guards that were surely watching Droï and even if he could, they *must* have been reinforced by now. Kourishand surely could not help with a fight *inside* a cloud whale in spite of his assurance he would not burn Semaj accidentally – the first time his attention wandered to focus on the *combat*, Droï would become an inferno.

He needed a plan – and information. Not for the first or last time, Cly wished he'd studied sorcery. Unsure what he could accomplish by it, he was nevertheless seized with an urge to explore. Surely there must be *something* here that he could turn to their advantage! He removed his clothes and began to apply the fire shield to his own body. He placed his magical gems and the mysterious coin into a small bag and treated that, as well. He did not neglect to rub some in his eyes and even sucked some into his lungs.

Soon he was featureless yellow glow, like some ethereal being. He tied the treated bag to his wrist, and then unlaced Semaj's hatch, sliding himself carefully through it, exposing as little of Semaj's interior to the intense heat outside as possible.

Semaj's ladder was starting to smoke and Cly wiped it down with some of the ointment from his own body. He and the ladder were now a cheerful fiery red, a fitting match for the hellish glow of the lava. Cly padded around on the top of the castle.

The inhabitants continued to be absent. The place was huge, built on an outsize scale. The doors were fifteen feet high, and a stretch for Cly to even reach the knob. The stair treads were a foot and half high. He resisted the urge to explore the structure – the lack of furniture or other equipment showed the beings that had lived here must have taken everything useful with them – and soon found his way down to the entrance. This door was larger and surely heavier than the others but luckily it was standing open.

The northern end of the little island was just twenty yards from the shore. A number of dark cave entrances were visible on the far side. Cly scratched his head – carefully, so as not to disturb the ointment – and considered.

“Kourishand,” he said out loud.

In a moment, a fiery form appeared in mid-air. The mighty salamander reared to his full height, stretching his arms over his horned head, reveling in the room.

“A MOST PLEASANT SPOT, TAVARISH VALTHIZ. ROOMY AND COMFORTABLE,” he said, using Cly’s own secret name.

“I’m glad you like it,” said Cly, dryly. “Make yourself comfortable and let’s talk.” Kourishand sat with one leg curled under him and propped an elbow on the other knee. He nodded gravely.

“We must rescue Droï,” Cly said, “But I confess I have no ideas.”

Kourishand’s fiery eyes narrowed as he thought.

“UNLIKE THIS ONE,” he said, jerking a thumb upward to indicate which one he meant, **“HE YOU WISH TO RESCUE HAS NO FLAME IN HIM. YOU HAVE THE OINTMENT TO PROTECT HIM. WE MUST APPLY IT SOMEHOW, THOUGH THERE BE GUARDS TO CONFOUND US. WE MUST FIGHT, I THINK. I SEE NO OTHER WAY.”**

“How?” Cly asked in a dispirited tone. “With what? Our *one* remaining bone knife? We’re *traders*, not warriors. Could *you* take them all on?”

Kourishand tilted his head to one side, considering, but he, too, had no inspiration.

“NO. I COULD NOT KILL THEM FAST ENOUGH TO PREVENT THEIR KILLING OR WOUNDING YOU, LET ALONE THEIR CAPTIVE CLOUD WHALE.”

“You can’t fight and still control your heat, can you?” Cly asked, hoping his guess was wrong. Kourishand’s answer confirmed what he thought would be the case.

“NOT PERFECTLY, TAVARISH. NOT WELL ENOUGH TO FIGHT WITHIN THE EPHEMERAL CREATURE,” he said. **“IT TAKES ATTENTION TO KEEP FROM BURNING FLAMMABLE THINGS THAT TOUCH ME.”**

Cly decided to reconnoiter the area. The castle stood alone on the basalt island, and the shore had few crystals and no gems. The magician had no idea how long these took to form in the intense heat of the fire mountain interior but since the far shore was strewn with them, he could only assume they had been collected by the vanished occupants of the castle.

Cly tested the efficacy of the shield by dipping his foot into the lava. It was like thick pudding but quite incapable of harm – nor did it stick to

his shield, either. In a few moments he waded across the lava – chest deep in the middle – to the far shore. A *truly* novel experience.

Bemused as he was, he did not miss the opportunity to capture the scene as a recording attached to his *fire* rune – it was the first time he'd found a use for it since he learned it. He pictured an illusion or a seeming of the lava filling a cloud whale – complete with eddies in the lava where he walked that his victim would see! – and shuddered. *That* illusion might be enough to drive someone insane right then and there. Another image of a rock wall glowing red and radiating heat he stored under his *danger* rune – the illusion of falling he *had* stored there was nothing compared with that wall!

Here the ground was thickly covered with mineral incrustations – so many that gem hunting turned out to be quite difficult. The profusion of different kinds of crystals were excellent camouflage for the more valuable rough gems, though he did find three beautiful emeralds of good quality and one gorgeous ruby nearly the size of a walnut. Even raw, the four gems would be worth nearly 10,000 silver shillings, he guessed. But he felt disappointed. There was more here to look at, he decided.

As he explored, Cly kept an eye out for the lay of the land. He quickly discovered a lava tube angling upward that might lead toward Droï and he left off his gem collecting to explore it. Kourishand stayed with him, his mighty wings furled, walking on his knuckles like some huge, fiery gorilla.

The tube narrowed somewhat and angled upward, and after an hour of trudging, Cly reached the surface of the mountain. The tunnel ended in a cave on an exposed flank of the southern face, in full view of the pirate city, though too far away for anyone to see him clearly – though even a vague glimpse might trigger searching parties. This portion of the tube had had all crystals, valuable or not collected – surely by the pirates. Cly examined the view carefully, noting that they were downhill from Droï and further south than he had figured. There were ruins almost directly upslope from where he stood – almost certainly some sort of temple. Humans, at least, seldom built anything else near or on a fire mountain and the ruins were definitely not large enough to have been built by the castle-people. Cly shivered a bit. There must be some sacrificial shaft nearby. There always was for such temples. That might need to be examined, too, he decided.

Cly headed down again when he felt his shield getting cold and stiff – it wouldn't do to have the stuff freeze up or something.

He couldn't find a tunnel going toward Droi. But there was a largish one running almost horizontally from the huge chamber where Semaj floated patiently. The floor was flat and very smooth, almost slippery, and the ceiling was just out of reach overhead. It ran for perhaps fifteen yards before opening up into another large chamber. The roof was not visible, the top of the chamber was shrouded in gloom, but from the vertical walls, Cly guessed it was at least several hundred yards in height, maybe much more. As he looked about, Cly noticed furtive movement out of the corner of his eye, but when he looked he saw nothing. When the same thing happened again a moment later, the Magician grew suspicious.

"Kourishand, do you sense spirits of some sort?" he asked the hulking salamander, sitting comfortably on the obsidian floor.

"~~I do.~~" agreed the elemental. "~~Near the center.~~"

Cly walked toward the center of the chamber and after a moment, Kourishand followed. As he approached, Cly noticed several blackened fragments of something. He picked one up to examine it more closely and again that furtive movement caught at his eye. Sure enough. The magician would not have minded being wrong on this one.

"This is bone," he said, examining the fragment. "Someone has died here."

"~~More than one.~~" Kourishand agreed. "~~I count a dozen ghosts, at least. They are hard to see.~~"

Cly digested that statement grimly, noting without comment the limitations of the salamander's vision and figuring from the number of fragments and ghosts that this must be the killing ground reached from that temple-like structure he had noticed on the surface. He knew himself to be safe from ghosts but both of the women would be in grave danger. This chamber must join up with one of the side vents partway up the side of the volcano. A popular spot for sacrifices; it was a common choice in many primitive cultures. Obviously, one such had once lived on this island. A lot of people had died this way. Some poor – even some wealthy. It never mattered once your feet left the altar.

Why would he think *that* thought? Cly wondered to himself. He'd been feeling distinctly odd, recently. Abnormally impulsive. He was still lost in thought when Kourishand touched his shoulder. "What?"

Kourishand indicated a further passageway with a gesture. "~~I said, there's something glowing over there.~~"

Cly peered in the indicated direction. There *was* a glow – faintly bluish and definitely out of place. Waving to the salamander to request quiet, he padded toward the glow. He reached the passageway and looked

down inside cautiously, exposing as little of himself as possible. His care was needless; the glow was coming from a statue.

But what a curious statue! It was of a running man, poised on one foot, so cleverly carved as to make it look as if his weight had already shifted for the next step. Cly circled around it – and as he came around to the front he recognized it. It was the mysterious knight.

Cly simply could not be surprised. So, the coin didn't really want him to go to Vindolonda after all – it wanted him *here*. Cly shook his head and sighed, and examined the statue more closely.

The Knight was wearing archaic plate mail from head to foot, with the visor of his helmet up revealing craggy features and pale blue eyes which showed whites all around the irises, details that were not visible in the crystal. A short, curly, blond beard decorated his chin. A backpack was slung in the small of his back, revealed by the cunningly-carved traveling cloak billowing out behind the man, so detailed as to have every stain, every fray and rip visible and complete. He was holding a great sword before him, as if running on guard. And he was bathed in a fell blue glow that muted but did not hide the richness of the colors in which he was painted. Around his neck was a gold chain hanging loose with the two ends melted off. Cly scratched his head. "What's the point of the chain?" he wondered. "And whyever would someone put a statue down here?" He asked out loud, "And *why* would a coin geas anyone to come look at a statue?"

Kourishand shook his head. "~~Not a statue, Brother. He is running.~~"

"Running?!" gasped Cly. "You must be joking, he's utterly immobile!"

"~~Not so. He is not moving very fast, but moving he is.~~" the elemental said, squinting at the man as if trying to gauge his speed.

The magician looked again at the running man. It was true he wasn't on a pedestal, had no marker on him, did not stand in a niche or any other indication of deliberate placement and his colors *were* very lifelike. But if he was real then what could ail the man?

Cly tried to recall the Wizard's journal. He was pretty sure the blue glow was very characteristic of temporal distortion spells. The man must be in stasis.

But for how long? Long enough to have at least shifted his body into this running stance. He wondered how long it would take to run away from the circular chamber in stasis. "How fast is he moving, Kourishand?" asked Cly.

~~“Not very fast,”~~ said the salamander, helpfully.

Cly sighed and circled the man again, examining every detail. The why might be obvious, he thought. The man must have been thrown from above, as the unfortunate victims whose ghosts now surrounded them must have been. If that were so, he must be sprinting from his landing place in the round chamber, having survived the impact somehow. So he’s run a distance of about ten to twenty yards. How long did it take to run ten yards when frozen in stasis? Cly didn’t know, nor could he recall from the journal but guessed several thousand years, at least. No wonder his armor and clothes appeared archaic!

The young thaumaturge rubbed his chin with a thoughtful fist as he considered the man. He had no intention of trying any wizardly spells – he understood enough of the journal to know that he didn’t understand anything about wizardry. But he had noticed his nullification spell was very similar to the wizardly one that occupied most of the first entry in the journal. In fact, aside from a slightly faster cadence in the second phrase, and an additional flourish of the right hand during the last, they were virtually identical. Even the words were the same. If the wizard who cast this spell was not that much better at his craft than Cly was at his, if the journeyman wizard had not omitted some vital part of the wizardly nullification spell – and if he moved the man to some place where he would not burst into flames the moment the spell was removed – Cly felt sure he could break the spell and return the man to normal. He did not know if that would be a kindness or not, nor if it would help Khar-Droi or not. Or even themselves, for that matter. But he strongly suspected that that must be what the *coin* wanted.

~~“He was the manner of an experienced fighter,”~~ noted Kourishand, divining Cly’s thoughts. This was surely so. He was carrying a bastard sword nearly four feet long at the ready, had a crossbow slung across his back along with two bandoleers of stubby quarrels. Casually stuck into his wide belt was a wicked-looking knife and a Vinodolondan short sword decorated with gems but showing signs of use along the asymmetrical primary cutting edge. His armor was elaborated with a number of short, sharp spikes and serrated cutting edges, as if intended for use with martial arts. If this man was actually trained to use that stuff as it was obviously meant to be used, he could probably cleave his way through a crowd of armed men as a troll could through defenseless sheep. The ankh on a chain around his neck, a similar sigil on his cloak, and the general air of richness marked him as a prince or paladin, just as Keff had speculated. Cly was of two minds about helping the man. He was, without a doubt, a

ferocious fighter. The whale rider doubted the crew of Khar- Semaj could kill this man if they had to – even with Kourishand to help. Though not tall, he was compactly and powerfully built.

Cly felt sure the man could not be evil – no brigand would have the training to use the things this man carried. And surely no brigand could have killed such a man and taken them. He was not sure *how* he knew these things – but the coin must have had something to do with it. There was no help for it – he needed to release this man from stasis.

“Kourishand, give me a hand moving him, would you?” Cly asked. The two began to move the strange knight back to Semaj. This would have been a formidable challenge were he alone but, as it was, it was comparatively trivial.

Semaj’s boarding ladder proved to be an obstacle, however. Finally, Kourishand picked the knight up bodily and flew with him to the top of the ladder, using wings and powerful legs to propel himself and his burden to the top of the ladder at one go. Cly climbed the opposite side of the ladder, unlaced the hatch and entered, drawing the knight behind while Kourishand remained without and shoved. At length, the knight stood, still in his running pose, in Semaj’s salon. How he managed to stay upright on Semaj’s springy membrane deck, the magician could not guess.

It was only a couple minutes before Cly felt the shield he was wearing beginning to stiffen again. He poked at it, trying to decide what he could do about it, and discovered it could now be peeled off without much effort. On a hunch, he tore it into small pieces and whisked it back into the rest of the shield still in the royal jelly column. It soon dissolved in once again. The stuff would not last forever but at least he wasn’t having to waste any.

Cly checked the two women again. Kara was still out but Vonya was drifting in and out of sleep, mumbling incoherently. The Magician fetched some food and water and fed her a bit at a time until she settled down again. She was feverish to the touch, flushed, but the terrible wounds that should have been fatal were fading away. She was burning up her own physical reserves, but she was healing.

Once the women had been attended to, Cly got the wizard’s journal from his personal effects and reviewed the wizardly nullification spell. It was, as he recalled, a trivial variation of his own – not really that big a surprise, as nullification was quite a common operation. He knew his spell even worked for sorcery, so it was not all that surprising that it, or some trivial variation on it, should work for at least some wizardry. In

fact, he recalled it had worked on the defensive spells of the slain wizard on that abandoned ship with no modifications at all.

The thaumateurge stood in the salon regarding the strange knight for some time, his mind awirl with thoughts. How had he come here? What mission was he on? What strange order did he come from, and would he be able to handle the terrible shock of finding himself in his far distant future? Indeed, could he even talk with the man at all? What connected him with the coin? Cly pursed his lips. There were a thousand reasons to proceed with care and only one not to. They needed help and somehow this man was provided. The gods had left him, there was no question. A pleasant surprise? Or one of their little jokes? The magician knew he had no choice. Something told him he had no choice at all. Without giving himself more time to think, he cast the spell that would free the strange knight.

“*Mel cancelli Disruptas - Dag!*”

23. THE PROPHECY FULFILLED

Cly had to give the man his due. The spell faded instantly and the knight resumed his headlong flight but stopped himself within two paces. His wide eyes stared around the room, and he continued to hold his sword at the ready.

The Magician nodded and smiled at the man. “VELCOME,” he said in Tradetalk. This pidgin form of Assuran was the most widespread language that had any chance of being old enough for the man that Cly could think of aside from fairy languages he probably had never even heard of. “VELCOME ON KHAR CLOUD VALE SEMAJ, A LIGHT TRANZPORT FROM OUR CLOUD HOME AT MOUNT SHORMA.” It didn’t matter what he said, anyway, the Magician thought. Just so he got across to the knight that he was not being threatened.

The knight’s eyes narrowed, though the whites were still visible all around the irises, giving him a slightly mad look that began to worry Cly. For no discernible reason, the Magician was reminded of the golden disk with the gnome sign on it. He started to reach for the pouch when the man replied.

“I DON’T HOLD WITH THAT YRGOT, LAD. I’M NOT BUYING ANYTHING TODAY,” he announced in beautiful patrician tones in fluent High Elven. Cly was stunned into silence. The knight stood at ease as he watched the Journeyman magician digest this, dropping the point of his sword but not sheathing it.

Cly pulled himself together. “YOU ARE CLEARLY AN EDUCATED MAN,” he said, in the same language – one that most magicians know, and one that hasn’t changed since time immemorial. “I HADN’T EVEN THOUGHT TO TRY THE ELDER TONGUE.”

“I’VE BEEN YRGOUND,” the knight replied. “SO I’M YRGOUND...KHAR-SEMAJ. A CLOUD WHILE, OBVIOUSLY, THOUGH I DON’T RECOGNIZE THE CLAN. YOUR CLOUDHOME IS MT. SHORMA? THAT WOULDN’T BE THE SHO’ORMA AT TIMARK, WOULD IT?” Cly was startled.

“WHY YES, THOUGH I EXPECT FEW WOULD RECOGNIZE THE NAME, NOW. HOW DID YOU GUESS?” he asked.

The knight grinned, setting the point of his sword on the top of his right boot to protect Semaj’s soft deck and letting his hand sit lightly on the pommel. “‘SHO’ORMA’ IS ELVISH SLANG. ITS’ EXACT MEANING VARIES A BIT, BUT IT’S USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH PLACES OVERRUN WITH HUMANS. KING MJADOR OF HILLENDY HAS BEEN TRYING TO ANNEX TIMARK SINCE BEFORE MY FATHER TOOK THE THRONE.”

"I'VE HEARD OF HALLENDY — IN THE EAST OF VINDOLONIA? BUT NEVER OF A KING MJDOR — NO ONE NOW LAYS CLAIM TO SHORMIA. THRONE? YOU ARE OF ROYAL BLOOD, THEN?" Cly pressed.

"FORGIVE ME MY LADSE IN MANNERS, LAD," RETURNED THE KNIGHT. "I AM VALKENHAYN OF CAERLEON IN THE KINGDOM OF KRITHALA, KNIGHT AND PHILADIN OF ISHTA. AND YOU?"

"Cly Khar-Semaj," said Cly automatically — and then blinked. "OF . . . CAERLEON? IN KRITHALA?" he asked, stunned.

"YES, 'TIS A LOVELY PLACE, YOU SHOULD VISIT IT SOMETIME," Valkenhayn replied in a slightly sarcastic tone.

"I'd love to, once you kill the dragon," Cly said, dizzily, dropping back into Assuran, the Imrian language and the one Khar clan used itself. "Caerleon was wasted by Evenshade more than two millennia ago! He sleeps still, upon Caerleon's royal treasure, in the great hall itself — awaiting. . . awaiting. . . by the grounder's Gods!" He swayed and dropped onto Semaj's springy membrane floor. "By the Ancestors and the Elements!"

"You can let me in on this any time," said the knight testily — in clipped but quite recognizable Assuran. "Two millennia ago? What year is it?"

"4553rd year of Imri. I should've *known*! I should've *guessed*!" Cly said, shaking his head.

"Let's back up just a teeny bit and take this from the top," suggested the Knight with a steely glint in his eye. "You say it's the 4553rd year of Imri? That's. . . erm. . . three-thousandth-and-change century of the Hippogriff by the fairy calendar?"

Cly nodded, "I'm not sure of the exact date but that's about right."

"And you seem to imply that the Obsidian Dragon has taken Krithala?" asked the Knight.

Cly nodded again, "Evenshade — ah! You shouldn't say the name yourself?" The Knight nodded grimly.

"All right," said the Knight. "About two thousand years have passed, then?"

"Close enough," Cly said. "As I remember the legend, the dragon Evenshade came from out of the uttermost west seeking gold and slaves and found both in Caerleon. A great battle was fought but it was a doomed effort for the empire. The dragon was at the height of its powers and commanded a vast army of the creatures of darkness. But Korin of Caerleon went into battle anyway. He would have been...?"

"My father," agreed the knight, absently.

"He was slain in personal combat with the wyrm," Cly went on.

"That's Dad. He was always the overachiever type," noted the knight.

"The dragon took the Great Keep that day. When came night, the womenfolk collected the fallen. Your father was still alive, though both his legs were frozen solid by the monster's frigid breath. Just before he died, he swore Caerleon would live again and vengeance on the dragon. He said, a prince of Caerleon would come from fire and end the life of the icy wyrm. Then he died, with a name on his lips that no one could catch." Cly concluded.

"My name, I expect. I was probably the only one not there. You see, I knew what *really* brought that dragon. It wasn't gold. It wasn't slaves. It was *commanded* to come."

"Commanded?" gasped Cly. "Who could command a dragon?"

"Humph. Who, indeed? If I knew that, I'd be sleeping in my own bed in the west tower, not riddling a skyjammer about my family's dirty laundry. I tracked one of his agents here – a wizard. I felt sure my quarry was on this island – too many of the world's troubles led to Kenekra."

"Kenekra!" whispered Cly. "The Lost City! That makes sense! Sea-Reaver's old base! The biggest slave market in the world! So *this* is where it is!"

Valkenhayn nodded. "I see the place is still living up to its reputation. It was certainly the base for the plot against my father and the throne. This wizard got the drop on me, spelled me and apparently dropped me into the volcano."

"Of course!" Cly said. "You were already enspelled when you fell – but the fall couldn't hurt you through the spell. Any shock or impact would take centuries to register. The spell would have held you stiff, protected your bones and flesh."

"Just so. I'd bet that word got back to my father about what happened to me. Dad was a minor wizard himself and he had access to some of the best sorcerers. And I know how word must have gotten to him, too," Valkenhayn grinned. "So there's your prophesy. Awaiting only your little nudge. So, here I am – thousands of years out of time – with only myself and my sword to defeat a freeze Drake of legendary proportions who's been ensconced in the family lucre long enough to get ugly about whether or not it can keep it. Sound about right?" said the knight, mildly.

"Um. Yeah, I'd guess that's a good summary," Cly said, shaking his head. "I guess it isn't going to be fun living up to *that* legend."

"Hey, living legends is what paladins are all about, kid. It goes with the territory. But this isn't *my* story and I'm owing you for breaking the spell. So what's your problem? And how does it bring you to a volcano,

of all things, being as you're so fond of travel on the most inflammable beast I've ever heard of?"

"Ah. Well," Cly said, imitating the man's talent for quick summaries, "One of our cloud whales has been skyjacked by a bunch of pirates for nefarious reasons and has been hangared in a canyon at the base of this fire mountain. We were the closest to him, came at his call, raiding a fire ant hill along the way, stole all their royal jelly, used it and some borrowed magic to create an alchemical fire shield to protect ourselves from the volcano, and hid our own whale inside the caldera."

"Quick thinking," commented the knight. "Insane. But quick."

Cly grinned and continued, "Unfortunately, all I've got for help is myself, two women both wounded from the fire ant encounter, two chirpies, who can't really leave the cloud whale, and the cloud whale himself, who is, by the way, probably quite mad," summarized Cly.

"So, we need to rescue the other cloud whale, deal with the pirates based in a city that has never fallen, and escape from the inside of a volcano aboard an insane cloud whale, *before* I can realistically try to tackle the freezedrake?" asked Valkenhayn. "Ha! Piece of cake!"

"Do you really think so?" asked Cly, surprised even more.

"Nah. We're sunk," replied the knight philosophically. "But today is as good a day as any to die, lad."

"Not a pleasant thought, Sir Valkenhayn."

"Nope. Never is. So, how did you find me?"

"Well," Cly said, fingering the disk, "We're hiding from the pirates on this island. It seemed the best place to do it. I found you when I reconnoitered the...area..." He closed his eyes, confused for a moment, suddenly overwhelmed with a desire to hand the disk to the knight. Unable to stop himself, he did so.

As the disk left his hand, Cly's mind suddenly cleared. In a trice he was nearly overwhelmed with his recollection of recent history. What could have *possessed* him to hide *inside the fire mountain*? Why had he been so impulsive of late? What had *happened* to him? And he answered himself – he had been geased by the coin. And now, it appeared, he has discharged that geas.

Valkenhayn looked sadly at the disk, which Cly saw now was of bright burnished gold, covered with delicate runes. No worn coin, this, but a glowing and brilliant piece of art, and clearly loaded with magical power.

"What is it?" Cly breathed. "What did it do to me?"

“It’s a piece of the Crown of Krithala, lad. And it brought you here to fulfill the prophesy. As it must’ve been trying to do for lo these many centuries.”

24. THE PRINCE OF CAERLEON'S PLAN

"Okay," said Valkenhayn, sliding his massive sword into his back scabbard with a single motion. "Let's see the ladies." He moved toward the living area visible from the salon, tucking the piece of the crown into his belt, and pausing to remove his metallic boots without prompting from Cly.

The magician followed, watching the man, fascinated. Here was a recovery he could scarcely imagine. Almost as if the man *expected* to have leaped forward thousands of years. There was no resentment, no astonishment in his manner. He was utterly matter-of-fact. And he was clearly used to life aboard cloud whales, too.

"Have you spent much time aboard cloud whales, Sir Valkenhayn?" Cly asked.

"I've been on a few. Zer-Tulew brought me here. And you can stick with 'Val', laddie. A man gets tired of having to listen to all those wasted syllables," the man replied as he knelt by Vonya.

"Clan Zer was exterminated more than a thousand years ago in a massive cloud war involving all the surviving clans," Cly said.

"You'll have to tell me all about it," Valkenhayn said absently as he gently examined Vonya. His fingertips lightly brushed her wounds and he pursed his lips, his eyes even wider than normal giving him a distinctly unbalanced look. But he didn't start raving, though Cly wasn't sure if that was good or bad. In a moment he had finished and then commenced again with the same gentle touch with Kara.

"She's a-burnin' with fever, lad," he said, nodding toward Vonya. "Need to take it down. Right now," he added in a professional tone. Shrugging his backpack off one shoulder, he swung it round and rooted about within for a moment, finally emerging with a little metal tube and some herbs in a white paper. "I hope these are still good," he said with a twinkle. "The other lady is simply exhausted and needs a restorative. Can you make a tea from this?" he asked, handing the paper to Cly.

"Tea?" the cloud whale rider asked blankly.

"Dissolve the powder in hot water," Val said.

"Hot water?" sputtered the magician. "Where am I going to get *hot* water aboard a cloud. . . wait a minute."

Cly left the knight without another word, and bounced aft to one Se-maj's ballast bladders and tapped it for a bit of water.

Kourishand, he thought.

~~Yavaniscu?~~ came the reply.

Make the water hot, please. And please don't burn us out of the sky. he replied.

A fiery circle appeared in mid air and a huge hand extended from it in a cloud of brimstone, reaching to the cup. The salamander stuck a single finger into the cup for a moment and Cly felt the light bone cup grow hotter. In a moment, the disembodied hand retracted into midair again, vanishing without trace, leaving the cup of water just cool enough for the magician to hold it. Cly swirled the powder in as he returned to the salon, noting that the heat did seem to make it dissolve more easily.

He returned to find the knight had smeared some type of healing salve on Vonya's wounds and had pulled a flask from his well-equipped backpack. As Vonya stirred at his ministrations, he slowly dribbled the contents of the flask into her mouth. Obviously magical, the wounds, already fading from the salve, slowly vanished away completely. Vonya woke with a start.

"What!? Where are we? Who are *you*? What happened? Where're the fire ants? Where's Cly? Where's Kara? What's *happening* here?" she caught sight of Cly over the knight's shoulder and stopped for a moment.

Cly said, "On Semaj. He's Sir Valkenhayn of Caerleon. You were attacked by the fire ants, but Kara saved you with some new kind of magic. They are still in their hill as far as I know. I'm right here. She's right there. We're trying to heal you up so you can help us save Khar-Droi."

"Of. . .*Caerleon*? New. . .magic?" Vonya echoed, looking from one man to the other. With a bewildered frown, she hiked herself to a sitting position and then stood with the aid of one of those convenient glass struts. "Cly *what* is going on? Where *are* we?"

Valkenhayn grinned, losing, if only for a moment, his slightly mad expression, and said, "Bring her up to date, lad. I'll take care of the other lady." Taking the tea from Cly he sniffed at it, nodded approval to the magician and began massaging Kara with one hand while he poised the cup to her lips. Vonya looked askance at this but the journeyman pulled her aside.

"He's Valkenhayn, Prince of Caerleon, I found him in a sacrificial area in the fire mountain, protected by a wizardly spell. He's going to help us."

"Caerleon? A *Prince*? You found him *in*...what? *Inside* the fire mountain?" asked Vonya in disbelief.

"Well, yes," agreed Cly. "I used the fire shield I made from the farj. It works perfectly. And I. . .uh. . .didn't have far to go. . .mmm. . .because Semaj is. . .uh. . .well, sort of. . .*inside* the fire mountain, too. I've painted

his entire outer hull with fire shield! He's hovering over the lava lake in the center of the caldera now and. . .oops." Cly broke off as Vonya's eye-lids fluttered and he eased her down. "Put your head down between your knees. That'll help."

"Cly, why are we inside a fire mountain?" came Vonya's somewhat muffled question.

"Well, I knew the pirates wouldn't look in the central caldera to find us," he said, brightly.

"Uh-huh," Vonya replied.

At that moment, Kara sighed, and Cly saw the knight had managed to get all the tea into her and it seemed to be rebuilding her tired body with remarkable speed. The magician blessed the knight's foresight in packing some scorched useful magic along.

Kara looked up at Val without any great surprise, which surprised both men.

"Thank you, Sir Valkenhayn. I'm doing much better now," she said, pulling herself into a seated position. She massaged her temples with her hands.

"I'm pleased m'lady," the knight replied politely. "How can you know my name? You didn't seem to be listening earlier."

"Your name? I don't know. I just know it. Cly, the pirate's sorcerer is telling them the cinder curtain will fall before the suns glow again. They are going to put a crew aboard Droi this evening," she announced.

"Blazes!" Cly cursed. "How can you know this?" But Kara just shook her head.

The journeyman magician looked long and searchingly at his friend. Something was drastically different here but he had no idea what. Clearly her new magic was telling her these things. Somehow she must have picked up some kind of sorcery. No, he corrected himself. Sorcery would not have cured Vonya, not directly. Sorcery was an informational magic.

Cly mightily wished he had Keff's magical aspect-detecting palantir for just a minute. He closed his eyes for a moment.

Kourishand, are there other elementals, here? Did she kindle the power?

~~*I SENSE NONE, MY BROTHER. BUT NEITHER AM I SURE I WOULD.~~
~~WHAT SORT OF ELEMENTAL?~~* the salamander asked.

Cly suddenly realized he *did* know!

An efreet, Kour. A lightning elemental, he thought.

~~*NO, MY BROTHER, I SENSE NONE OF THOSE NEAR,*~~ replied his fiery comrade.

Cly opened his eyes to find Kara looking at him curiously.

"Who are you talking to, Cly? What's an efreet?"

She's reading my mind, thought Cly with an icy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"What do you mean? How could I. . . your lips didn't move," Kara said, her eyes widening. "I. . . I *can* sense what you are thinking. What you *all* are thinking. What *Ship Smasher* is – oh, Cly!" she suddenly buried her face in her hands.

Cly rushed forward, crouching by her and holding her shoulders with one arm. "Kara, don't panic. We will deal with this." She nodded, still covering her face.

Valkenhayn said, "I take it this is a new thing? Yes, I can see it is. Curious. Who is this Ship Smasher fellow and what else does his pet sorcerer tell him?"

Kara shrugged. "They are coming. I can't get too many details, it's like listening to hundreds of voices and catching just a few words here and there. Droï is terrified, he wants to go home. Semaj is counseling patience and Paschalon is vowing he will suicide into the city if either Droï or Semaj is harmed." Valkenhayn lifted an eyebrow at that.

Cly digested this statement for a moment.

"We need to explore this some more but however Kara got this information, one thing is clear, we don't have time to fool around. We must find Droï, cover him with fire shield, and get away. And we have to do it now," he said.

"They are certainly pushing things," agreed the knight. He asked Kara "How many guarding Droï?"

"Seven," she said, looking up.

"Are they experienced fighters? Can you tell?" he asked.

Kara shook her head. "They are very confident. But I've no idea if that's justified.

"We'll have to assume it is," Val said. "How much time to cover the whale with the shield?" he shot to Cly.

"About two hours," he responded. "He's smaller than Semaj."

"How soon can we leave after that?" the knight asked next.

"Hmm. . . hard to say. I figure perhaps an hour all told to get Droï out of the hangar and get him away from ground fire."

"Assuming the fight with the guards takes no time at all, that will leave us with him half out when Ship Smasher and his crew of merry cut-throats arrive, yes?" the knight asked Kara.

"Yes," she said. "That's about right."

"Keen," the knight said. "We need a diversion. Something that will turn their attention toward the city, away from the mountain. Do you have any offensive magic?" he asked.

"I have a salamander," Cly said, "But no other major spells of offense."

"Probably not enough, even if he's prepared to sacrifice himself," the knight mused half to himself.

Cly thought furiously, unconsciously patting the various items he carried until his hand touched the bag of enspelled gems. "Would a loud boom help? I have some magic gems, I don't know what's in them, but we could just implode them."

"It might, at that. Need to be a pretty big bang, though, to attract their attention when they're already headed this way," the knight mused.

"Perhaps we could use the salamander to drop the stones on them from the air?" asked Vonya.

"That would just alert them to our presence," Val said. "We need something that will make them change their plans to take Droï out. Something that will make them want to return to the city. Could we use the explosion to...? Yes! Perhaps your Paschalon had the right idea after all! Can we find a lava tube heading that way? Maybe use the explosion to open it and let lava pour down near the city?"

Cly tried to recall the layout. "I don't think so. There is an arm of the sea between the mountain and the city. The lava would just pour into that."

Valkenhayn smiled a nasty smile. "Or we *could* use the gems to open a channel and let the *sea* pour into a *lava* chamber."

Cly thought for a moment and then nodded.

"That will look like a new vent from the city. Big, impressive explosion, lots of smoke and steam. . .and they'll need to prepare for a potential lava flow. Sandbagging and so on." Valkenhayn rubbed his stubbly jaw reflectively.

"Just so," he agreed. "The trick is to make the new vent *look* as threatening as possible – these people have been living near this volcano for generations, it would have to be a very impressive plume for it to demand they turn aside from whatever Ship Smasher has planned."

"It can't possibly work!" Vonya said. "I mean, Kara said they had a sorcerer! Surely he will sense what is going to happen. If he sees an explosion or a plume or whatever, he'll look for the cause and find us!" But Cly shook his head.

“No. Val is right. Magic cannot easily penetrate stone. He’d have to cast special spells to sense us behind all the stone of the mountain. And we can do the whole job from *inside* the mountain! Even their sorcerer won’t have a clue what’s happening unless he thinks to try to penetrate the stone around us and he never will! If he tries precognition he will just sense some impending threat. He won’t sense us *inside* the mountain because of the stone, and he’ll just assume the mountain itself is sprouting a new fissure! How could he *possibly* imagine an *attack* coming from *here?!*”

25. A BIT OF A DIVERSION

Cly and Valkenhayn perched on the side of a narrow ledge, gazing down into a hellish inferno of flowing lava just a dozen feet below them. Both were glowing a fell crimson from the fire shield that enveloped them. Valkenhayn squinted as he peered in the direction of the flow.

"This looks good. If my calculations are right, the ocean inlet should be about two or three hundred feet above this. Judging by the shape of this crack, some nice cold water should be enough to pry the walls apart going that way, straight for the city, or close enough to make no difference." But Cly shook his head.

"We haven't enough gems to break that much rock, Val. We need to find a spot nearer the surface." He was exhausted. They had been searching for nearly an hour of precious time but the underworld here was a maze of crisscrossing layers of rock. Only one spot was near enough to the surface that Cly figured the imploding gems might have a fighting chance to break through but not only did the nearest cracks not lead toward the city, the spot was also too high above the inlet so no water could flow in. The resulting explosion just would not serve but given their time pressure, it might be all the diversion they were going to get. But Valkenhayn seemed unimpressed.

The knight counted minutes, knowing the time pressure they were under and knowing Cly favored the other location. But this would give the lava a nearly straight shot for the city. If only they could channel the implosion, to magnify the effectiveness somehow.

"Magician, riddle me this. How can we channel the power in the gems to blast the most rock?"

Cly rubbed his forehead – carefully, so as not to thin the fireshield that was all that stood between him and a fiery end. But it didn't help him come up with a solution.

"I don't know, Val. Thaumaturges don't deal in that kind of thing. Maybe if we could embed the gems in the matrix of the rock but I can't for the life of me think of a way to do that. A wizard could phase them through, or teleport them. Master Bosrin could alter reality in a way that would let us find a shaft. I can't think of any other way," he concluded, shaking his head.

"Do we have any acid or something that might let us melt in?" Valkenhayn asked, examining the surface of the rock as if he could find something he already knew wasn't there.

Cly thought a moment, and then reached his mind out to Kourishand. *Brother? Could you melt your way through solid rock about a hundred yards?*

The thaumateurge could almost feel the salamander shake its head. *IT'S NOT SO MUCH A MATTER OF MELTING IT, BROTHER. I HAVE POWER AND TO SPARE FOR THAT. BUT I COULD NOT FIND MY WAY IN SOLID ROCK. I AM NO GNOME. I WOULD BE LOST IN THE FIRST COUPLE OF FEET!*

Definitely work for a gnome, Cly thought to himself. Then did a mental-double take. The wizard's journal started with the creation of a *gnome* – and had a lot of earth elemental magic. Now, how did that spell go, again? Invocation to the elements, a binding, then a name, wasn't it? The magician sighed. No name. Yes, name! Cly's eyes widened.

“Val, that bit of the crown that dragged us here. Let me see it again.”

Valkenhayn's expression was unreadable but he produced the coin without comment.

The device was positively covered with tiny, finely incised runes. But the jewel was still obvious and so was the earth elemental runes that Yothar had pointed out to him. There it was. A name. *Gragar*. Without a doubt, this coin could summon him.

“Val, can you work this? Can you invoke the crown?” he asked excitedly but his shoulders sagged when Valkenhayn shook his head.

“Nay, Magician. If the crown were whole, yes, without a doubt but just a fragment?” He sighed. “No. The crown may never serve my family again.”

“The crown, maybe not,” Cly agreed. “But Gragar might.”

“Maybe. A *gnome* *could* be very useful. Can *you* summon him?” Valkenhayn asked.

“I don't know. Maybe. I'm going to try,” the journeyman said.

It wasn't easy. He scratched out a summoning circle and first tried the spell on Kourishand, who reported no effects whatsoever the first time he tried. But the second time, he felt a distinct tug, a momentary dizziness that could only be a failed summoning. Cly calculated and recalculated his formulas while the knight waited impassively, quietly ticking off the minutes in his mind while the magician worked out his new spell. The fiery light made it very difficult to see the ghostly controls of light that appeared when he started up the circle.

The fire shield hid any expression in Cly's face but the knight could see he was tiring. Suddenly, a blast of fire erupted from the circle and a

manlike form of pure fire leaped forth with a triumphant roar. Leaped *out* of the circle.

"It is not closed, Yevanisen."

The Magician re-scratched the indicated spot and wasted no more time, recasting the spell using Gragar as the focus – but it failed with only the merest hint that contact had been made. Cly tried again, this time using the coin as a locus designator instead of the summoning circle, and leaving off the compulsives. He was now too tired to confine or dominate the gnome if it felt belligerent. All he could do was hope that Gragar would be feeling cooperative.

Cly cast the spell once more and this time everything seemed to work. Feeling nauseated with fatigue, he waited, watching for the gnome to appear, as did Kourishand and Valkenhayn. But after a long moment the Magician was overcome with bitter disappointment. With no hint of why the spell failed and tired to the point of being weak-kneed, Cly cursed to himself and tried to think of what to try next. Then, a flicker of motion caught his eye.

The glowing red rock before him rippled, as if it were mere fabric between him and some powerfully muscled creature. It froze for a moment, then seemed to flow into shape, cresting in the center to form a nose, dimpling to form eyes, a face suddenly peered at him from the rock, seemingly carved, but moving like some living thing. The face moved forward, lifting up and out of the rock into a manlike body, it towered over them all, even Kourishand. It flexed its lumpy, powerfully muscled arms, then looked down at the threesome. The fact that the rock he was composed of was glowing red with heat did not hurt the effect, either. A low rumble like the sounds of boulders grating on each other filled the air.

"WHO SUMMONS GRAGAR OF CAERLEON?"

It spoke in Assuran, one of the languages used in Krithala as well as Imri, but it was slow, and sounded heavy, grinding and hollow. Valkenhayn stepped forward to confront the monster.

"This magician summoned you at my behest. Look on me, Gragar. See in my face who I am."

The gnome leaned down to peer at the strangely glowing apparition that addressed him, squinting at Valkenhayn's face. He nodded.

"Yes," he rumbled. **"A SON OF CAERLEON. WHY HAVE YOU SUMMONED ME, VALKENHAYN, CAERLEON PRINCE?"**

Valkenhayn smiled as he hefted the bag of gems.

"We just need a bit of porter work done."

26. JAILBREAK

Valkenhayn peered around the boulder and quickly pulled back, jostling Vonya as he did so. A rather pleasant experience, he noted without losing his tactical train of thought.

“Are we there yet?” she whispered into his ear. He nodded.

“Yes,” he whispered back. He continued his count of minutes. “Give it another few moments, M’Lady. Gragar will be setting the gems off just about. . .now.” Seconds later came a rumble in the distance. Valkenhayn nodded, grinning, whites showing all around his eyes. He looked toward Kara. Her head was cocked as she listened to something her ears would never hear.

It took some time – several minutes – before her eyes focused on Valkenhayn. She nodded slowly.

“Right,” the knight said, unsheathing his greatsword in a single motion. He tested the edge with his thumb, opening once again a tiny old scar. He wiped the blood on the shining blade. “More to come.” he whispered to it. He closed his eyes in prayer for a moment and then leaped from concealment with a blood-curdling war whoop and charged for Droï’s gangplank.

Vonya followed right behind, with Kara trailing uncertainly after. Cly was in no shape to fight and Kara was clearly too bemused by her strange new powers. It was her and the Mad Knight against the seven pirates holding Droï. This would be no picnic.

And indeed, it was not. The two guards at the gangplank gaped at the charging knight, fumbling at their weapons as he arrived. The knight leaped high to drive a spiked knee into one while slicing at the other with his wicked-looking sword. One pirate went down, blood gurgling from a sword slice in his rib cage big enough to put a fist in, the other doubled over the spiked knee and then flew off the gangplank as Valkenhayn stopped himself, grabbing a strut with his free hand. In a trice he was up the plank, bellowing his claim of two more souls to his Goddess and promising more. Vonya, taken much aback and horrified at the speed of the fight, vaulted the bleeding pirate and followed as quickly as she could.

Two more pirates were already down in Droï’s salon, one clutching his protruding entrails, the other doing little since he had recently been separated from his head. But the remaining three pirates, now thoroughly warned, were surrounding the battling warrior. Valkenhayn, in order to fight effectively, needed to have something firmer than a cloud whale’s bouncy membrane floors under him and so was forced to stay near Droï’s ventral struts and gangways, which were well away from any walls. Agile

and speedy as he was, he was now fighting savagely on three fronts and not having such an easy time of it. Worse yet, his fierce kicks, normally such an effective part of his wild dervish fighting style, were having little effect on the pirates, who were moving easily over Droï's springy deck. In a flash, Vonya realized that, in their tedious guard duty, they must have discovered how to play trampoline aboard the cloud whale since he was hangared here. They had already learned that *springy* did not mean *fragile* – they bounded in at the knight, slashed at him, and bounded back out again before even Valkenhayn could strike at them.

Vonya quickly put her own skylegs to work, bounding aside from the gangplank she bounced up and off a wall – a trick she doubted the the pirates had learned – catching one of the pirates on her dagger as he tried once again for the Vindolondan. It was a nasty, slashing, bloody wound across the man's arm but it didn't catch any tendons. They both landed in a heap and the pirate caught Vonya in a steely grip, trying to fend off her dagger but unable to bring his longer cutlass to bear in such close quarters.

Valkenhayn caught all of this out of the corner of his eye and abruptly switched tactics on the remaining pair. Leaping from his firm platform and kicking his boots off in midair, he rebounded from just aft of the skull, flying over a pirate and hacking down at him, scoring a nasty head wound that would certainly impair his vision. He landed at the ready, facing the last pirate with an unsettling look of joy in his face.

The pirate, no fool he, backed away on guard but couldn't reach the gangway without either passing the knight or trying to wade through the wrestling match. His eyes darted back and forth as he tried to figure out which way to run. Then he quietly closed his eyes and folded to the floor. Valkenhayn watched this performance in some consternation, but didn't drop his guard. Shooting a glance at the wounded pirate behind him, the knight saw that he, too, had mysteriously fainted. So, it appeared, had Vonya's opponent, who was now lying inert on top of her. She shoved him off, sat up and took in the scene.

Vonya and Valkenhayn's gazes met, and as one they turned to the hatchway, where Kara stood, swaying slightly, looking from one to the other.

"That's a handy trick, M'Lady," said the knight.

"I just invented it," she replied. And then she slumped to the floor as well, joining the sleeping pirates.

"Be a better one if you didn't have to nap afterward," added Valkenhayn as he sheathed his sword. He paused as a faint tremor managed to

make its way though Droï's resilient structure. Nodding to Vonya, they both turned to tying the pirates and tossing them out of Droï's hatch to the trembling stone floor, where their slain comrades shortly joined them.

Cly found Trock tied and unconscious in a storage cubby aft of Droï's major heart. She had been cruelly beaten, apparently trying to avoid something much worse. Valkenhayn, with the help of Cly's handy elemental, produced more of his rejuvenating tea and the two left Vonya to get it into Droï's pilot captain, while they moved to their supply of fire shield and set to painting Droï's not inconsiderable outer hull. Once Vonya was satisfied that Trock was comfortable, she, too, fell to work. Before Droï was half covered, Kara had recovered from her faint as well, and had carried out an inspection of Droï's condition.

Droï had fared relatively well, he had no crippling injuries, though he was badly torn, bruised and in pain from the pirates' hard, inexperienced use of him. But it was the King that broke her heart.

He was still alive, but only just. He had crawled back into the hive, where the Queen stood over him protectively, though she let Kara minister to him, still unable to process the idea that humans could be dangerous.

Kara had to amputate his right foreleg, and do a bowel resection, removing part of the liver and the entire spleen, as well as rebuild the foremost diaphragm in the complex Hiveling respiration system, operations she had only watched heretofore. She bound him up, and then bundled him in furs and spare cloth and tucked him underneath the Queen to keep him warm in case he should go into shock. She thought he had a fair chance of surviving, but he would always be badly maimed. She prayed to her Ancestors that he live – for if he did not, neither would Droï. A cloud whale with a dead hive is a flying corpse, with no hope of avoiding the inevitable.

Once she had taken care of the King, Kara took up a spatula as well. All four of them worked feverishly to get Droï's thin hide protected from the cinder-laden ash cloud he must pass through to win his freedom.

Kara was still more than a little bit bemused by her new powers and not at all certain what they were or how they must be controlled, but she quickly learned how to suppress the mental clamor and to pick out occasional details. Shortly after joining the workers, she was able to report that the diversion seemed to be successful. A crack of considerable size was slowly snaking its way in the general direction of Kenekra, leaving behind a most impressive plume of roiling smoke and the pirates had, indeed, pulled back to the city to prepare to deal with lava flows. Though Kara

could sense their minds and, to some degree, their intentions and emotions, and could guess at their physical location, she could not actually see them. Their concern was growing.

27. ESCAPE FROM THE FIRE MOUNTAIN

Semaj slowly came to the realization that he was growing uncomfortable. There was no doubt about it, he thought to himself – he was getting hot. The fire shield had limits after all.

The young cloud whale kept this information from his vetengineer – they were very close to being ready to spirit Droi away and he had no intention of alarming his Youngest Companions and perhaps spook them into leaving Droi when they were so close to winning freedom for everyone. Paschalon, Semaj's father, concurred with this in their short and intermittent mental communications, which were now possible though only at the most extreme range. Dimly through Old Pa's eyes, Semaj saw the fiery mountain blasting smoke and cinders in a vast plume that curtained the entire island. There was still no breeze – but Paschalon predicted the weather would change shortly and in such matters he was very, very seldom wrong.

Kara seemed to be in a trance. She clung near Droi's rear dorsal sail, a spatula dripping with the glowing fire shield ointment forgotten in her hand. Cly watched her for a moment, then carefully worked his way toward her. She did not move.

"Kara," he called gently as he approached. There was no response. Alarms went off in the back of Cly's mind as he looked into her blank face. "Kara!" he said again, touching her shoulder. Suddenly the vet focused on him.

"Cly," she said quietly. "We need to leave as soon as we can."

"Why?" asked Cly carefully. "The pirates are busy, and undue haste might damage one or both of the cloud whales."

"The pirates are beginning to evacuate the town," she breathed quietly. "The crack goes too deep, Cly. It's opened some fault line miles down and a new fissure is heading for the sea. The sorcerer says the city is doomed – and perhaps the whole island, too!"

As the full import of her words sank into both of them, Kara suddenly redoubled her efforts to cover Droi while Cly moved aft looking for Vonya and Valkenhayn.

"Von! Val!" he called as he came into sight of the two of them just finishing up Droi's starboard sails. They looked up at his call.

"We have to get out of here! Kara says the sorcerer believes our diversion has opened up an old fault line – and it's heading for the sea! If it opens a direct connection between the cold water and the lava pits in the caldera the result would be..." He did not finish.

Valkenhayn grabbed his bag of shield and tossed it across the patch of unprotected skin he was working on and attacked it with his rag.

"It would be catastrophic! It could take the top off the whole mountain. Or worse! There are legends of whole islands vanishing, blowing up when a volcano exploded near an inlet," he finished, wiping furiously.

Vonya thought rapidly as she, too, redoubled her efforts. "Cly, we can finish up here shortly. Take Kara and get back to Semaj and get him ready to leave."

"But we have the *entire* underside to do!" Cly protested.

"The cinders will be falling from the sky, we can skip the ventral areas. We can also skip the underside of the main sails. They'll hurt Droï if they scorch but they aren't close enough to a gas bladder to bring him down in flames," Vonya said, working toward Valkenhayn's growing patch as quickly as she could. "Droï's not *inside* the scorching volcano, he doesn't need *perfection*!"

Cly nodded and hurried back to Kara, who was, he noted with some relief, finishing her section. Motioning for her to follow, he brought her up to date as they ran toward Semaj. Kara wanted to protest the risks to Droï but she was feeling uncomfortably warm – and she now knew her powers well enough to know it was not her own body that was feeling the heat.

Vonya and Valkenhayn finished Droï's superstructure in short order and Vonya went forward to ready Droï for departure while Valkenhayn started severing the lines holding him. He finished with one huge swipe that severed the cable holding the weighted canvas curtain across the entrance to the cave. As it dropped away he spotted a band of pirates just a few feet from the cave coming up from the arroyo.

Valkenhayn wasted no time wondering why the pirates were here instead of the city. Switching to his bastard sword, he ran back along Droï's dorsal surface and half leaped, half slid down the cloud whale's side to block his boarding ramp.

The lead pirate, a burly, massive man, naked from the waist up and full bearded blonde, though bald in the pate, stopped short as the knight appeared in the hatchway as if by magic. He was now breathing very heavily, as was the rest of his band, and all showed signs of having braved the cinder showers. The massive pirate spat at the foot of the ramp in disgust.

"I don't know who you are, nor do I care! I want zee flying vult! Ye need to get off zis island —*now*! You can come vis us peacefully or vee can keel you now. I'd rather not take the time to keel you. Chooss."

Heavily accented Assuran, but quite understandable. Valkenhayn eyed the band. Besides the evident leader, there were three powerful men clad like their leader except for their shirts – colorful silk, now holed here and there with burns. One other was wearing black robes embroidered with arcane symbols. He was carrying a crystalline sphere in one hand. The Sorcerer, without a doubt. He looked terrified, the knight noted clinically. *That* was not a good sign. Sorcerers were seldom terrified without some *real* good reason to be.

“I will give you safe passage but you cannot have the cloud whale,” the knight announced. “Put down your weapons and I give you my word you’ll be treated well.”

“*Vot goot is his vort!*” barked one of the pirates but his leader waved him silent. He was looking intently at the knight.

“*I am Corz’n zi Mra’ahn. Who are you?*”

“Valkenhayn of Caerleon.”

The pirate nodded slowly. “*I zee.*” He looked toward his Sorcerer, who was looking at the knight with naked fear in his face. Then back at Val.

“*Gift me your vort, as a prize of Caerleon, sat yet vill be vreed, vis our weapons, at Bissral Island.*”

“I so swear,” said Valkenhayn.

The pirate tossed his scimitar to the ground in front of Valkenhayn and motioned to his men to do likewise. With obvious reluctance all complied. The sorcerer added nothing to the pile, gazing nervously from Valkenhayn to the crystal ball.

The knight collected the weapons and bound them with a cord. He waved them into Droï’s interior.

“Stay aft. Do not attempt to reach the wheels, or our bargain is ended.”

One of the pirates cursed under his breath but the sorcerer answered for the band in Elvish. “**WE SHALL NOT ATTEMPT TO TAKE THE CLOUD WHALE. HURRY, WE’VE NOT MUCH TIME LEFT!**”

Valkenhayn took up station in Droï’s salon, where he could keep an eye on the pirates and still be heard near the wheels and shouted, “We’re ready, My Lady!”

Vonya shouted back and gently tugged at the wheels in a certain pattern.

Droi felt the pounding of strange feet within him, sensed some sort of altercation. . . no, an argument. An agreement. More feet within him. Then he felt a Youngest Companion tug gently at his lateral sails.

Without his chirpies, Droi was almost unable to comprehend the thoughts of the Youngest Companions – and the fiery aspects of many of them filled him with dread even though his intellect told him they were here to help him. The tugs continued and finally Droi concluded they wished him to try to move. Faced with the unyielding wall in front of him, glowing brighter than ever before, he tried to ease himself backward. He expected to be brought up short at any moment but he was not. Though not without painful scrapes and bruises, he began to back himself out of the enclosure.

Semaj was feeling very, very hot now and could no longer cram his worry down so that the companions could not sense it. Thrilled as he was by his sojourn here in a place where his kind had never been before, with Droi under way it was time now for him to leave as well. He sounded his departure call.

Kara and Cly arrived in the caldera just as Semaj's eerie ululation echoed from the cavern walls. They were gripped with fear at the apparition that was Semaj, for though the shield still held, it was thin and the heat had expanded his gas, forcing Semaj to vent – and the plume of escaping gas became a swirling tornado of flame just forward of his main topsail. He was having trouble keeping his lift down and drifted dangerously close to roof of the caldera.

The end of his ladder was out of reach, so Cly made a stirrup with his hands, bent down for Kara to put her foot in and with a single lunge he literally threw her at the ladder. Kara caught the end with one hand and managed to pull herself up.

Semaj, seeing the problem below despite the almost blinding glare, tried hard to vent even more gas, but he was unable to drop any lower – to the contrary, he was going to be ascending despite his best efforts.

Kara looked down at Cly.

"Go on!" he shouted. "Get him clear!"

But Kara knew that Droi was already leaving. If she left Cly here, he would die. It was that simple.

Simple. . . all she had to do was lift him up. . .

Kara squeezed her eyes shut and willed Cly to rise – and the Magician did so, with such speed and force that his impact nearly knocked her

off the ladder. Cly grabbed at her and the ladder as he hit with audible grunt. Both paused a moment and tried to catch their breath.

"Thanks," said Cly, and the two climbed toward Semaj's hatch. As they climbed they could see the fiery whirlwind of Semaj's venting far above him, so bright the glow outlined the hatch. The shield was no longer opaque. It was beginning to give out. They could see the fumes dancing along the Semaj's glowing surface.

Opening the hatch exposed Semaj's now-heated interior to the super-heated air of the caldera and the combination was just too much even for a fire-aspected cloud whale to handle. The salon was in flames as they entered. Cly quickly laced the hatch shut, rubbing his arms against the seams to transfer some of the shield from his own body. Kara ran to the wheels, shouting to Vil and Mru to get Semaj out of there!

Semaj heeled over with a flick of his sails and surged out of the caldera chamber and into the mouth of the main vent. The magma here was definitely rising, and great gouts of lava spouted here and there as the waves found new high marks with each passing instant. Semaj sensed his father's wonder that only his son could find himself ever needing to escape an erupting volcano.

Semaj needed no urging, without slackening his pace he pulled up into the throat of the volcano and added his lateral sails to his wingflukes and hurled himself up the flume.

But his lost lift was critical. The temperature of the throat fell as he rose and the relatively colder and denser air seemed to plow up above him, robbing him of lift – and worse, cooling him down – and he no longer had enough gas to lift himself without the heat to help. Halfway to safety above, Semaj stopped rising.

Semaj nearly succumbed to panic then. Vil and Mru, and the hivelings did do so. The humans nearly followed them – but Semaj and Kara's minds touched and the two of them held fast. There was one thing left to try.

Semaj released all his ballast in a silvery sheet, dropping hundreds of gallons of water down the throat of the volcano and started up again. Acid squirted onto spongy bone in his lifters seeking even more lift and the walls of the stone cave continued to slide downward. But it was not enough. . . within sight of the summit, Semaj stalled again.

But only for the briefest of instants, for a moment later there came a blast of superheated steam from the depths of the mountain - Semaj's own ballast water, having finally dropped into the magma pit far below.

The pressure blasted Semaj out of the volcano as if he were some piece of aerial flotsam the volcano had cleared from its throat in one mighty cough. The cloud whale zoomed through the cloud of cinders, flying free of the volcano and saw the clear night sky above him. But within seconds he fell back into the curtain.

Semaj had virtually no lift. He was going to crash.

“Lighten the load! Lighten the load, Cly!” He and Kara dashed around Semaj, beating at flames, cutting lines and tossing hard-won cargo overboard through the scorched remains of Semaj’s hatchway. Far below them the stormy black ocean became visible. Within minutes there was nothing left to throw overboard – Cly even tossed the Wizard’s journal and books from the *Gallun’s Luck* out. They threw themselves into beating out the last of the flames within Semaj, hoping against hope that somehow the cloud whale would find lift. But there was none to be had. In a long, steep glide, Semaj headed for a final landing.

Droi backed away from the cave where he had been prisoner and looked around with frightened, dazzled eyes. Everywhere was that fell glow! The very ground pulsed a dull red, the fire mountain itself was nearly yellow to his heat-sensitive vision. Laboriously he turned himself and slowly stroked his way away from the mountain toward his distant uncle Paschalon.

The cinder cloud was more terrifying than anything he could have imagined, bits of fire flew about him, touched him. Yet there was no other way. He flew into the maelstrom.

Vonya fought the wheels with all her strength, trying to help Droi build up momentum and cursing the heavy rig that made him so clumsy. Behind her, she heard Valkenhayn bellowing orders, though to who she had no idea.

“Look lively now! You! Get aloft there, by the spine!”

“What for!? Zis zing is shaking me daff!”

“For fire, fool! If one starts near you, beat it out!”

“*Aye!*” roared their leader. “*Wooof your arses!*” He grabbed up one of the blankets used to cushion cargo and took up station, as did the other men – even the sorcerer. In the midst of their situation, Valkenhayn still did not miss the sorcerer’s worried look. Obviously they were not out of danger yet.

Droi fought his way through the curtain. Rocks fell around him and through him, piercing his thin hide. He was leaking from one of his lifters already, and he adjusted his lift to compensate. Suddenly pain welled along his ventral sails. . .he was on fire!

Valkenhayn and the bearded pirate fought side-by-side as the fire threatened to collapse Droi's ventral struts – something that could collapse the young cloud whale in a smoking heap. They were fortunate there were no lifters nearby but the danger was scarcely less for that.

The two stood shoulder to shoulder, beating at the flames with blankets, not putting it out but at least stopping it from getting hot enough to take out the bone.

Droi was strangely calm. His crew was all but totally gone and he floated in a roiling maelstrom of flames and flying rocks and cinders. This was hell. He was dead already. He could hear the pod elders calling him to join the Last Fleet.

Even as he was composing himself to go, Droi suddenly sensed another mind nearby. In his bemused state, it was a moment before he recognized his cousin Semaj – Semaj who had not surrendered to the elements. Burning along his entire superstructure, Semaj still fought grimly for life – but he was heading for a crash in the pitiless sea.

Droi was torn for a moment. . .peace awaited him in the Last Fleet, a surcease of pain. . .but he could not leave Semaj, the Fire-Born flesh of his own flesh. That was unthinkable.

Droi's fear left him in a great rush and he turned to port and slowed himself, venting gas and trying to gauge Semaj's crash-landing vector.

Semaj suddenly sensed his cousin not far below him...

From Semaj's salon, Cly and Kara both saw Droi coming into view, lit from within in the most terrible sight a whale rider can ever see but still fighting. They had only a glimpse before both were thrown to the floor by the force of Semaj's impact against his smaller cousin's back.

Droi staggered in the air as Semaj hit him, forcing his lifters to full power to regain altitude. The two cloud whales plummeted downward, slowing, but still dropping.

Droi crashed into the sea in a great splash and the evil glow within him vanished. He felt the water cascading off of him as he tried to pull himself aloft. Dropping what was left of his own ballast, Droi somehow

pulled himself and Semaj away from a watery grave and finally won his way back into the air.

**Well done, cousin,* sent Semaj.*

**Claw Khar always pays its debts,* said Droi.*

To Paschalon and his crew, the sight was one they would *never* forget. Droi, with the faint yellow sheen of his fire shield still visible in patches on his flanks, bearing the burnt and broken wreckage of Semaj on his back, lumbering forth from the cinder curtain just yards from the seething gray sea below. As far as the eye could see were ships of every shape and size and description all fleeing the volcano's wrath. In the distance the roiling gray clouds of ash and smoke, shot through with lightning and flashes of explosions proceeding left to right across the length of the island toward the towering cone of the volcano. The island was doomed.

Paschalon lunged toward the struggling twosome, braking himself with a backward surge of his sails and spinning his huge wingflukes overhead in a dazzling pirouette that would've been impressive in a cloud whale a tenth his size. His crew and hivelings dangled from internal struts or bounced about his interior like dice in a cup. He brought himself alongside the battered pair, and his crew quickly transferred a half a dozen hands. Within minutes, Paschalon's crew had rigged him to tow the pair and not long after they pulled away from the island as fast as Old Pa's mighty sails and huge wingflukes could pull them.

Within hours they were overtaken with a rumbling roar the like of which none had ever heard before. It poured over and around them in a deafening, rolling thunder. In the years after this age, no one would find the island or the city. Only a plume of smoke and steam bubbling up from the sea and at low tide, a crescent sandbar visible only from a high altitude, ringing the site beneath the waves.

28. DIFFERENT...CAN BE BETTER

Trock glared at Valkenhayn.

"What do you *mean*, we leave them at Bisral?" she hissed at him. "Those men attacked my whale, killed my crew, beat me and tried to *rape* me! By the grounder's *Gods*, I deserve *revenge*!"

"Aye, that you do, lass. But I took an oath to land them at Bisral if they gave us the whale and didn't delay our escape. If they hadn't agreed to that we'd all be dead. 'Twas an alliance of convenience," said the knight gently. "I have no choice."

"I have a choice, Caerleon!" she gritted.

"*I zink not, My Lady,*" said the bare chested pirate who had named himself Corz'n zi Miratahn but who was known throughout the Nestick ocean area as Ship Smasher. "*Vee are ceffently matched. And vee right now haff little to gain by fighting. And if vee are to count grieffances, let us not minze vort's —you haff slain nearly a sounsand people in your attempts to vree zis damned creature, including my own brother! I vill forgo vengeance —for now —so long as vee maintain zee truce.*"

Trock looked to her kin for aid but found little there. Cly shook his head to indicate that he felt it not worth the danger of the fight and Vonya seemed drained. Kara alone seemed alert, watching the enemy sorcerer with a curious expression but ignoring everyone else.

In truth, honor provided little alternative. One of Paschalon's mantas ferried the pirates to the island as they passed over it on their way to Cloudhome. Valkenhayn chose to join them, much to the surprise of the whale riders.

"I'm headed for Imri, Magician," he explained. "I can catch a boat from Bisral sooner or later and this lot has no grudge against me. Fair skies to all of you!" And he, too, stepped aboard the manta. Cly and Vonya looked after him, missing the Mad Knight already and wondering if they will ever see him again.

"You will, I think," said Kara, to their unspoken question.

"How can you tell that?" demanded Cly.

"The sorcerer was thinking many things before he left. His mind was pretty much a muddle but he seemed to think his destiny was somehow entangled with Val's – and Val intended the pirates would join him," she said.

"Join him? In what?" asked Vonya.

"To free Krithala from Evenshade," she replied. "It had already occurred to Ship Smasher that there would be treasure and to spare for those who restored Caerleon to the throne."

“So they’re off to restore the Crown of Krithala,” breathed Cly. “That means a war, you know. Evenshade won’t go down without a fight. All our effort to end a war and we’ve well begun the next in the process.”

“We’ve ended the coordinated piracy, at least for now,” noted Vonya. “That’s huge, and without that coordination Imri’s navy should be able to handle the rest. And Krithala is just outside our normal trade routes. The fight won’t be on *our* turf – but there will be a lot of trade for war material through Imri. I daresay we’ll make a better profit.”

Cly sighed. Thinking back to that mad moment – mad only in retrospect, once he surrendered the coin – when they entered the fire mountain, he shook his head, ruefully.

“What is it, Cly?” Vonya asked, catching the gesture.

“I’m worried about the other clans. Just the *visible* differences in all this *innovation* will likely freak them out. We’ve done things that would put us utterly beyond the pale. But just imagine their reaction if they find out we actually flew Semaj *into* a fire mountain!”

Vonya shrugged.

“First of all, it came out all right in the end. Second of all, no one forced Semaj to do it. And third of all, why should they ever find out? *I’m* sure not going to talk about *any* of it! What about you?”

“Ancestors, no!” Cly said emphatically.

“Not me,” Kara seconded. Vonya smiled.

“All we have to do is just pretend none of it *ever happened*. Sure, the clans won’t like our tinkering, they might embargo us, even shun us, but *that* level of ire we can *survive*. Losing all our cloud whales, being unable to take care of them, losing our trade area – those we can’t. It’s not an easy course to fly, but it’s the only one we have. So we fly it. With any luck at all, none of the events of the past few days will come back to bite us in the clan’s collective keester.”

“What if Ship Smasher comes after another cloud whale?” asked Cly.

“He won’t,” Kara said confidently.

“And what of this strange new magic of yours?” the magician asked her.

Kara hesitated. “It’s something. . .the dragon of Imri City taught us, I think.” Cly stared.

“I beg your pardon?” he said.

“I’m sure he didn’t *mean* to, though. The Dragon’s Hand – the one who talked to us – offered to make *me* one of them. The dragon gave me this same kind of power, but to use it I needed to stay close to the dragon – no more than a few hundred miles away. I couldn’t leave Semaj, so I re-

fused. The power left me then but when I saw the fire ant killing Vonya, it somehow returned to me. But it doesn't come from the dragon now. It comes from Semaj. It's. . .well. . .I've become. . .a cloud whale's Hand."

"From *Semaj*?" Cly asked. "How can you tell?"

"I can tell. I can tell what he is thinking sometimes – not well, he doesn't think like we do. But he *knows* me, Cly. And you. And Vonya, too. He wants. . .he wants so many things, Cly. But he has decided he wants *us* more than anything, we've somehow become very important to him. I think all the cloud whales know their crew – far more so than we ever guessed before. They can feel us in their minds. That's where our souls go when our bodies die, they keep us with them and someday we go with them to the Last Fleet." Kara stopped, blinking.

"Go on," prompted Vonya gently.

"They carry our cargo so we will take care of them," she said in a rush. "They aren't things, they're *people* – somehow our ancestors worked out a bargain with their ancestors that they still honor today. We take care of them and they take us and our cargo where we want to go. They consider us. . .they consider us. . .*part* of themselves. Like the hivelings. We are the cloud whale."

"So Semaj was. . .sensing. . .your mind when the dragon made his link. . .and then duplicated it?"

"I think so," Kara said. "It's not exactly the same. It's much tougher to control and it's far more powerful. It's. . .fuzzy. . .but it's sharpened up a lot in just these few days. It's exhausting to use the power but I think that will fade as the two of us work it out."

"Is this something Semaj can pass on?" Vonya asked.

"Oh, yes. I'm sure he'll teach Droï and Mareen, at least. They need a certain kind of mind to link to, though. But the dragon said there were lots of us in the clouds."

"A whole new field of magic," breathed Cly, his eyes shining.

"Yes. But in the meantime, we've got to pay an indemnity for our lost cargo and mail and we have to get Semaj fixed up – *again*. And so much for our profit," Vonya said sadly. But Kara smiled.

"Oh, I think we'll do okay. I'm going to show Master Wold how to do the modified light rig – and none of Semaj's major structural parts are damaged. He only needs a light refit."

"Less than what Droï needs," observed Vonya.

"What does Droï need? He has some fire damage but his structural and propulsive systems are all intact. He just needs rest," returned Kara.

"No, Ma'am," said Vonya vividly recalling her battle with Droi's wheels. "He needs a refit, a *complete* refit, from stem to stern – *and* we'll have to do it at Imri. We'll find the money somewhere." Cly nodded as Kara looked from one to the other.

"But he'll never allow us to. . .oh, yes. I guess he will. So will Trock," she said.

"This is a turning point in our history, My Ladies," Cly observed. "Many things will be different now. Let's make sure different. . .is better."

"Aye," echoed Vonya and Kara together.

"I vote we don't tell the other clans about Semaj's Hand, either," Cly said as they prepared to make way.

The ladies looked at one another and nodded. That, too, was a detail best kept to themselves.

Hours later Semaj regained enough lift to float off of Droi's back and he insisted on being detached from the tow rope shortly thereafter. When they arrived at Clouthome that evening, it was Paschalon leading two battered and damaged – but proud – cloud whales home.

**WHAT USE HAD THE ANCESTORS FOR A CLOUD WHALE BORN IN FIRE?* asked Paschalon of the pod as they approached. *NOW WE KNOW.* And the voice of fire said nothing at all.*

NOTES ABOUT THE WORLD OF INGARDE

FONTS USED IN THIS BOOK

- The primary text is in FreeSerif and represents text in unaccented Assuran. This is the primary language of the cloud whale riders, Imri, and many nations and/or city-states around this part of the Great Nestick Ocean.
- CAELDERA and Argos MF are used in headers and headings.
- **GEOMANTIC**, the Earth element language, is Colossus.
- **AEROMANTIC**, the Air element language, is “Windswept MF.”
- **PYROMANTIC**, the Fire element language, is PhoenixOne.
- **AQUAMANTIC**, the Water element language, is the unfortunately named “Aliens ate my mum.”
- **ELECTROMANTIC**, the Lightning element language, is the stunningly appropriate font “Inner Flasher Version 2.0.”
- **Truespeech** is in “trattorian 2.” It’s also in multiple colors and has animated sparkles, but my publisher didn’t offer that...
- The *dialect of Assuran* used by the pirates, uses the aptly named font “Arrr Matey BB.”
- The *dialect of Assuran* used by the fishermen (and most of the blue-collar class in Imri) is represented by the font “Erin Go Bragh.” Many of the languages in this part of Ingarde are either derived from, or influenced by, Gaelic. They all use various permutations of Celtic fonts.
- The Assuran dialect used by some Imrian locals and by Torkwil (Though with a much thicker accent – better than the fisher-folk, but not by much. He was born in Imri but left a long time ago) is the font “Amerika.”
- **147W** (Grawk), used by the gargoyle, is represented by “Auto-REALM Phoenician.”
- **TRADETALK** is good ol’ “Arial Unicode MS” available on every computer ever made, practically – admittedly sometimes under another name.
- **Cloughload the Dragon** uses “!The Black Bloc.”
- **HIGH ELVEN** is the language of the Daoine Sidhe or “High Elves,” it uses the font “Ambrosia MF.” “Daoine Sidhe” is properly pronounced “Deeny shee,” it’s Gaelic.
- **Richian** is represented by “Celtic Gaelige.” Valkenhayn’s native language.

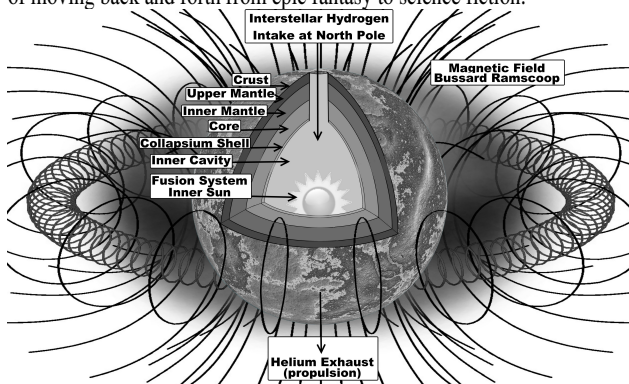
All of these fonts are either free, free-for-commercial use, or covered by a license for font packs that I bought for these projects. No intellectual property owners were harmed by the production of this work.

ARTIFICIAL WORLDS

Ingarde is, of course, the world I created for my role-playing gamers. The characters and incidents in the novel are based on a considerable number of games but great gaming does not imply a great novel, so I have taken liberties in picking and choosing which incidents and the order in which they occur and fabricated other scenes in order to make for some sort of semi-coherent narrative. Nevertheless, I do feel the characters in the novel are accurate representations of how they were played in the actual games.

The world of Ingarde may seem a little confusing to people who are encountering it for the first time and so I've decided to add a few notes in order to provide some background for my new readers.

Ingarde was originally a fairly generic fantasy world, whose cosmology was based on medieval concepts of the flat Earth. That didn't last long. As my gamers constantly pushed the outer envelope of my little world, it gradually developed a more and more complex back story and a much broader context – a *science-fiction* context for my players were fond of moving back and forth from epic fantasy to science fiction.



As conceived in this novel the end product, Ingarde, is a huge world more than three times the diameter of the earth. Its gravity is very close to Earth, however, because the world was *built* that way. It is artificial, constructed by the “World Builders,” a mysterious and ancient culture which left a number of these artificial worlds in our galaxy. Where a natural world would have a core of liquid iron, artificial worlds like Ingarde pos-

sess a huge fusion reactor floating within a hollow shell of “collapsium*.” Above this floats the liquid iron outer core, mantle, and crust. Like the world of Pellucidar by Edgar Rice Burroughs, it therefore has a central sun. Unlike Pellucidar, there is no inhabitable surface on the inside, the central sun keeps the interior temperature high enough to maintain the outer core of liquid iron, and the place is a hellish inferno of radiation. The fusion core is fueled by hydrogen – the solar wind from the local sun in most cases – drawn into the planet’s North Pole by powerful magnetic fields, which also provide radiation shielding. Helium and other waste products are ejected from the South Pole using the same mechanism.

This arrangement enables Ingarde and her sister worlds to do something that ringworlds, space habitats and other structures for living in space cannot – they have plate tectonics, and are outwardly indistinguishable from a “natural” planet aside from their size and (apparent) low density. But they can provide *much* more habitable space than a natural world can for the same mass. Together, these factors have profound implications for the evolution of life forms living on the planet.

The magnetic field that funnels the solar wind to the interior fusion reactor is *extremely* powerful. It is properly oriented to permit life forms living on these worlds to use it for navigation, just as migratory animals do on Earth – but there are many *other* implications, including the kind of geological formations you might recall from a recent science fiction movie, “Avatar,” where soft rock cooling from lava that contains enough ferrous ore can be molded into loops that follow local magnetic vortices.

You can’t find “unobtainium” on these worlds, but they *can* provide “upsidaesium” – which is essentially the same stuff, but I preferred the original name from the “Rocky and Bullwinckle Show” that was, as far as I know, the first appearance of the material in *any* fiction. Rocky and Bullwinckle were following a treasure map, came to the “X” where the mountain mine of upsidaesium could be found – and there was nothing there but a flat plain. Until they realized the mountain was hovering above them.

Unlike unobtainium, upsidaesium is *not* a natural mineral. On Ingarde it can be found in the ground only where there are also fossils of giant flying creatures. It is produced naturally by such creatures as a method of flying or as an aid to it. The bones of certain giant flying animals contain enough superconducting upsidaesium to cancel out a great deal of their weight.

* “Collapsium” is to iron what diamonds are to carbon. Planets can’t make it. Neither can normal novae, you need *supernovae*. Or *really* advanced technology.

LANGUAGES AND SPECIES

There are a number of incongruities in the languages used in this area of Ingarde. Ingarde has no “native” populations of anything. You can’t find much in the way of fossils, and everything and everybody that is there was apparently *put* there, either by the World Builders or some other mechanism in the galaxy that spreads DNA.

The primary influence in this area of Ingarde, the Great Nestick Ocean, is Gaelic. This is because most of the cultures depicted are either descended from, or influenced by proximity to, or were affected by various incursions of Celtic peoples. Most came from Earth, others from other worlds that also share the Celtic culture. On Earth, the Irish, Welsh, and Scottish Gaelic are still semi-intelligible to one another, but many of these languages no longer are. Basque may be a similar case on Earth as it, too, is distantly related to a Celtic tongue, but none of the Irish, Welsh, or Scots can understand it.

The other languages are non-Earthly, but there often is an Earthly influence. The use of “Tovarisch,” Russian for “comrade” is one such having crept into the elemental languages, who use it as a title for those bound by the kindling. Other titles include “Maker,” as the one who made the elemental using it. Russian-derived or influenced languages are to be found on the other side of Thermia in the area of Calthis, and the word came from there. Conspicuously absent are languages with English or Saxon affiliations, but these, too, exist in the southern part of the Nestick near Krumm’s Mote, referred to in the text.

Vindolonda is the epicenter of the Irish incursions and include a population of Leprechauns, *homo articulatus*, and Daoine Sidhe, *homo shree*, that actually came from Ireland on Earth before they died out from cultural and population pressures exerted on them by *homo sapiens*, much the same way Neanderthals did. Like Neanderthals, however, the Celtic populations of the British isles today show some DNA traced in the 25th century to the Daoine Sidhe. A few skeletons of these two species were unearthed in Ireland in the 23rd century and posed an enduring mystery until Earth contacted worlds with other human species.

Most cultures on Ingarde have legends of coming from other worlds. Leprechauns and Daoine Sidhe believe their species originated on the world of Éirinn (pronounced “Air-in”) which isn’t a world at all, but the island of Ireland on Earth. But that connection has been lost.

There are many other species of human in the galaxy, including Neanderthals on Keldane and Tenseti, among others, and Daoine Sidhe and Leprechauns on Éirinn. The latter, of course, gave Ireland its Gaelic name

from the people incurred to Earth from that world. This information is presented and expanded upon in depth in the forthcoming book *All the Myriad Humanities*.

CLOUD WHALES

Large creatures that fly, frequently small ones that hover, all produce upsidaisium internally and store it in their bones – *except* for cloud whales. They are descendents of some life form in the Cambrian period that did not survive on Earth but which specialized in lighter-than-air flight on worlds where it did. They are part of a fairly wide ecology of more-or-less related species, including the sky mantas and the pyromantas.

Cloud whales are living creatures and very much a part of the DNA-based biosphere. They and their related creatures form a Kingdom by themselves. This actually makes them quite alien to most of what we consider to be normal life forms, but they are, nevertheless, organic to their environment.

This ancestry means that cloud whales are not technically vertebrates but they do have a structure that serves much the same purpose, although it does not have an embedded nerve channel as a normal spine does. This structure has two branches, both originating in the skull, one running along the belly to the tail, the other arching up running along the back eventually to meet up with the belly spine in the tail. These structures and the skull are the only really substantial bone that cloud whales have and together form a sort of keel that supports all the rest of the cloud whale's anatomy.

The “lifters” referred to in the text are the individual gas bags, which hold the hydrogen that keeps the creature aloft. Each of them is equipped with a spongy mass of bone and a gland producing HCl – hydrochloric acid – at a much greater concentration than normal digestive juice. The action of the acid on the bone is what makes the hydrogen.

Cloud whale's have two separate circulatory systems. One runs along the bottom of the creature linking the brain to a heart and to the digestive system. This system is full of normal liquid blood. The other runs from front to rear of the animal along the back. It reaches all parts of the cloud whale that are not supported by the other circulatory system, and links with the liquid system just behind the lower heart (directly under the salon referred to in the text, actually) where it picks up nutrients. The arteries and veins of this system are much larger than the other ranging up to several feet in diameter, and the “blood” is actually air carrying a heavy load of moisture which is laced with nutrients that sustain all the more di-

aphanous tissues that make up most of the creature's body. This is pumped by a second heart which is much larger than the first and hardly more substantial than the rest of the cloud whale, being nearly transparent except for the very slim bands of muscle embedded in the tissue which provide the actual power to beat. You can think of a cloud whale as an animal or as a vehicle. The "vet" is also the "engineer" and is responsible for adapting and maintaining the creature – hence "vetengineer."

Cloud whales are communal organisms. The preying-mantis-like hivelings were the first species to form a true symbiosis with them. They are literally part of the immune system, defending the creature, and consuming mold and foreign bodies that may grow in the creature's interior nooks and crannies. They also have a rôle in reproduction, but we won't go into that now.

The chirpies, large rodents that are distantly related to squirrels, were the next to be incorporated. Smarter and more flexible than hivelings, and able to talk to a limited extent, they are also part of the cloud whale's defenses, but their primary task is communication. Their minds are linked closely enough to the cloud whale's to have an awareness of the cloud whale's own mental world, but still remain separate to a much greater extent than the hivelings, giving them more autonomy, and more ability to relay things the cloud whale might wish to communicate.

Finally, the humans – the "Youngest Companions" as the cloud whales think of them – have even more autonomy, but much less ability to directly communicate with the cloud whale. The cloud whales permit humans to make various alterations in its anatomy and even to direct its course. They do this because humans literally extend their youth.

While only hivelings, chirpies, and humans are considered to be *part* of the cloud whale, cloud whales host vast numbers of other organisms. Birds, other small animals, bats, thousands of different kinds of plants, and so on, live in and on every portion of a cloud whale's anatomy. While the hivelings and chirpies somewhat retard this process, only humans can actually stop it in its tracks. Without humans, cloud whales eventually get completely overwhelmed by this invasive ecology, and gradually lose volitional control. Eventually they are paralyzed, relying on stored nutrients to make hydrogen. At this stage they no longer even *look* like cloud whales, they look more like flying islands, the aerial equivalent of an underwater reef. That image is what lead me to invent them, as I wanted a flying island for a series of adventures, and the culture and biology was developed as that series went on.

With humans, the cloud whales are kept clean, tidy, and *mobile*. Of course they still age, and eventually they will still cease to move. Feral cloud whales in this stage of life tend to clump together forming even larger flying islands, but the minds of the whales that compose it remain active for decades or even centuries, lending their knowledge and experience to younger cloud whales as they grow (about which, more later.) It was this structure that humans adapted into “Cloudhome,” and when a whale can no longer function as a transport, it is incorporated into the structure of Cloudhome permanently.

NEARBAND AND FARBAND SPEECH

Cloud whales developed psionics for navigation and communication at ranges too far for nearspeech (sound in the human hearing range) and too close for farspeech (infrasound – extremely low frequency sound that cloud whales – and *real* Earthly whales, and Earthly elephants as well – use to communicate over very long distances. One big drawback of farspeech – it takes bloody *forever* to say something. The frequencies used are too low for normal communication data rates to be possible. Droï’s call for help, all 34 words of it, took the better part of a couple of *hours* for him to say *just once!*

Farspeech has another drawback. It reflects weirdly off the landscape compared to “normal” sound frequencies, messages get broken up, and parts may not arrive in the same order they were transmitted in. It is normal for cloud whales to repeat farspeech messages over and over, and they often have to re-assemble an incoming message from fragments gleaned over several attempts. You might think of it as the cloud whale’s equivalent of email.

PSIONIC POWERS

Psionics – powers of the mind – are an old idea. I wanted to include them, but I needed a back story that would explain why they were so hard to confirm as real (and never have been in what we jokingly refer to as “real” life) and why they tended to be limited and unreliable. The explanation I use is simple – human brains run on only about 20 watts of power. This is simply not enough to *do* very much, especially since most of it is actually used to keep the brain running in the first place. People in my game could boost their brain power temporarily with drugs, spells, or the like, and some are born with the ability to do this naturally, but humans remain way at the lower end of the psionic spectrum.

However, if the problem is lack of power, I reasoned that creatures with very large brains might have power to spare, and better ability to generate power over and above their own metabolic needs. Dragons were

one such, which lead to the idea of the Dragon's Hands. Cloud whales – who developed psionics to communicate and sense the world around them much as Earthly whales and bats use their sonar – were also logical candidates. *Cloud Realm* is based on the series of games where the cloud whales learned how to do this.

Cloud whale psionics start out so-so and become more powerful and flexible as it ages and its brain grows. At first it is only used for sensing where its eyes can't see but later they can use it for communication, and still later can use it for physical manipulation, including telekinesis and even – provided your chirpies and crew can (probably unwittingly) help – even teleport via power gates.

Psionics work similarly for dragons. Though dragons *can* use their front paws as hands, only very young dragons do normally. Older youngsters and adults use telekinesis almost exclusively, unless they are startled in some way and revert to using a physical gesture by reflex.

GHOSTS

Oh, and a word about Maia and Ekim – yes, they're dead. They actually died some time ago, but that hasn't really slowed them down much, they are still pretty active.

In a cloud whale, ghosts are real but insubstantial. However, they can be amplified and supported by the cloud whale's psionic powers. Their "afterlife" is a continuation of their lives as crew members of the cloud whale. Most of the time they keep to themselves occupying a sort of virtual reality version of their cloud whale where they can socialize with each other.

Ghosts can affect the actual, physical world by *manifesting*. They appear (though they remain insubstantial) and they can manipulate the physical world. They *cannot* easily manifest in front of someone who *knows* they are dead. Neither Maia nor Ekim would try to manifest themselves in front of, say, Shamyir or Bosrin, in anything short of a dire emergency. They were contemporaries and the magicians know when and how the two died. Since most of the living crew on a cloud whale *do* know the recently departed they seldom see any. They do, however, have stories about more distant past crew members seen still working at their posts. These stories are literally true, though few (living) whale riders fully understand that.

A manifesting ghost crew member is essentially the cloud whale using its telekinesis on *itself*, working in the manner of a human or chirpie crew member. Since the core of this construct is the actual ghost of the departed, with an independent existence, the cloud whale itself does not

conceive or truly understand what they do or how, but whatever the ghost *wants* to do, the cloud whale does on their behalf with psionics. Large, ancient cloud whales may have a maximum of twenty or thirty living crew members – but there are *hundreds* of ghost crew aboard them. The cloud whale’s mentality plus its ghost crew all together are termed a “constellation.” Only on a new “cadet” cloud whale are the *living* crew *all* the crew on board. If the pirates had stormed Old Pa instead of Droï, the outcome would have been very, very different. They didn’t know that.

When a cloud whale retires, its’ body becomes part of Cloudbhome. It lives for decades, sometimes centuries, helping keep everything aloft. But eventually it dies, and on human-occupied Cloudbhomes, it is trimmed and trimmed, the body slowly disappearing until only the brain is left. Eventually the brain dies and is removed as well.

But this is not the end of them! The cloud whales added *after* a whale’s retirement gradually take on and support the older constellations whose brains have died as well as their own. None of them even *notice* when the original brain dies – even the whale that did it! But with each passing generation, like a copy of a copy, they fade, manifesting *as themselves* less and less often until they just cease to do so. No one notices they are gone – because if they did, their echoes would be reinforced, fading would be retarded, and manifestations would continue. Not until no one remembers them do cloud whales and their crews finally, truly “die,” never manifesting again – although they never really go away *completely*.

However, all the foregoing still applies even if the physical bodies of cloud whales are *destroyed* rather than retired! When humans or chirpies die aboard a cloud whale, their mentality is saved by the cloud whale itself. If a cloud whale dies, its’ constellation “joins the Last Fleet” – essentially, all becoming figments of the cloud whale *pod’s* collective imagination. Without the original brain they *start out* as copies, and so fade a little faster, but they still continue.

Ghosts have little trouble manifesting for people who have no idea of their actual status, as Maia does for Cly. The only thing that marks them for what they are is their lack of a shadow and of any physical substance – which allows the chirpies to run right through them. This is no great impediment to them – they have no trouble manipulating things like tools, because they are actually being handled by the cloud whale’s telekinesis on their behalf. While they are physically insubstantial, touching Maia would feel like touching a live person, and she could touch you as well – but what you’d be *feeling* is Tocho’s telekinesis.

Most of the time, people don't *know* they are interacting with a ghost. It would never occur to Cly Maia *was* dead, the physical signs – like the lack of a shadow – just don't register. It should also be noted ghosts, even manifesting, do not have the kind of impact that living people do on one's attention – people usually don't even think about them when they are not present, and although they do *know* them, they can seldom recall the circumstances of their last interaction.

Maia and Ekim are part of Old Tochou's constellation of past crew, and they are supported by his recollection of them. Oh, and yes, Ekim and Maia were husband and wife. On cloud whales, marriage is forever. None of this “til death do they part” nonsense. At least until they are all completely forgotten.

These attributes are what Keff was referring to when he talked about ghosts in the clouds following different rules. *Actual* ghosts in the game (and narrative) also exist. Most move on at death, but some linger. If they are not bound or controlled by magic-users they simply hang out near where they died or at some location that was important to them in life and haunt it. They are a horrible danger to the living because when a living person comes near them they can only dimly perceive the *person*, but they are drawn to the (to them) intense brilliance of the *kel* – which is their elemental aspect. If they can pull your aspect off of you, and it's a *big* ‘if,’ they can be alive again – as elementals, granted, but still, *alive*. The unfortunate facts are, however, that ghosts almost never *succeed* in doing this. And when they fail, the resulting elemental forms right where the living person is – which is fatal in one of the five ways mentioned in the text. Cly nearly failed to let go his aspect when he kindled, Kourishand burnt him pretty badly. The scarring from that wasn't only physical.

THE WORLD OF INGARDE

Ingarde is not the only artificial planet in Known Space, but it is unusual in that it *is* the only one known that is not comfortably orbiting a normal sun in the manner of a natural planet and not calling attention to itself. Ingarde is instead in deep space, in flight and untethered to any sun. She is, in fact, a Bussard ramjet built on a truly heroic scale, using her magnetic field to funnel interstellar hydrogen into the North Pole as fuel and making use of the energy in the helium and other waste products to provide thrust. She is presently making about 20% of the speed of light and still accelerating.

Clearly Ingarde was intended to *go* somewhere, but where and why remain mysteries. Projecting her course forward leads to nothing of any great interest in the relatively near term (the next hundred million years or

so) and she will eventually exit the Milky Way galaxy heading in the general direction of Fornax, one of the smaller satellite galaxies of our local group. Projecting it backward leads to areas with old suns and many nebulae, but all investigated thus far show no sign of an advanced civilization like the World Builders.

Without a sun, Ingarde would be cold and shrouded in eternal night. To provide the heat and light from above that normal life forms depend on, Ingarde possesses a multitude of small suns, as referred to in the narrative, held aloft by the same magnetic field used to funnel interstellar hydrogen to the fusion core. They do so not all that high up, and cloud whales can easily reach their altitude. Of course, most don't. Ever. Except Semaj.

Ingarde's local suns generally follow routes which take them over specific areas of the world at regular intervals. They wax and wane, each on their own schedule. The spectral class, intensity, routes, and schedules of intensity and spectrum cover a wide gamut. The concept of a "day" or "night" therefore varies, possibly wildly, from place to place. This gives the world a sort of timeless quality, again very similar to Pellucidar. Moreover, these suns are not eternal, old suns die out and eventually crash, new ones appear from time to time, undoubtedly produced by deeply-buried machinery that must exist somewhere on Ingarde. The occasional "moon" that may be referred to is actually an old sun, no longer bright enough to define "day" but still useful at night.

Exactly who the World Builders are has always remained a mystery. They have never been found or even identified. No one knows what they looked like. Nothing apparently remains of their technology or culture except for their worlds. It is conjectured that these worlds were built to provide their culture with additional living space, but this is only a guess. It is also not known *how* these worlds were built.

MAGIC

The World Builders were not the only mysterious ancient civilization to be found in my gaming galaxy. A culture called "The First Ones," conjectured to have been the first intelligent species to evolve in our galaxy, is responsible for magic, which is part of the fabric of Ingarde but which can also be found on other worlds, even natural ones, in the galaxy.

As for what magic is and how it works, Arthur C. Clarke once observed that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." In my games, this is quite literally true, "magic" has a technological basis, but one so advanced that it is beyond even the most sophisticated modern civilizations. This can be seen in the graphical user

interface – quite literally. Ghostly controls specific to each spell appear when the spell is invoked. These controls cannot be seen as such by anyone looking at the Magician operating them, but some indication of them *can* be seen as little ghostly lights, sparkles, or glows around the Magician. “Arcane gesturing” is simply the magic-user manipulating the controls.

These controls are “skinnable” like various computer apps are – they tend to be similar but not identical between different lines of magic.

It is extraordinarily difficult to study magic *as* magic, because the technology itself possesses a degree of sentience and the very act of observing it and testing it causes it to change and adapt. Results are seldom reproducible. It has also been “polluted,” in a sense, by being exposed to many different cultural paradigms for “magic,” both human and inhuman, Earthly and otherwise. It’s extremely unlikely the First Ones *really* wanted things like zombies wandering around, for example, but it is clear that the driving intelligence behind magic somehow got the idea that *someone* did and provides spells and support for their creation and maintenance. Magic is therefore *extremely* complex, *varies* from place to place and time to time, and can be quite unreliable, especially if the user is at all tentative or unsure of themselves, which leaves magic essentially trying to *guess* what effect they intend. Not only must *you* get comfortable with magic, magic must also get comfortable *with* you.

The need to kindle one’s magical abilities is a safety feature that evolved as a means of preventing people with no idea what they are doing from triggering magical effects. Otherwise, one would never know that some meaning is attached to certain sounds or gestures and the resulting spell effects would rage out of control.

One thing that *is* certain is that the First Ones and the World Builders were *not* the same culture. Ingarde is the only artificial world ever discovered *with* magic. All the other known artificial worlds are resolutely non-magical. Many, though far from all, natural planets also have magic.

ASPECTS AND ELEMENTS

Your “aspect” is much like your astrological sign. It has little effect on your day-to-day life, but it says something about you, and it may subtly influence how you think and behave.

The system is a slightly mutated form of the medieval idea of the “Four Elements,” Earth, Air, Fire and Water. To these has been added “Lightning” – as part of the electromagnetic spectrum. Perhaps I should refer to them as **EARTH, AIR, FIRE, WATER** and **LIGHTNING**, I did this partly to show that Earth *did* have an influence on magic – at least, around the Ne-

stick ocean – but it was not the *only* influence. It was also handy to explain the use of pentacles (five elements, five sides, five points) for summonings. Semaj's unusual birth gave him a fire aspect that pretty much freaked out other cloud whales, and made him something of a loner. Cloud whales are normally air aspects, of course.

There are other ways in which aspect plays a rôle individually and as part of a culture. You might notice that when cloud whale riders curse they tend to use words representing fire, burning, or other such things rather than “hell” or “damn it.” If you read the first chapter of *Crown of Krithala* included below, you will see Valkenhayn doesn't swear a lot, but he uses more traditional forms when he does.

The history of these games is really a story about how clan Khar became unique and different from any other cloud whale clan. More about this will follow in future works, but there are hints of things unique to the clan in this narrative. Vorchula, for instance, has two distinctions making him unique – one is his ability to open and fly through a power gate. This is something he discovered by accident in his youth, and the gate will only ever take him to and from one place – the cavern. As to *why* a cavern, the answer is because he is an *Earth* aspect, and that, too, is unique.

The projected final book of this series – *Cloud Quest* – is the story of a *water*-aspected cloud whale, Skii, forced out of her own clan and seeking to find a new home, which eventually finds her adopted by the Khar clan. Each of these events pushes the Khar clan further and further away from their traditions, making them more innovative and successful but also alienating them from other clans. The whole story arc covers this transformation, and intersects at several points with other story arcs about Valkenhayn and Imri.

WHY THE EARTHLY INFLUENCE?

Though the story takes place on a world thousands of light-years away, there is clearly deep connections with Earth. There are also deep connections with many other worlds. To make a long story short (too late!) the galaxy is filled with DNA-based life forms, all of which are related in various ways. There are a number of mechanisms that move DNA – and cultures that have it – around the galaxy, perhaps even further. There *are* non-DNA-based aliens, but they tend to be unique to themselves, not found in multiple places unless they have starflight. But DNA-based species can be found that are identical on different worlds, and many more that are subtly or grossly different from clearly related species on other worlds. Quite a large number of people have vanished off Earth and found their way to Ingarde through no fault of their own. Evidence

for other worlds and other influences can also be found on Earth – *if* you know how to interpret them. Legends of Leprecauns, for instance. Leprecauns *were* real, but for various reasons are no longer found on Earth. Nazca lines are *not* such evidence. Those were just natives drawing really big pictures.

CONCLUSION

If it seems that my games have a lot of mysteries and enigmatic ancient civilizations, well, they do. Now some of these have actually been resolved in the history of my personal game, but since I am planning to also publish it, it is my intention that the resolution of these mysteries be left up to the individual gaming groups that will play it, rather than being dictated from “on high.” Variety is the spice of gaming as well as life. My objective is that my game will provide a different and unique experience for anyone who plays.

I hope the reader has enjoyed this romp into my imagination, and I hope to provide future opportunities for you to do so again. Until then, enjoy.

Larry Smith

CHRONICLES II PREVIEW: THE CROWN OF KRITHALA

Valkenhayn stared at the enemy Wizard. The Wizard glared back from his single baleful eye. He raised his fist, speaking rapidly in the Magician's tongue.

"Teleporta celixal!"

Val dodged, but it did little good – the spell struck him as had the previous ones, and it, too, vanished in a flash and a note of pure music as the bright yellow gem on the chain around his neck absorbed the power in the spell. Val allowed himself a grim smile as he came back on guard and began moving toward the Wizard. Across the altar room, McKulluh was stirring, pulling himself together from the Wizard's first blast as they had entered the altar room. The leprechaun had taken the full force of it, and lacked any kind of magical protection – but his fairy constitution seemed to have spared him the full consequences of the spell.

The Wizard gave an inarticulate growl as his spell spent itself against Val's amulet, watched as the gem grew brighter and brighter with each spell it neutralized. As he watched Valkenhayn stalk him he smiled.

Valkenhayn saw the smile and knew it was bad news. He fainted with his blade, trying to take the Wizard out before he could put his plan into effect, but the man dodged, kicking McKulluh out of the way. As he whirled to face Valkenhayn again he had another spell prepared.

"Disrupto intensil. - Dag!"

Trusting to the gem, Valkenhayn hurled himself at the Wizard, trying to end the battle before the Fates took away his victory, but as he charged forward the enemy Wizard's spell slammed directly into the gem – targeting the *gem*, not him. Valkenhayn felt himself struck fair in the chest by some enormous force. His breath whooshed out as he was thrown backwards, staggering and windmilling his arms. He managed to stop himself as he fell back against that evil altar, so close to the pit behind he could smell the brimstone wafting from it.

"Not enough, Wizard," he panted, as he began to pull himself up. The Wizard was panting, too. His face was screwed up in pain. *"And i think you ARE too tired to throw much more magic at me."* Across the altar room, McKulluh was getting to his feet, wearily but gamely pulling out his sword.

The Wizard snarled. *"Not much. but enough!"* This time he didn't start a spell, instead he made a much more prosaic gesture, surprising Val

* Speaking Rithian.

entirely. He pulled something from a pocket and flung it at Val as McKul-luh cried out a warning. . . Val looked down to see a glowing gem strike him...just below the shattered remains of his amulet! The world suddenly flashed blue, then slowly turned to a dull red.

Valkenhayn found himself in some kind of rocky cave. Cursing he sprang to his feet and looked quickly about. It was *hot* here – and growing hotter. He spotted a likely-looking cave entrance nearby – dark, and, he hoped, cooler. As he sprinted toward the cave the world gave a sudden jerk once again. The cave vanished, and Valkenhayn felt his foot drop into a soft, springy surface as ahead of him appeared the back of cloud whale's brain case. He halted quickly and looked about.

He was obviously aboard a cloud whale. The gem must've had some sort of teleport in it, though Ishta alone knew why. Maybe it was all the Wizard had left.

Valkenhayn was standing in a neat little room just aft of a cloud whale's head – what the skyjammers called a “salon.” There was a young man in Magician's robes looking at him with a surprised air, and two young woman sleeping or unconscious. That was the bloody *problem* with fighting a Wizard. Things could change so suddenly.

The Magician nodded and said, “VELCOME. VELCOME ON KHAR CLOUD VALE ZEMAJ, A LITE TRANZPORT VROM OUR CLOUD HOME AT MOUNT ZHORMA.” He was speaking tradetalk, and Val did not recognize the accent. That wasn't good.

Well, in for a shilling in for a crown. Valkenhayn narrowed his eyes as he assessed the young man.

“I DON'T HOLD WITH THAT ARGOT, LAD. I'M NOT BUYING ANYTHING TODAY,” he said in High Elven. Any reasonably well-educated Magician ought to be able to handle that one, he thought. He was right.

“YOU ARE CLEARLY AN EDUCATED MAN,” the young man replied in the same tongue. Good. Unraveling his accented tradetalk would've been a headache-inducing chore. “I HADN'T EVEN THOUGHT TO TRY THE ELDER TONGUE.”

“I'VE BEEN AROUND. SO, I'M ABOARD,” he stopped for a moment and flipped the phonetics of the youngster's previous welcome around to account for the language shift - “KHAR-ZEMAJ. A CLOUD WHALE, OBVIOUSLY. THOUGH I DON'T RECOGNIZE THE CLIN. YOUR CLOUDHOME IS MT. SHORMA? THAT WOULDN'T BE THE SHORMA AT TIMAR, WOULD IT?”

“WHY, YES,” the young Magician – a journeyman, by the look him – said, blinking in surprise. “THOUGH I EXPECT FEW WOULD RECOGNIZE THE NAME NOW. HOW DID YOU GUESS?” he asked.

This did not sound good. No one would recognize Timiak? It's only the most obvious landmark in this area of the world, isn't it? Or rather – no one would recognize the *name* “Timiak?” That didn't bode well, either. Val was beginning to suspect he hadn't just teleported, he may have shifted in time, too.

Well, at least the young fellow wasn't flinging spells at him. Valkenhayn grinned and set the point of his sword in top of his right boot carefully avoiding the cloud whale's springy floor. “ŠHO'ORMIA IS ELVISH SLANG. ITS EXACT MEANING VARIES A BIT, BUT IT IS USUALLY ASSOCIATED WITH PLACES OVERRUN BY HUMANS. KING MAJOR OF HALLENDY HAS BEEN TRYING TO ANNEX TIMIAK SINCE BEFORE MY FATHER TOOK THE THRONE.”

“I'VE HEARD OF HALLENDY – IN THE EAST OF VINDOLONIA? BUT NEVER OF A KING MAJOR. NO ONE NOW LAYS CLAIM TO ŠHORMIA. THRONE? YOU'RE OF ROYAL BLOOD, THEN?” the Magician asked.

“FORGIVE ME MY LADSE IN MANNERS, LAD,” Valkenhayn said. “I AM VALKENHAYN OF CAERLEON IN THE KINGDOM OF KRITHILJA, KNIGHT AND PEASANT OF ISHTA. AND YOU?”

“Cly Khar-Semaj,” the young man said. “OF CAERLEON? KRITHILJA?” he said, looking stunned.

“YES,” replied the knight warily, “IT'S A LOVELY PLACE. YOU SHOULD VISIT IT SOMETIME,” he added sarcastically. What, does he think I don't know my own country, he thought to himself.

“I'd love to once you kill the dragon,” the Magician said, abruptly dropping into the Imrian language Assuran. Luckily, Valkenhayn knew that one, too. The magic-user's eyes rolled like he'd just taken a mailed fist to the head. “Caerleon was wasted by Evenshade more than two millennia ago. He sleeps still, upon Caerleon's royal treasure, in the great hall itself. . .awaiting. . .awaiting. . .by the grounder's gods!” he swayed a moment more and then plopped himself down where he was standing. “By the Ancestors and the Elements!” he said.

Oh, this did *not* sound good. Evenshade *already* in Caerleon? Been there for *two* millennia? A dark suspicion began to form in Valkenhayn's mind. Switching to Assuran also he said, “You can let me in on this any time.” He was trying to hold his irritation in check. “Two *millennia* ago? What year is it?” Val asked him.

“4553rd year of Imri. I should've known! I should've guessed,” Cly said, shaking him head.

“Let's back up just a teeny bit and take this from the top,” Valkenhayn said, looking sharply at the young man. “You say it's the 4553rd year of Imri? That's...erm,” Valkenhayn did some quick calculations in

his head to convert the Imrian calendar to the fairy one used in Krithala. "Three-thousandth and change century of the Hippogriff by the fairy calendar?" He desperately hoped his math was wrong.

"I'm not sure of the exact date but that's about right," the Magician replied.

Son of a freaking bitch! He'd been blasted forward in time over two thousand bloody years! "And you seem to imply the Obsidian Dragon has taken Krithala?" he asked, already knowing the answer.

The magician nodded. "Evenshade – ah! You shouldn't say the name yourself?" Valkenhayn nodded, grimly. Shouldn't indeed. Not if he wanted to take the wyrm so-and-so by surprise. Two thousand years sitting in his family's treasure! Oh, yes, we won't say its name. Not yet, we won't. But we sure will when it's time!

"All right," Valkenhayn gritted through his teeth. "About two thousand years have passed then?"

"Close enough," Cly said. "As I remember the legend, the dragon Evenshade came from out of the uttermost west seeking gold and slaves and found both in Caerleon. A great battle was fought but it was a doomed effort for the empire. The dragon was at the height of its powers and commanded a vast army of the creatures of darkness. But Korin of Caerleon went into battle anyway. He would have been...?"

"My father," agreed Valkenhayn, still considering his predicament.

"He was slain in personal combat with the wyrm," Cly went on.

"That's Dad," nodded Val. "He was always the overachiever type."

"The dragon took the Great Keep that day. When came night, the womenfolk collected the fallen. Your father was still alive, though both his legs were frozen solid by the monster's frigid breath. Just before he died, he swore Caerleon would live again and vengeance on the dragon. He said, a prince of Caerleon would come from fire and end the life of the icy wyrm. Then he died, with a name on his lips that no one could catch." Cly concluded.

"My name, I expect," Valkenhayn said. McKulluh must've killed that cursed Wizard and gotten word back to Dad when he dropped into the volcano under the influence of some sort of time shifting spell. Stasis, most likely. He sighed.

"I was probably the only one not there. You see, I knew what really brought that dragon. It wasn't gold. It wasn't slaves. It was *commanded* to come," the knight said.

"Commanded?" gasped the skyjammer. "Who could command a dragon?"

"Humph. Who, indeed?" growled Valkenhayn. "If I knew that, I'd be sleeping in my own bed in the west tower, not riddling a skyjammer about my family's dirty laundry. I tracked one of his agents here – a wizard. I felt sure my quarry was on this island – too many of the world's troubles led to Kenekra."

"Kenekra!" whispered Cly. "The Lost City! That makes sense! Sea-Reaver's old base! The biggest slave market in the world! So this is where it is!"

Oh, good, Valkenhayn thought to himself. We're still in the area, then. The knight nodded. "I see the place is still living up to its reputation. It was certainly the base for the plot against my father and the throne. This wizard got the drop on me, spelled me and apparently dropped me into the volcano."

"Of course!" Cly said. "You were already enspelled when you fell – but the fall couldn't hurt you through the spell. Any shock or impact would take centuries to register. The spell would have held you stiff, protected your bones and flesh."

Always nice to have a magic-user confirm your suspicions. "Just so. I'd bet that word got back to my father about what happened to me. Dad was a minor wizard himself and he had access to some of the best sorcerers." He smiled to himself, thinking of McKulluh. "And I know how word must have gotten to him, too. So there's your prophesy. Awaiting only your little nudge."

He sighed. "So, here I am – thousands of years out of time – with only myself and my sword to defeat a freezedrake of legendary proportions who's been ensconced in the family lucre long enough to get ugly about whether or not he can keep it. Sound about right?" said the knight, mildly.

"Um. Yeah, I'd guess that's a good summary," Cly said, shaking his head. "I guess it isn't going to be fun living up to that legend."

Valkenhayn half-smiled. "Hey, living legends is what paladins are all about, kid. It goes with the territory. But this isn't my story and I'm owing you for breaking the spell. So what's your problem? And how does it bring you to a volcano, of all things, being as you're so fond of travel on the most inflammable beast I've ever heard of?"

"Ah. Well," Cly said, "One of our cloud whales has been skyjacked by a bunch of pirates for nefarious reasons and has been hangared in a canyon at the base of this fire mountain. We were the closest to him, came at his call raiding a fire ant hill along the way, stole all their royal jelly, used it and some borrowed magic to create an alchemical fire shield to

protect ourselves from the volcano, and hid our own whale inside the caldera.”

Valkenhayn digested that for a moment. “Quick thinking,” he commented. “Insane. But quick.”

Cly grinned and continued, “Unfortunately, all I’ve got for help is myself, two women both wounded from the fire ant encounter, two chirpies, who can’t leave the cloud whale, and the cloud whale himself, who is, by the way, probably quite mad,” summarized Cly.

“So, we need to rescue the other cloud whale, deal with the pirates based in a city that has never fallen, and escape from the inside of a volcano aboard an insane cloud whale, before I can realistically try to tackle the freezedrake?” asked Valkenhayn. “Ha! Piece of cake!”

“Do you really think so?” asked Cly in surprise.

“Nah. We’re sunk,” replied the knight philosophically. “But today is as good a day as any to die, lad.”

“Not a pleasant thought, Sir Valkenhayn,” the magic-user said.

“Nope. Never is. So, how did you find me?”

“Well,” Cly said, taking something from his pocket and fingering it in his hand. “We’re hiding from the pirates on this island. It seemed the best place to do it. I found you when I reconnoitered the...area...” He closed his eyes, seemed dazed or confused for a moment, then suddenly reached out to the knight and handed him the thing from his pocket.

Valkenhayn looked sadly at the object, a little golden disk covered with delicate runes and set with a brightly shining gem, now sitting quietly in his hand. This explained a great deal. It was the only thing that *could* explain why a skyjammer would fly his cloud whale into an active volcano. Impressive. Crazy, but impressive.

“What is it?” Cly asked, quietly. “What did it do to me?”

“It’s a piece of the Crown of Krithala, lad. And it brought you here to fulfill the prophesy. As it must’ve been trying to do for lo these many centuries.”