

# The High Priest and The Idol

Lyremouth Chronicles  
Book four

by

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## FOREWORD: THE RULE OF SORCERY

### **Magic changes everything**

**T**he 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. Many could 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 embryonic 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.

Only the founding of the Coven at Lyremouth 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. Calling themselves the Coven, they 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 dependable. 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.

It was a society where the circumstances of one's birth counted for nothing, compared to one's abilities. What did it matter who someone's parents were, or where they came from, if that person was a sorcerer? Rich or poor, male or female, dark skinned or pale, nothing counted in comparison to the ability to work magic.

However, there was no pretence at equality. The sorcerers were the unchallenged ruling elite. The social divide was an unbridgeable gulf, marked by distrust, bordering on outright hostility. For all the benefits the Coven brought, the common population viewed the sorcerers with resentment, and were in turn the subject of disdain.

The Coven sorcerer Jemeryl was a product of her civilisation and had never worried herself over the rights and wrongs of her status in society. Her goal in life was to study magic and rise up the Coven hierarchy. The ungifted subjects of the Protectorate were of as much concern to her as the sheep and cattle in the fields.

Meeting Tevi and falling in love changed Jemeryl's outlook more than she would have thought possible. Suddenly she found herself at odds with the leaders of the Coven, forced to justify and defend her relationship. The issue upsetting her fellow sorcerers was not that Tevi was also a woman—in the bisexual Protectorate this was viewed as

commonplace—but because Jemeryl’s lover was a common mercenary warrior. For Jemeryl this came as something of a revelation, forcing her to reconsider her place in the world she knew.

Whereas for Tevi, it came as no surprise at all. She had faced far worse condemnation on the islands of her birth, far outside the Protectorate. At least nobody on the mainland was going to kill her over the issue.

## Part One

# The High Priest

## CHAPTER ONE—SUMMONED TO LYREMOUTH

Before much longer, the progression of the equinoxes was going to progress off the edge of the paper. Jemeryl sat back and ruefully studied the diagram. Despite her careful planning, with hindsight she could see that she should have positioned the first astral alignment point further from the centre of the page. Was the situation retrievable if she shifted the dates on by twelve years so she could fit the earlier bits in on the left? Jemeryl nodded thoughtfully. That should work well enough.

Her satisfaction lasted less than a second. The new section would then take up the space allocated for the table of the lunar eclipses she had yet to add. In fact, the more Jemeryl looked at the half-completed work, the more she reached the conclusion that her whole approach had been wrong to start with. The figures should have been broken up by planetary conjunction, rather than year. Briefly, Jemeryl considered erasing part of the diagram and amending what was left, maybe even turning the sheet widthways, but then she picked up the paper, scrunched it into a ball, and tossed it into the fire. The paper burned with an agreeable finality. Jemeryl smiled and pulled a clean sheet towards her.

“What makes you think you’re going to do any better this time?”

The raucous voice was inhumanly devoid of inflection, but this did not stop Jemeryl catching the undertone of ridicule. She answered without looking up. “Because now I know what I’m doing.”

“Excuse me? Haven’t I heard that before? Paper doesn’t grow on trees, you know.”

“Your point being?”

Klara II landed on the desk in a blur of black and white feathers. She strutted forward to stand on the paper and stared up at Jemeryl. Her bead-like eyes glittered in the firelight. “My point being that you’ve wasted a lot of paper. Why do you have to start from scratch each time you make a mistake? It would be quicker to edit what you already have.”

“I want to get it right.”

“What is so important about this diagram?”

“Elthon, the idiot. He’s spent two years trying to demonstrate that lunar conjunctions can be used to underpin oracles.”

“So you’re going to waste three years and half a forest proving him wrong.”

“It won’t take me that long.”

“But you can’t comment on the forest? Look, the Protectorate isn’t going to collapse just because a weasel-faced, ginger-haired sorcerer produced a stupid diagram.”

“Elthon has black hair.”

“I wasn’t talking about him.”

“My hair’s too dark to count as ginger.” Jemeryl was grinning, knowing her familiar was merely trying to get a rise out of her. She pushed Klara off the paper.

“Check out a mirror sometime. Anyway, by the time you finish this diagram, it’ll be grey. I suppose next you’ll be telling me you’re not a pedantically over-obsessive crank?”

“No. That’s Elthon.”

“You know the thing about turning into whatever you most dislike?”

“Can’t see it applies, because I’m not about to turn into an annoying magpie.”

Wings flapped. For an instant, Jemeryl assumed Klara had flown off in disgust, before the sound registered as coming from behind. Jemeryl turned her head in time to catch sight of a carrier pigeon swooping in through the half-open study window.

“Oh look. It’s grey and gormless.” Klara latched on to the fresh target for her sarcasm.

“Don’t taunt the pigeon. It’s rude of you.”

“Why not? It’s too dense to notice.”

“It’s not nice.”

“Now who’s being rude? I think it’s a perfectly nice pigeon—just a bit on the stupid side.”

For its part, the carrier pigeon bobbed its head up and down, cooing, as if agreeing with Klara.

Jemeryl shook her head at her familiar. “You’re incorrigible.”

“Who’d want a corriged magpie?”

Jemeryl chose to ignore Klara’s question in favour of retrieving the note from the pigeon’s leg. However, reading the contents turned her expression and mood progressively less cheerful. She read it a second time and then started on a third pass, but broke off. The words on the paper were not going to change, no matter how many times she read them. On the surface, the summons was straightforward, but what lay behind it? Jemeryl glanced at the fire, tempted to let the note follow her failed diagram, but regrettably, the letter could not be dismissed so easily. She rang a small bell and a few seconds later the head of a servant appeared around the door.

“Yes, ma’am?”

“I want to talk to Captain Teverik. Can you find her for me? Er...” Jemeryl frowned at the sheet of paper in her hand. “Tell her I’d like to talk to her fairly soon, but it isn’t so urgent she needs to dash over if she’s busy.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The head withdrew.

Jemeryl wandered to the window. Her residence at the apex of the hill commanded a view over the densely packed streets of Horzt and the surrounding farmlands. A sky of washed blue hung over the scene. The air was heavy with the weight of spring. To her nose it was the scent of rich soil and pollen. To her extended sorcerer senses it was a riot of auras, about to erupt now that winter was fading. Her eyes focused on the line of mountains to the south. Beyond them was the city of Lyremouth, the home of the Coven. The pigeon had flown all the way from there with the letter—a personal summons from Alendy, the Guardian.

Seven months had passed since Alendy had been elected to the position, making him the leader of the Coven. For Jemeryl, these had been seven months of wondering what he would do, while trying to persuade herself that most likely he would do nothing. Now a message

had come. Was it what it seemed? Was she reading too much into it? Jemeryl chewed her lip. Would Alendy really be so blatant?

The door of the study opened again. “I got your message. Has something happened?”

The new arrival was Tevi, town guildmaster for the Mercenaries. Judging by the reinforced leather armour covering Tevi’s tall frame, and the sweat plastering her dark hair to her forehead, she had been drilling the town guard when the servant found her. Regardless of how the message had been phrased, Tevi had obviously rushed over, not taking the time to shed the protective wear.

Jemeryl took a moment to study her lover. Although Tevi cleaned up well, the active warrior style definitely suited her. In fact, no matter how Tevi dressed—or undressed—she was well worth looking at. Jemeryl smiled. Whatever Alendy was planning, separating them was one thing he would never succeed at.

Jemeryl nodded towards the pigeon. “I’ve just had a letter.”

“Is there a problem?”

“I assume so, though I don’t know what it is.”

“What?” Tevi’s face wrinkled in confusion.

Klara piped up. “Don’t worry. It’s not you. She’s been progressing equinoxes all morning. It always makes her turn cryptic.”

Tevi ignored the magpie and came close enough to put her hand on Jemeryl’s arm. “What is it?”

“In detail I don’t know but…” Jemeryl indicated the letter on her desk. “It’s a summons to go to Lyremouth immediately.”

“No other information?”

“None. Not even a hint. They’re sending an interim sorcerer to stand in for me. He should be here in a few days.” Jemeryl slipped her arm around Tevi’s waist for a quick hug before sinking back down in her chair. She picked up the paper but, rather than read, merely stared at it. The words were telling her nothing. The paper they were written on was just as informative. “And I’m to go alone.”

The air left Tevi’s lungs in a sigh and she dropped into a chair on the other side of the desk. For a while she sat glaring, before saying, “So. Alendy has decided to play games with us.”

“I don’t know. I can’t believe he’d be so blatant about it.”

“I can. It’s no secret he disapproves of us. Gilliard was on our side,

so there was nothing he could do while she was Guardian. But it's what now...seven, eight months since she died? I'd say that was the right sort of time-frame for him to get a feel for being Guardian and want to see what sort of power he has."

"Well, one thing he very definitely doesn't have the power to do, is to say who I share my bed with."

"Not directly. But he can order you to one end of the Protectorate and leave me at the other. We're perfectly free to be lovers, but not to get within a thousand miles of each other."

This was all familiar territory that they had covered often before. Jemeryl shook her head. "I've told you, there's no way he could get away with it. Wherever he sends me, you can join me. And if he keeps mucking around, what he's doing will be obvious to every other sorcerer in the Coven."

"Will they care? You know most are on his side."

"Oh true. My consorting with an ordinary citizen shows no regard for the status of sorcerer, and therefore demeans them as well." Jemeryl knew her ironic grin was a half shade away from being a grimace.

"Exactly. They aren't going to get upset about us."

"Not about us as such, but they will get upset. We sorcerers are very tetchy about our rights. We get irked enough by the rules we have to obey. We don't want to concede anything more. And we certainly don't want rules about our private lives. If I lose the right to pick my lover, then they do too."

Tevi started to speak, but Jemeryl held up her hand and went on. "As a member of the Coven, I'm sworn to obey the Guardian. But on the flip side, Alendy has sworn to vouchsafe the rights of Coven members. He's so obsessive about the pre-eminence of sorcerers. He can't have it both ways and decide I don't have the same sort of freedoms a farm hand would take for granted."

Tevi slumped back in her chair. "So what are you going to do?"

"I've got to obey the summons. Maybe, just maybe, Alendy has a good reason for it."

"And if not?"

"Then I'll pull out the Coven rule book and give him more grief than he'll know what to do with."

"I can go with you anyway. I'll help you turn the book's pages."

“If I obey his orders to the letter it’ll make me an irreproachable victim of an abuse of power, and my case will be all the stronger. Don’t worry. I can guarantee we’ll be back together again soon.”

“If you don’t come back, you know I’ll follow you. Wherever you are.”

“Yes. I’ll be counting on it.”

Tevi pursed her lips, clearly not mollified. “When will you go, and for how long?”

“I’ll leave tomorrow, but I can’t say when I’ll be back. I’ll leave Klara with you. I can use her to pass on messages.”

“And a damn sight more effective than the grey gimp over there.” Klara fluffed up her feathers.

Jemeryl reached out and stroked Klara with her forefinger. The magpie was her familiar. The bond between them was so close that, effectively, she was doing some of her thinking in Klara’s head. “By the time I get to Lyremouth, it will be too tiring to mind ride her for long. But no matter how far away I am, I’ll be able to make contact, if only for a few minutes a day. I’ll be able to let you know where I am, and what’s happening. The rest of the time, she’ll be quiet.”

“That’ll be no bad thing.” Despite her manifest discontent with the plan, Tevi gave a half grin.

Klara hopped onto Tevi’s wrist. “And I love you too, sweetie.”

