

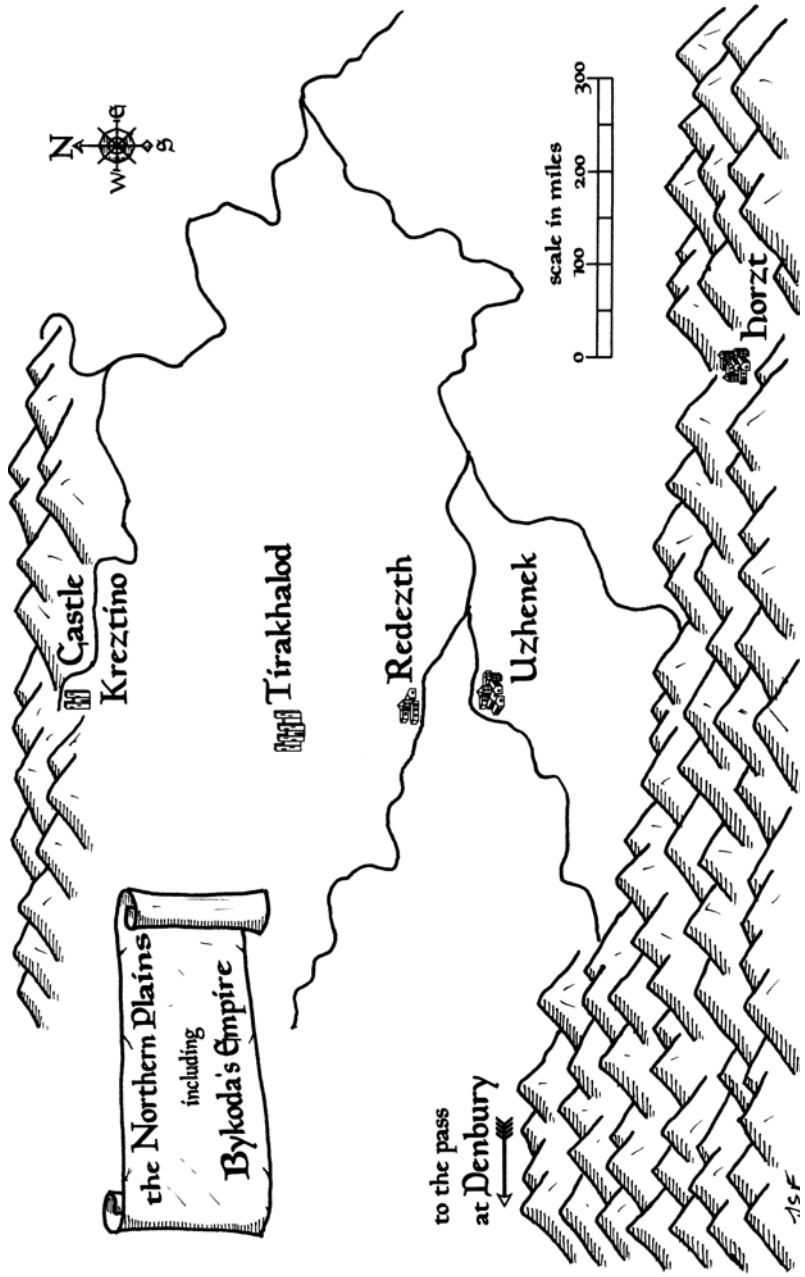
The Empress
and
The Acolyte

Lyremouth Chronicles
Book Three

by
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FOREWORD—EMPIRES AND ANARCHY

Magic changes everything

The rare individuals who could directly access the higher dimensions had dictated the history of the world. These workers of magic perceived more than the four normal dimensions of time and space known by the ungifted majority, and thus could manipulate their surroundings in ways that seemed as mystical and unstoppable to the rest of the population as a sighted archer might seem in the world of the blind.

A witch was someone who was aware of just one or two paranormal dimensions. Maybe one person in every hundred might claim this title. Far more uncommon were sorcerers, who could perceive all three paranormal dimensions, including the paradoxical second aspect of time—the realm of soothsayers and oracles.

Nobody knew why some were born with these gifts. Whatever the cause, it did not lie in heredity. Children of the most powerful sorcerer were no more likely to be gifted with magic than those of a common shepherd. And therein lay the source of the chaos that sorcerers had inflicted on the world.

Their powers were vast. One sorcerer, acting alone, could carve out an empire, sweeping aside whatever small culture the ungifted had painstakingly built. Cities and civilisations were created by sorcerers' paranormal abilities, and all fell back to anarchy on their deaths. No empire lasted longer than one generation.

These empire-building sorcerers were as diverse as their empires. Some were tyrants who enslaved entire regions. Some were motivated by concern for others and sought only to enhance the well-being of their people. Some were decadent parasites who exerted no control over their lands other than to claim tribute.

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Yet even the worst of these empires were remembered fondly by most of their subjects as a time of stability and safety; a time when a powerful protector kept all other dangers away; a time when a farmer might sow a field with the expectation of harvesting it.

What other option was there? Ordinary, ungifted people could not hope to resist even a witch. Without the structure of empire, what chance was there of ordinary workers gaining any reward from their daily labour? Living by one person's rules was better than living by no rules at all.

Only the founding of the Coven broke this cycle of empire and anarchy, and only for the lands under its control, the Protectorate. On the death of the great philosopher sorcerer Keovan of Lyremouth, his acolytes formed their alliance under an elected leader—the Guardian—and invited other sorcerers and witches to join them. To the ordinary folk of the surrounding region they offered protection in return for the payment of taxes.

For four and a half centuries, the Coven grew in size and power. The territory that it controlled expanded also, by consent rather than invasion. The order and security offered by the Coven was an attractive lure, and bordering territories petitioned to join. In time, the Protectorate of Lyremouth came to dwarf the overnight empires of lone sorcerers.

Like any human institution, the Protectorate was not perfect, but it was generally benign and just. Guilds could manage their own affairs. Ungifted citizens had rights under the law. Folk might grumble at the taxes and distrust the autocratic sorcerers, yet—uniquely in the history of the world—they lived their lives in peace and prosperity, with the hope that their children and grandchildren might do the same.

The advantages of the Protectorate for ungifted citizens were clear, but what inspired sorcerers to join? Why abide by the laws of the Coven, working to the orders of the Guardian, when they could live outside its rule and take whatever they wanted from defenceless ungifted folk?

The answers to this question were also as diverse as the sorcerers themselves. Some were unworldly scholars, eager for the chance to study with others who saw the world in all its multi-dimensional complexity. Some were motivated by moral standards and took satisfaction from

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working for something that would benefit people for centuries to come. Some had ambitions to rise through the Coven hierarchy and one day have hundreds of powerful sorcerers under their rule.

Or, as with Jemeryl, it could be a case of all three to varying degrees, dependant on what mood she was in that day.

PART ONE

The Empress

CHAPTER ONE—AN ORACLE OF DEATH

Nails clawed into the tabletop, fighting for grip. The fingers clenched, slowly and laboriously inching the arm forwards. A moment of rest, and then once again the fingers reached out. At the other end of the forearm, where the elbow should have been, loose tendrils of skin dragged across the wooden surface.

Two women stood by the table, watching the sluggish progress. The warm glow of a fire competed with dim light from the leaden sky outside. The only sounds were the crackle of flames and the rain beating against the window. The stone castle walls and thick hanging tapestries blocked out all else.

The younger woman by far was Jemeryl, oathbound sorcerer of the Coven at Lyremouth, still in her mid twenties. Her eyes were fixed in concentration on the animate arm, but her angular features held an impish grin. Light from the flames accentuated the hint of red in her curly auburn hair.

“You know, I think it’s going to work.” Jemeryl’s voice reflected her satisfaction.

“But are you still sure it’s a good idea?”

The elder woman turned away and wandered back to her seat by the hearth. Her shrunken body was swallowed by the mound of cushions. Firelight glittered on the gemstones on her fingers and the gold embroidery decorating her robe. It etched deep lines on her face. The wisps of fine white hair on her forehead were almost invisible in the flickering shadows.

Jemeryl raised her eyes to her companion, the Empress Bykoda. “Yes. Why shouldn’t I?”

Although the two sorcerers had worked together for many months, Jemeryl knew that the Empress did not share her own enthusiasm for

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the project. In fact, Bykoda's motives for assisting at all were something that still caused her considerable puzzlement.

Jemeryl returned her attention to the disembodied arm. She picked it up and flipped it back and forth, examining it from both sides. The fingers jerked and flailed about, spider-like, until she made a sharp, cutting gesture above it. Immediately, it ceased to twitch, ceased even to maintain its shape. The object in Jemeryl's hand hung limp, like a half-stuffed stocking. She treated it to a final moment of consideration, then dumped it on the table and also took a seat by the fire.

Bykoda tilted her head. "You haven't had second thoughts? You think it will really benefit your ungifted citizens back in the Protectorate?"

"Only those who've been unfortunate enough to lose an arm or a leg."

"Unfortunate or foolish?"

"Either."

"Might it not make warriors reckless knowing that if they lose a limb your Coven sorcerers will make them a replacement from resin?"

"In my experience, warriors don't feel that indifferently about what happens to their bodies. Keeping themselves in one piece is a major preoccupation because they're always being confronted by people who want to slice them into bits."

"I'll take your word on it. I admit that I've never spent much time bothering about what's going on in their heads."

"I've got Tevi to keep me well informed on the subject," Jemeryl said lightly.

"Your lover? Yes, I suppose you must talk sometimes."

Jemeryl faltered briefly, caught out by Bykoda's pensive tone. Had the Empress never previously considered the idea that she and Tevi might speak to each other? "Um...yes, her. Knowing Tevi so well helps me see that the ungifted aren't very different from you and me."

"And have you never got yourself into an awkward spot because you were overconfident? I wonder if your ungifted warriors might do the same, especially as they won't understand the limitations of the resin."

Jemeryl shrugged. "They'll know that they can't get a replacement head, which should stop them from getting careless. Plus, the ordinary citizens don't trust sorcerers enough to want to rely on us more than they have to."

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“You just said they weren’t so different from us.”

“Do you trust things you don’t understand?”

Bykoda gave a laugh. “I don’t understand why you’re bothered about your citizens’ health. But I take it on trust that you are.”

“Then just trust that it will be another success to report when I go back, which will make my seniors happy.”

Trying to explain was not worth the effort. Jemeryl just grinned and slipped down in her chair, stretching her feet towards the fire. Her casual pose was one of contentment as she considered the successful conclusion of her mission. For over two and a half years she had been a guest at the castle of Tirakhalod, learning as much as Bykoda was willing to teach. The initial invitation came as a surprise, both to Jemeryl and her superiors in the Coven at Lyremouth. Not everyone had been convinced that the isolated Empress would have anything to teach a Coven-trained sorcerer.

Jemeryl however, had been less arrogantly assured of Coven superiority. Admittedly, the Coven’s longevity had allowed it to amass vast knowledge and experience. Its libraries held the collected discoveries of thousands of sorcerers. Whereas Bykoda’s realm was typical of the normal run of the world. She had built the Empire by herself, using nothing but her own abilities. Her magic lacked framework and support.

To Jemeryl, many of Bykoda’s greatest problems were trifling. Bygone Coven sorcerers had long since found the solutions. But in other places, the originality of Bykoda’s work was breathtaking. The need to survive had driven her. Every crisis she had overcome by her skill alone. She had been inventive and ruthless, sometimes in ways that did not fit well with Jemeryl’s Coven-born ethics. But Jemeryl was not there to offer censure or support and, to her mind, the knowledge that she would be taking back justified her presence. Bykoda would have done the same regardless, and at least the Protectorate citizens would now benefit.

A while passed before Bykoda spoke again. “In all the time you’ve been here and seen what the Empire has to offer, the challenges, the freedom, no rules, not having to answer to anyone, has your commitment to the Protectorate weakened?”

Jemeryl shook her head. “Not at all.”

“It’s ironic.” Bykoda’s tone was serious, even rueful. “When I

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invited you here, it was partly because I was certain you wouldn't want to take over my Empire. Now I find myself wishing that you would."

"You...what?"

"That day we first talked, I had just learnt that my latest attempt to deal with a certain problem had failed. You asked about the animate resin, how it was done, and I thought it would be a good excuse to get you here. That's why I offered you the chance to study with me here in Tirakhalod. I thought you..." Bykoda sighed and made a vague gesture with one hand.

"You thought I could solve your problem?"

"Not quite. But I thought that you might be useful if no other solution was found."

"It...I..." Jemeryl broke off in confusion. "What is the problem?"

Bykoda gave a wry grimace. "You don't like oracles, do you?"

"No." Jemeryl paused. "Can I assume you've had a foretelling of something that you don't want to happen?"

"You could say that. In eight months' time, I'm going to be murdered."

Jemeryl needed a few stunned seconds to regain her voice. "Yes. I can see that you might be a little upset about that. Um...do you have any ideas how, or why?"

"The how is some form of magical attack that I haven't identified precisely. As for why"—Bykoda gave a shrug—"hopefully just revenge by someone I've annoyed, or an upstart sorcerer planning on usurping my Empire."

"There could be worse reasons?"

"Oh yes. Come with me. There's something I want to show you."



Tevi hugged close to the base of the cliff and looked up. One hundred feet of sheer rock face hung above her. Battlements lined the top, and directly overhead, the watchtower rose higher still. At her feet, the river lapped around her boots. Once the spring rains came, the spot where she stood would be deep underwater, but for now, Tevi could just squeeze by between rocks and river as long as she did not mind getting her feet wet.

The sounds of battle drowned out all else: the crackle of lightning

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and boom of explosions, and below them, quieter, human voices raised in screams and shouts. Yet, thankfully, none of it was on Tevi's side of the fort.

The stronghold was built atop rocks overlooking a bridge. Triangular in shape, with river-eroded cliffs on two sides, the fort made the most of the defensive potential of the site. Only on the third, landward side could it be assailed by an army. Its purpose was to guard the bridge against any who might seek to strike at Tirakhalod, and in addition to its natural defences, the Empress's powerful magic was imbued in the stone to proof it against paranormal attack—which was more than a touch unfortunate when the fort was being held by a detachment of renegades.

A junior officer witch, a lieutenant, had deserted, taking her troops with her. Commander Ranenok himself had led the force sent to apprehend the deserters before they could cause more havoc. When the fleeing lieutenant realised that she could not avoid a battle, she had bluffed her way into the fort and taken it over. Even so, with all the resources of Bykoda's Empire against her, one lone lieutenant could not win, and she must have known it, yet obviously she was determined to put up a fight. Tevi's task was to bring that fight to as quick an end as possible, with the maximum number of loyal troops left alive.

Ranenok's current assault on the landward side was a diversion, and it seemed to be working. No arrows or other missiles had come Tevi's way as she had snuck along the riverbank. Yet the defenders' oversight was not particularly reckless or negligent. Despite the low water level, the route was not passable for a force large enough to launch a serious attack on the fort. For any ordinary fighter, climbing the cliff would be daunting when not wearing armour, impossible with it. And as Jemeryl had frequently pointed out, even sorcerers did not find flying a viable method of transport.

However, Tevi was not a completely ordinary fighter. The potion she had taken during childhood granted her magically enhanced strength, easily sufficient to tackle the climb while wearing a thick leather cuirass, carrying a sword, and with a shield strapped to her back. Her upbringing on the Western Isles, collecting eggs from the nests of seabirds, had also given her experience of scaling sheer rock faces and a good head for heights.

Before long, Tevi reached the top of the cliff where the battlements

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began. The man-made wall was not so generous with handholds as the natural cliff, yet the blending of rock into dressed stone was not seamless, and she was able to find a level spot, a foot deep, where she could stand upright without needing her hands to cling on.

From her waist, Tevi unwound a long rope with an iron grapple attached to the end. She whirled it around vertically in a circle and then hurled it upwards. On her second attempt, the grapple caught on the parapet of the watchtower and held. Tevi gave an experimental tug and then waited to see if the sound had attracted any attention, not that there was much she could have done in her exposed position if it had. To her relief, no heads appeared over the parapet. The clank of the grapple hitting stone had obviously gone unnoticed amidst the chaos of Commander Ranenok's magical assault from down the hill. Unsurprising—the noise was enough to have drowned out far more. As she stood there, Tevi could feel the walls vibrating from the volume of the onslaught. After one last tug on the rope, she began to climb.

At the top, Tevi peered cautiously over the parapet. The flat roof of the watchtower was about forty feet across. On the other side, three soldiers were manning a ballista, a form of huge crossbow. Tevi recognised the pile of ammunition just in front of her as exploding spheres. This would be very useful once she had control of the ballista. Of course, getting control was the tricky bit, and outnumbered was never good.

Two of the soldiers were working on the windlass that pulled back the ballista's twin arms. The third was getting another projectile to launch at the attacking troops. Tevi waited a few seconds until his back was to her when he bent down for the sphere, then she hauled herself onto the roof. The slap of her feet hitting the wooden slats made the man look up, but for him it was too late, and he could not hope to match Tevi's strength. She grabbed the soldier, swung him round, and hurled him over the parapet behind her, then she drew her sword and leapt forwards.

At the falling soldier's scream, the other two soldiers jerked away from the ballista, heads turning and hands reaching for their swords. Tevi charged towards the nearer one, a middle-aged woman with a soot-stained face. In clear panic, the woman fumbled at her scabbard, seeking the hilt, but the wild scrabbling was inept and the weapon was

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only two-thirds drawn by the time Tevi had her own sword embedded in the woman's chest.

Tevi turned to the last of the three soldiers. She advanced a step.

The man's eyes bulged in fear. "You're the...the..." Apparently he recognised her, by reputation if nothing else.

Before Tevi could take another step, he turned and fled from the roof, slipping on the spiral stairs in his desperate haste. Yet surely he would be back soon with support. Tevi knew that she did not have much time.

She glanced into the courtyard of the fort. The magic that had been worked into the stone was holding up against Ranenok's attack and the walls were unbreached. However, the wooden gates were proving more vulnerable to the powers hurled against them. A curtain of smoke was rising, and they were visibly loose on their hinges. The lieutenant witch was standing just inside, bolstering the gates with her magic.

From Tevi's viewpoint, the situation could not be better. Within seconds, she had completed winding back the ballista's arms and placed a sphere in the sling. Fortunately, the projectile stayed in place as she tilted the ballista down and aimed at the gates. Tevi released the trigger.

The fort's defensive magic protected against attacks from outside but not those emanating from within. The gates exploded in a ball of flame. Tevi did not wait to see if the lieutenant survived. The witch had been caught by surprise, and Tevi was fairly sure that she would have been unable to shield herself. Regardless, Tevi knew there was not time to reload the ballista. Already she could hear shouts coming from the stairwell. Now that the gates were gone, Commander Ranenok and his troops would be storming the fort. All Tevi had to do was hang on until reinforcements arrived.

Tevi grabbed her sword and shield, raced to the staircase, and advanced a few steps down. The sound of hobnailed boots was only one spiral below her, and then the first of the soldiers charged into view around the central column. The man had only a split second to register Tevi standing in wait above him before her sword slashed down on his neck, hitting between mail hauberk and helmet. The man dropped back and disappeared around the stairs. Judging by the shouts, he landed on several of his comrades.

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Like all spiral staircases in castles, this one ascended clockwise. The design was intended to give an advantage to defending forces, working on the twin assumptions that most people were right-handed and that the attackers would be the ones coming up the stairs. In this case, Tevi was the one with the advantage. The full radius of the circle was empty behind her right shoulder, meaning that she could rain blows down on her opponents, while their answering parries were severely impeded by the central column.

Forewarned, a second soldier came more cautiously into view, with doubt evident in her eyes. She managed to deflect Tevi's first blow on her shield, but her comrades bustling up behind her were ill disciplined and barged into her legs. The soldier lost her footing on the narrow, triangular stair and was unable to counter Tevi's second strike. The soldier fell forwards and then slid away down the stairs. Her place was taken by an older man who kept his shield high.

Jump! a warning voice screamed in Tevi's head. As she did so, her opponent jabbed his sword at her feet. Tevi landed clear of the blade, then braced her forearm on the central column and kicked out as hard as she could. The man flew back into his comrades, taking all those in sight with him as he fell back down the staircase.

While Tevi waited to see what would come next, fresh shouts erupted outside the tower. From the sound, Ranenok and his troops were now inside the fort. The soldiers below her must also have heard and either decided to take refuge or to challenge the new invaders. Whatever their choice, they did not return to fight Tevi.

For another five minutes, Tevi held her ground on the stairs. Tempting though it was to seek out her comrades and join in the courtyard battle, Tevi was too well experienced in warfare to take the risk. She must not allow the enemy to get control of the ballista. Leaving her position would be dangerous. She had no idea where anyone was, and even with her strength, she dare not let herself be surrounded. On the narrow stairs, she could only be attacked one on one.

At last she heard new footsteps at the bottom of the tower. A voice belonging to one of Ranenok's sergeants called out. "Captain Tevirik. Are you there? Are you all right?"

"I'm here."

"We've secured the courtyard, ma'am."

"The roof's clear. I'm making sure it stays that way."

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“Right, ma’am. We’ll be with you shortly.”

The sound of people running up the stairs was followed by that of a short skirmish, and then the sergeant’s head appeared around the central column.

“The tower’s ours, ma’am.”

Tevi nodded and jerked her thumb over her shoulder. “The ballista is up there with ammunition.”

A sudden huge grin split the sergeant’s face. “You did great with the gates, ma’am.”

Tevi smiled back and patted his shoulder. On her way down the staircase she passed three floors filled with friendly soldiers, enemy prisoners, and dead bodies. Most of the soldiers cheered as she passed. The rest brandished their weapons in salute. Tevi nodded in acknowledgement. The prisoners sat slumped and did not raise their eyes.

Tevi emerged into the courtyard. Two dozen of Ranenok’s soldiers occupied the space. More were on the battlements. The ruins of the gate hung off its hinges. At the sight of Tevi another riotous burst of cheering filled the air. She responded with a modest half-wave, half-salute, and felt the heat of a blush start on her cheeks.

Smaller towers stood on either side of the gate. Screams and shouts from one spoke of a battle in progress. One of the soldiers pointed towards it. “Commander Ranenok’s in there, ma’am.”

Tevi looked at the other tower. The door was shut and a group of soldiers were advancing on it holding a thick section of tree trunk, clearly intending to batter the door down. Ranenok would be too busy to take her report, and the battering ram was something that would benefit from her strength.

Tevi took a few steps forwards when suddenly, her internal voice screamed, *Arrow, move!* In blind reflex, Tevi obeyed and threw herself to the right. She had gone a mere six inches when fire shot through her upper arm. The pain exploded in a fresh wave when she hit the ground.

“Look out! Archer in the tower,” somebody shouted.

Soldiers in the courtyard dived for shelter. Tevi scrambled behind a low wall and then looked at her left arm. The armour-piercing head of the arrow had gone through the shoulder guard of her cuirass, her arm underneath, and out the other side. A stream of blood was running

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down to her hand. The wound was certainly not fatal, but without the forewarning and moving those six inches, the arrow would have gone straight through her heart.

Tevi's head started to swim. She leaned back against the wall behind her and concentrated on breathing deeply. Then she heard the crackle of mage fire and Ranenok's voice called out. "Take the tower." Around the courtyard, soldiers moved out from cover.

Tevi struggled to her feet. All the soldiers were charging towards where the door to the small tower had been—now there was just a fire-blackened hole. The archer would have more to worry about than targets in the courtyard.

Commander Ranenok strode over to Tevi's side. "Are you all right?"

"I will be. I was a little careless, sir."

Ranenok frowned. "Get yourself into the watchtower. I'll send Hanno over. Do you need assistance?"

"No, sir."

"I'll be back as soon as we've got this bit cleared out." Commander Ranenok nodded and marched back to join his subordinates in the small tower. The battle would not take much longer.

Despite an annoying dizziness, Tevi made it inside unaided. The ground-floor room of the watchtower was deserted except for two bodies. Tevi leant against the door frame and looked around. The furniture consisted of a table and three rickety stools. Tevi did not think she had the balance required for the stools, so she simply collapsed onto the floor.

Hanno arrived shortly. He was the healer for the troop, based on some natural magical talent and a lot of experience. More soldiers followed him into the room. Some carried in injured comrades, while others removed the dead renegades.

Hanno knelt at Tevi's side. "How are you feeling?"

"A bit light-headed."

He nodded and carefully prodded the spot where the arrow protruded from her arm. "You're lucky. It's not poisoned."

Tevi clenched her teeth and stared over his shoulder. Still more soldiers were entering the room, and curiosity was their only apparent reason for being there. All of them were watching her, and the sound of voices made it clear that others were standing outside the room. The

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weight of attention was unwelcome. Tevi closed her eyes but could not block out the muttered comments.

“Jed reckoned that arrows bounced off her.”

“Do you think she’s really bleeding?”

“Looks like blood to me.”

The voices died. Tevi opened her eyes to see that Ranenok had entered the room. The Commander glared around and then barked a string of commands. Within seconds, the gawking soldiers had vanished. Tevi closed her eyes again. The shock was ebbing, replaced by a touch of nausea. After the initial flare, the pain had faded to a dull ache, but now the fire was returning.

Hanno moved over to examine the other wounded soldiers. Ranenok stopped him with a harsh whisper. “Deal with Captain Tevirik first.”

“This one is more seriously injured, sir.”

“And she’s worth six dozen like him.”

“Yes, sir.”

The sharp beat of Ranenok’s footsteps left the room.

Tevi licked her lips. “I don’t mind if you tend to someone else before me.”

“I’m not about to disobey orders.” Hanno again knelt by Tevi. For a minute longer, he examined her arm. “Right, first, we’ll get rid of this. Lean forwards.” He grasped the arrowhead. “Ready?”

Tevi clenched her teeth. The snap of wood triggered an explosion of agony in her shoulder. Before she had a chance to respond, a second quick movement from Hanno yanked the rest of the arrow shaft out. Immediately, the healer’s hands pressed hard against the two wounds.

“Fine. That’s the second-worst bit over with. We just need to wait for the bleeding to stop a bit.” Hanno’s voice sounded unnecessarily cheerful.

Fire was washing up and down Tevi’s arm, from her neck to her fingers, in throbbing waves. She fought to get her breathing under control. “Does it look like blood to you?”

“Smells and feels like blood as well.”

Tevi took another couple of deep breaths. “They don’t think I’m really human, do they?”

“Are you surprised?”

“I’d have thought by now that they’d have got to know me.”

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“What they know is that you’re three times as strong as anyone else in the army. And you’re only half the size of some.”

“I’m taller than most women.”

“But not tall enough to account for your strength. They know it’s not natural.”

“Of course not. It’s magic.”

“But what sort of magic?” Hanno’s tone was lightly teasing.

“It’s a potion they brew in my home island.”

“No one has ever seen you take it.”

“I don’t need to anymore. You have a spoonful every day while you’re growing up and then the effect stays with you for life.”

Hanno pursed his lips. “Well, I must admit I’ve heard that story about you before. But the other tales are much more fun.”

“What other tales?”

“About you and the sorcerer.”

“Jemeryl?” Tevi was talking mainly to distract herself.

“Yep.”

“What do they say?”

“Well, some say that you’re a demon she conjured up. Some say that you’re a wild bear she changed into human form. And some say that she made you out of clay and then brought you to life. Since half the troop have seen you bleeding, I guess the bear theory will currently be winning. But overall, the other stories are more popular.”

“Why?”

Hanno paused for a moment and looked at Tevi’s face, as if judging her mood. “Everyone knows that the two of you are lovers. Demons have a bit of a reputation in that respect. While the clay golem stories allow people to speculate that she might have made various modifications to normal human anatomy.”

Tevi’s groan had nothing to do with her injury. “I don’t think I want to hear.”

“No. You probably don’t.”

“The other soldiers don’t treat me like a monster.”

“They’re far too pleased to have you around. It gives them a nice, safe feeling to think they’re going into battle behind an invincible fighting demon. That’s why Ranenok said you’re worth six dozen ordinary soldiers. It’s not just the way you fight. You push up the troop’s morale.”

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Hanno removed one of his hands and examined Tevi's shoulder. "That's the worst of the bleeding stopped. Now we'll get you clean and bandaged."

Going very carefully, so not to break open the wound, the healer removed the shoulder guard from Tevi's cuirass and cut open her undershirt. Then he washed the blood away and examined her arm with his eyes closed, using whatever paranormal abilities he possessed.

As she watched him, Tevi reflected that in the Protectorate, healers were the most respected of witches. In Bykoda's Empire their talents did not even merit a full army commission.

"It should heal fine. No bones chipped or tendons cut," Hanno said eventually. He pulled clean bandages from his bag and also a small flask of liquid. "Remember I said getting the arrow out was the second-worst bit? This will stop infection." His eyes met Tevi's briefly as he removed the cork from the flask. "But it's gonna sting."

Once her wound was treated and bandaged, Hanno wrapped a blanket around Tevi for warmth and studied her face for a few seconds. "You'll be all right. You're looking very pale, but I think it's just the contrast with your hair. You don't normally see anyone quite as dark as you." He patted her good shoulder, smiled, and went to see to the other injured soldiers.

Tevi leaned back carefully against the wall behind her. She felt exhausted, miserable, and bitter. Her black hair was just one more thing that marked her out as different from the rest of the army. In the northern lands, blonds predominated.

For the first few months after arriving in Tirakhalod, she had stayed with Jemeryl in the castle and had found it intolerable. Life had often been difficult in the Protectorate, where the gap between sorcerers and the ordinary ungifted population was a huge social chasm. But no matter how insignificant Jemeryl's fellow Coven sorcerers might think Tevi to be, they had to abide by their oath of allegiance to the Protectorate, which guaranteed the rights of everyone. Citizens could not be subjected to magic against their will. Citizens could not be murdered, mutilated, or enslaved on a sorcerer's whim. Citizens could speak their own mind, elect their own guild masters, live their own lives.

Life for the ungifted was not like that in Tirakhalod. Very soon, Tevi had realised she could not stay in the castle. Her reason for needing time away was not just that everyone treated her as Jemeryl's slave. It

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was that in allowing Tevi to have her own thoughts and treating her as an individual, Jemeryl was viewed as displaying an amusing yet perverse affectation. Jemeryl's familiar, the magpie Klara II, was taken more seriously.

Yet, Tevi could not abandon Jemeryl. Joining Bykoda's army had been a compromise. Tevi had promised that if she could spend half her time out with the ungifted soldiers, earning her place by fighting against bandits, trolls, werewolves, and other assorted monsters, then she would struggle to put up with the daily humiliations of life in the castle for the remaining period.

Jemeryl had not been happy, terrified of the risks Tevi took each time she went into battle. But in the circumstances, she could not deny Tevi the right to make up her own mind. Tevi grimaced at the thought. Now there would be another scar for Jemeryl to get upset about, and what could Tevi feel had been gained by it?

She clenched her teeth at the irony. She had spent months out with the common ungifted soldiers, people like herself, demonstrating her abilities in her bid to be seen as a person in her own right. She had fought with them, suffered with them, saved their lives. And they still gave all the credit to Jemeryl.



Bykoda led the way down a series of stairs until they were deep underground. The passage had been hewn from the solid rock beneath the castle. Jemeryl could feel a chill radiating off the walls. The air smelt of mildew and mice.

The room they finally entered looked to be a store, either a treasury or an armoury—although, for a sorcerer empress like Bykoda, there was little difference between the two. A row of iron chests lined one wall. Books lay on a desk in the middle of the room. A large bookcase was filled with many more. Shelves held dozens of sealed bottles, crystals, charms, amulets, and some other artefacts that Jemeryl could not even name.

Bykoda unlocked one of the chests and took out a small wooden box, six inches square. Her expression was preoccupied, even wistful. She placed the box on the desk, but rather than open it immediately, she

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started to trace the carved pattern on the lid with her forefinger. When she spoke, her tone was dispassionate.

“I first received the oracle of my death four years ago. I was actually probing into another matter. It’s the annoying thing with foretelling. You only ever find out what you don’t want to know. I don’t blame anyone for not liking them. I wish I hadn’t bothered. It hasn’t done me any good, and I never did get the answer to my original question.”

“What did you see?”

“The moment of my death. I’m in my council chamber. It has to be one of the meetings I hold twice a year, because I’m sure that all of my acolytes are there, although I can’t see them.”

“Are you blinded?”

“No. I’m falling forwards out of my chair. My body feels like stone. A fist is squeezing around my heart. My lungs are blocked. And I can’t turn my head, say a word, anything. All I can see is the lamplight shining on the floor tiles as they rush closer until I thump into them. The next thing is a crash as the crystal shields drop and shatter. And then someone starts to speak. But the blood is roaring in my ears, so I can’t tell whose voice it is. I miss most of it. The only words that I get are ‘...and now you will die.’ My face is pressed against the floor. My eyes are fixed on one of the windows. Through the glass I see the third-quarter moon. Then blue fire bursts over me and...I stop.”

“Any other details?”

“No.”

“Why do you think that your acolytes are there?”

Bykoda shrugged. “Just part of the foretelling. But I’m sure that they are, and that only happens at the council meeting.”

“I imagine you’ve investigated the oracle further.”

“Oh yes.”

“What have you learned?”

“Nothing.”

Jemeryl pursed her lips while she added up the implication. “Then it’s certain.”

“I fear so. Of course, I didn’t simply give up. I tried everything I could think of, but it made no difference. It was after one of my failed attempts that I invited you here, by way of a backup plan. And I’ve been continuing with my efforts since, but it’s looking inevitable.”

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“But you think that I can do something to prevent you being murdered?”

“No.” Bykoda smiled sadly. “I’m reconciled to it.”

Jemeryl frowned. “So what do you want me to do?”

“I’d actually be happy if you became my successor. I’d die that little bit easier, knowing my murderer wouldn’t get to take over my Empire.”

“Um...I don’t think that—”

“It’s all right. I know the offer doesn’t interest you.” Bykoda looked up. Her usual brisk manner returned. “Sight of the moon was the only piece of information that I’ve been able to make any use of. I spent some time lying on the floor of the council chamber, getting an exact fix on its position in my vision. Then I did a calculation of its phases. I’ve been able to narrow the date of my death down to three days this autumn. By which time you’ll be safely back in Lyremouth.”

“Oh, well before then. Tevi and I planned on leaving as soon as the passes over the Barrodens were open. Spring’s on the way. We could go in about a month.” Jemeryl hesitated. “Do you want me to stay longer? To do whatever it is that you want me to do?”

“No. Because all that I want is for you to take something back with you to the Protectorate.”

Jemeryl was bewildered. How could any item be so critical? And how did it link into the oracle? “What?”

“This.”

Bykoda opened the box. Lying at the bottom was a stone talisman in the form of a thick disc, carved to look like woven rope. Patterns in silver were inlaid on its surface. An ungifted observer would have seen nothing more to it, but Jemeryl could examine the talisman with all of a sorcerer’s extended senses. Deep within the stone were other designs, nodes in the lines of power, links and branches. The talisman was one of the most complex constructions that Jemeryl had ever seen, and its purpose was not easy to discern.

“What does it do?”

“It can change the past.”

Jemeryl glanced up sharply. “That’s impossible.”

“No. Just very difficult. And it’s limited in scope. The only thing you can change with it is your own mind.” Bykoda gave a wry smile

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and picked up the talisman. “My father was a carpenter; my mother was a silversmith. From them I got a knack for creating artefacts. This was one of my most ambitious experiments.”

“Experiment? Does it work?”

“I believe so.”

“Have you never tried?”

“Almost certainly. But then, the futures where I needed to use it never happened, so I have no knowledge of them. The temporal energy of the paradox is stored in the talisman.”

Jemeryl took a few seconds to think. “So you can’t ever be sure?”

“Not totally. But I know of three specific occasions, when I had fixed on a particular course of action, and then suddenly, for no reason, I did something different. With hindsight, all three of those switched decisions averted misfortune.”

“They might just be coincidences.”

“They might. Except that I’m not an impulsive person. I’d never have survived this long if I were. You’d have to be me to realise how out of character those spontaneous decisions were. They went in the face of all logic and available information. What I suspect is that, first time around, I went with the planned course of action, and when disaster struck, I used the talisman to reverse my previous decision.”

Jemeryl stepped closer and stared at the talisman in amazement. Many attempts had been made to change the past. All had failed. Bykoda’s claim was unbelievable, except that the Empress was the shrewdest realist Jemeryl had ever met, and certainly not the sort of person to indulge in wild boasting.

“Why do you want me to take this to Lyremouth with me?”

“Because it’s no longer safe. I told you I believe I’ve used it successfully three times. However, there was one final occasion when I tried to use it and I was not at all successful. The talisman nearly ruptured and exploded in my face. I managed to lock it back down, but it was a close thing. That was over two decades ago and I haven’t attempted to use it since.”

“Do you know what went wrong?”

“I suspect that it was due to the situation more than the talisman. I had the choice of two candidates. I doubted the loyalty of one and the

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competence of the other. I made my decision on the basis that suitable threats could solve the loyalty issue, but nothing can be done with a fool. I was wrong, and the candidate betrayed me.”

“You tried to use the talisman to change your choice of candidate?”

“Yes.”

“So, isn’t it poss—”

“I know what you’re going to say. Three options: the first, that I’m sure you were going to point out, is that the talisman was inherently flawed all along and never worked. The other times I thought I’d used it were simple coincidence or due to getting a premonition without realising.”

“What are the other options?”

“The second is that, rather than just three times, I’ve used it hundreds, or even thousands of times. So by now, the energy of the stored temporal paradoxes is on the point of becoming catastrophically unbalanced.” Bykoda paused. “The third option is a variation on the second. Maybe both candidates produced their own version of a disaster and there was no right answer. Since, in using the talisman, I negate my knowledge of the future, I might have repeatedly picked one and then the other, putting a little more stress on the temporal web with each pass through, until time was at the point of rupture.”

“That’s your preferred option?”

“Yes.”

Jemeryl frowned in thought. “Would the talisman be safe to use now that we’re at a different point in the temporal web?”

“I wouldn’t recommend trying. Whichever option is the right one, the talisman is unbalanced. I can’t think of any emergency that would justify the risk. There’s always another solution. Like with my disloyal candidate.”

“What did you do?”

“I think you’d be happier not knowing the details. Let’s just say that she never betrayed me again.”

“Oh. Right.” Jemeryl took a breath, forcing her thoughts on. “Why do you want me to take it to Lyremouth?”

“Ideally to have it unmade. But if not, to keep it safe.”

“Unmade?”

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“If it can be done safely.”

“So why don’t you unmake it?”

“Because it is going to take more than one sorcerer acting alone. Especially if she only has a few months left to do it in.”

“I’m not sure if I ought to take it with me.”

“You don’t want to learn how I did it? Pry open its secrets?” Bykoda’s voice was teasing. “I wouldn’t have thought you’d be able to resist the temptation.”

“I’m worried that it’s too dangerous to have in the middle of Lyremouth. What if it caused a temporal cataclysm in the city? Hundreds of thousands would die.”

“It’s quite safe as long as you don’t try to do anything with it. And I’m sure the Coven will be able to find a secure environment when they start to investigate. Plus, it wouldn’t destroy a location so much as a series of causal relationships. *Somewhen* rather than *somewhere*. It’s far more dangerous leaving it here. Supposing an errant sorcerer tried to reverse a decision that had a profound effect on the Protectorate? All the miles between Tirakhalod and Lyremouth would be no protection.”

“Is there much chance of anyone doing that? Who, apart from you and me, knows about it?”

Bykoda sighed. Her rueful expression returned. “My acolytes. I mentioned it once as a threat. If ever they caused trouble, I’d use the talisman to retrospectively cut their heads off before they became a problem. But I didn’t allow for the temptation the talisman presents. I’m fairly certain that I’m going to be murdered by someone who wants the talisman for themselves. That was another strong impression I got from the foretelling.”

“Have you tried telling your acolytes that the talisman is now unsafe to use?”

“Yes. It made no difference. I suspect my assassin realised I was only saying it in an attempt to stop them from killing me and hasn’t worked out that this doesn’t necessarily mean I’m lying.”

“If somebody made a decision in the past that they desperately want to reverse, maybe your talisman is simply too great a lure. Your murderer won’t believe it is unusable because they don’t want to believe it.”

“It must be something like that. Which means if they get it, they will try to use it.” Bykoda took the talisman from the box and pressed

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it into Jemeryl's palm, making her fingers close in reflex around it. "So much of my life is bound up in the talisman. If it ruptures, I don't know what it would do to me. That is why I want you to keep it safe." The elderly sorcerer looked up and met Jemeryl's eyes sadly. "I can come to terms with dying, but I don't want to risk never having lived."