

## CHAPTER 1

The corpse's shrivelled, unbending fingers surrendered the bundle reluctantly. Wrestling the object out of the dead man's grip seemed disrespectful so Tyen worked slowly, gently lifting a hand when a blackened fingernail snagged on the covering. He'd touched the ancient dead so often they didn't sicken or frighten him now. Their desiccated flesh had long ago stopped being a source of transferable sickness, and he did not believe in ghosts.

When the mysterious bundle came free Tyen straightened and smiled in triumph. He wasn't as ruthless at collecting ancient artefacts as his fellow students and his teacher, but bringing home nothing from these research trips would see him fail to graduate as a sorcerer-archaeologist. He willed his tiny magic-fuelled flame closer.

The object's covering, like the tomb's occupant, was dry and stiff having, by his estimate, lain undisturbed for six hundred years. Thick leather darkened with age, it had no markings – no adornment, no precious stones or metals. As he tried to open it the wrapping snapped apart and something inside began to slide out. His pulse quickened as he caught the object . . .

. . . and his heart sank a little. No treasure lay in his hands. Just a book. Not even a jewel-encrusted, gold-embellished book.

Not that a book didn't have potential historical value, but compared to the glittering treasures Professor Kilraker's other two students had unearthed for the Academy it was a disappointing find. After all the months of travel, research, digging and watching he had little to show for his own work. He had finally unearthed a tomb that hadn't already been ransacked by grave robbers and what did it contain? A plain stone coffin, an unadorned corpse and an old book.

Still, the old fossils at the Academy wouldn't regret sponsoring his journey if the book turned out to be significant. He examined it closely. Unlike the wrapping, the leather cover felt supple. The binding was in good condition. If he hadn't just broken apart the covering to get it out, he'd have guessed the book's age at no more than a hundred or so years. It had no title or text on the spine. Perhaps it had worn off. He opened it. No word marked the first page, so he turned it. The next was also blank and as he fanned through the rest of the pages he saw that they were as well.

He stared at it in disbelief. Why would anyone bury a blank book in a tomb, carefully wrapped and placed in the hands of the occupant? He looked at the corpse, but it offered no answer. Then something drew his eye back to the book, still open to one of the last pages. He looked closer.

A mark had appeared.

Next to it a dark patch formed, then dozens more. They spread and joined up.

*Hello, they said. My name is Vella.*

Tyen uttered a word his mother would have been shocked to hear if she had still been alive. Relief and wonder replaced disappointment. The book was magical. Though most sorcerous books used magic in minor and frivolous ways, they were so rare that the Academy would always take them for its collection. His trip hadn't been a waste.

So what did this book do? Why did text only appear when it was opened? Why did it have a name? More words formed on the page.

*I've always had a name. I used to be a person. A living, breathing woman.*

Tyen stared at the words. A chill ran down his spine, yet at the same time he felt a familiar thrill. Magic could sometimes be disturbing. It was often inexplicable. He liked that not everything about it was understood. It left room for new discoveries. Which was why he had chosen to study sorcery alongside history. In both fields there was an opportunity to make a name for himself.

He'd never heard of a person turning into a book before. *How is that possible?* he wondered.

*I was made by a powerful sorcerer, replied the text. He took my knowledge and flesh and transformed me.*

His skin tingled. The book had responded to the question he'd shaped in his mind. *Do you mean these pages are made of your flesh?* he asked.

*Yes. My cover and pages are my skin. My binding is my hair, twisted together and sewn with needles fashioned from my bones and glue from tendons.*

He shuddered. *And you're conscious?*

*Yes.*

*You can hear my thoughts?*

*Yes, but only when you touch me. When not in contact with a living human, I am blind and deaf, trapped in the darkness with no sense of time passing. Not even sleeping. Not quite dead. The years of my life slipping past — wasted.*

Tyen stared down at the book. The words remained, nearly filling a page now, dark against the creamy vellum. Which was her skin . . .

It was grotesque and yet . . . all vellum was made of skin. While these pages were human skin, they felt no different to that made of animals. They were soft and pleasant to touch.

The book was not repulsive in the way an ancient, desiccated corpse was.

And it was so much more interesting. Conversing with it was akin to talking with the dead. If the book was as old as the tomb it knew about the time before it was laid there. Tyen smiled. He may not have found gold and jewels to help pay his way on this expedition, but the book could make up for that with historical information.

More text formed.

*Contrary to appearances, I am not an "it".*

Perhaps it was the effect of the light on the page, but the new words seemed a little larger and darker than the previous text. Tyen felt his face warm a little.

*I'm sorry, Vella. It was bad mannered of me. I assure you, I meant no offence. It is not every day that a man addresses a talking book, and I am not entirely sure of the protocol.*

She was a woman, he reminded himself. He ought to follow the etiquette he'd been raised to follow. Though talking to women could be fiendishly tricky, even when following all the rules about manners. It would be rude to begin their association by interrogating her about the past. Rules of conversation decreed he should ask after her wellbeing.

*So . . . is it nice being a book?*

When I am being held and read by someone nice, it is, she replied.

*And when you are not, it is not? I can see that might be a disadvantage in your state, though one you must have anticipated before you became a book.*

I would have, if I'd had foreknowledge of my fate.

*So you did not choose to become a book. Why did your maker do that to you? Was it a punishment?*

No, though perhaps it was natural justice for being too ambitious and vain. I sought his attention, and received more of it than I intended.

*Why did you seek his attention?*

## THIEF'S MAGIC

He was famous. I wanted to impress him. I thought my friends would be envious.

*And for that he turned you into a book. What manner of man could be so cruel?*

He was the most powerful sorcerer of his time, Roporien the Clever.

Tyen caught his breath and a chill ran down his back. *Roporien! But he died over a thousand years ago!*

Indeed.

*Then you are . . .*

At least as old as that. Though in my time it wasn't polite to comment on a woman's age.

He smiled. *It still isn't – and I don't think it ever will be. I apologise again.*

You are a polite young man. I will enjoy being owned by you.

*You want me to own you?* Tyen suddenly felt uncomfortable. He realised he now thought of the book as a person, and owning a person was slavery – an immoral and uncivilised practice that had been illegal for over a hundred years.

Better that than spend my existence in oblivion. Books don't last for ever, not even magical ones. Keep me. Make use of me. I can give you a wealth of knowledge. All I ask is that you hold me as often as possible so that I can spend my lifespan awake and aware.

*I don't know . . . The man who created you did many terrible things – as you experienced yourself. I don't want to follow in his shadow.* Then something occurred to him that made his skin creep. *Forgive me for being blunt about it, but his book, or any of his tools, could be designed for evil purposes. Are you one such tool?*

I was not designed so, but that does not mean I could not be used so. A tool is only as evil as the hand that uses it.

The familiarity of the saying was startling and unexpectedly reassuring. It was one that Professor Weldan liked. The old historian had always been suspicious of magical things.

*How do I know you're not lying about not being evil?*

I cannot lie.

*Really? But what if you're lying about not being able to lie?*

You'll have to work that one out for yourself.

Tyen frowned as he considered how he might devise a test for her, then realised something was buzzing right beside his ear. He shied away from the sensation, then breathed a sigh of relief as he saw it was Beetle, his little mechanical creation. More than a toy, yet not quite what he'd describe as a pet, it had proven to be a useful companion on the expedition.

The palm-sized insectoid swooped down to land on his shoulder, folded its iridescent blue wings, then whistled three times. Which was a warning that . . .

"Tyen!"

. . . Miko, his friend and fellow archaeology student was approaching.

The voice echoed in the short passage leading from the outside world to the tomb. Tyen muttered a curse. He glanced down at the page. *Sorry, Vella. Have to go.* Footsteps neared the door of the tomb. With no time to slip her into his bag, he stuffed her down his shirt, where she settled against the waistband of his trousers. She was warm – which was a bit disturbing now that he knew she was a conscious thing created from human flesh – but he didn't have time to dwell on it. He turned to the door in time to see Miko stumble into view.

"Didn't think to bring a lamp?" he asked.

"No time," the other student gasped. "Kilraker sent me to get you. The others have gone back to the camp to pack up. We're leaving Mailand."

"Now?"

"Yes. *Now*," Miko replied.

Tyen looked back at the small tomb. Though Professor Kilraker liked to refer to these foreign trips as treasure hunts,

his peers expected the students to bring back evidence that the journeys were also educational. Copying the faint decorations on the tomb walls would have given them something to mark. He thought wistfully of the new instant etchers that some of the richer professors and self-funded adventurers used to record their work. They were far beyond his meagre allowance. Even if they weren't, Kilraker wouldn't take them on expeditions because they were heavy and fragile.

Picking up his satchel, Tyen opened the flap. "Beetle. Inside." The insectoid scuttled down his arm into the bag. Tyen slung the strap over his head and shoulder and sent his flame into the passage.

"We have to hurry," Miko said, leading the way. "The locals heard about where you're digging. Must've been one of the boys Kilraker hired to deliver food who told them. A bunch are coming up the valley and they're sounding those battle horns they carry."

"They didn't want us digging here? Nobody told me that!"

"Kilraker said not to. He said you were bound to find something impressive, after all the research you did."

He reached the hole where Tyen had broken through into the passage and squeezed out. Tyen followed, letting the flame die as he climbed out into the bright afternoon sunlight. Dry heat enveloped him. Miko scrambled up the sides of the ditch. Following, Tyen looked back and surveyed his work. Nothing remained in the tomb that robbers would want, but he couldn't stand to leave it exposed to vermin and he felt guilty about unearthing a tomb the locals didn't wanted disturbed. Reaching out with his mind, he pulled magic to himself then moved the rocks and earth on either side back into the ditch.

"What are you *doing*?" Miko sounded exasperated.

"Filling it in."

"We don't have time!" Miko grabbed his arm and yanked

him around so that they both looked down into the valley. He pointed. "See?"

The valley sides were near-vertical cliffs, and where the faces had crumbled over time piles of rubble had built up against the sides to form steep slopes. Tyen and Miko were standing atop of one of these.

At the bottom of the valley a long line of people was moving, faces tilted to search the scree above. One arm rose, pointing at Tyen and Miko. The rest stopped, then fists were raised.

A shiver went through Tyen, part fear, part guilt. Though the people inhabiting the remote valleys of Mailand were unrelated to the ancient race that had buried its dead in the tombs, they felt that such places of death should not be disturbed lest ghosts be awakened. They'd made this clear when Kilraker had arrived, and to previous archaeologists, but their protests had never been more than verbal and they'd indicated that some areas were less important than others. They must really be upset, if Kilraker had cut the expedition short.

Tyen opened his mouth to ask, when the ground beside him exploded. They both threw up their arms to shield their faces from the dust and stones.

"Can you protect us?" Miko asked.

"Yes. Give me a moment . . ." Tyen gathered more magic. This time he stilled the air around them. Most of what a sorcerer did was either moving or stilling. Heating and cooling was another form of moving or stilling, only more intense and focused. As the dust settled beyond his shield he saw the locals had gathered together behind a brightly dressed woman who served as priestess and sorcerer to the locals. He took a step towards them.

"Are you mad?" Miko asked.

"What else can we do? We're trapped up here. We should just go talk to them. Explain that I didn't—"



The ground exploded again, this time much closer.

"They don't seem in the mood for talking."

"They won't hurt two sons of the Leratian Empire," Tyen reasoned. "Mailand gains a lot of profit from being one of the safer colonies."

Miko snorted. "Do you think the villagers care? They don't get any of the profit."

"Well . . . the Governors will punish them."

"They don't look too worried about that right now." Miko turned to stare up at the face of the cliff behind them. "I'm not waiting to see if they're bluffing." He set off along the edge of the slope where it met the cliff.

Tyen followed, keeping as close as possible to Miko so that he didn't have to stretch his shield far to cover them both. Stealing glances at the people below, he saw that they were hurrying up the slope, but the loose scree was slowing them down. The sorceress walked along the bottom, following them. He hoped this meant that, after using magic, she needed to move from the area she had depleted to access more. That would mean her reach wasn't as good as his.

She stopped and the air rippled before her, a pulse that rushed towards him. Realising that Miko had drawn ahead, Tyen drew more magic and spread the shield out to protect him.

The scree exploded a short distance below their feet. Tyen ignored the stones and dust bounding off his shield and hurried to catch up with Miko. His friend reached a crack in the cliff face. Setting his feet in the rough sides of the narrow opening and grasping the edges, he began to climb. Tyen tilted his head back. Though the crack continued a long way up the cliff face it didn't reach the top. Instead, at a point about three times his height, it widened to form a narrow cave.

"This looks like a bad idea," he muttered. Even if they didn't slip and break a limb, or worse, once in the cave they'd be trapped.

“It’s our only option. They’ll catch us if we head downhill,” Miko said in a tight voice, without taking his attention from climbing. “Don’t look up. Don’t look down either. Just climb.”

Though the crack was almost vertical, the edges were pitted and uneven, providing plenty of hand- and footholds. Swallowing hard, Tyen swung his satchel around to his back so he wouldn’t crush Beetle between himself and the wall. He set his fingers and toes in the rough surface and hoisted himself upward.

At first it was easier than he’d expected, but soon his fingers, arms and legs were tiring and hurting from the strain. *I should have exercised more before coming here. I should have joined a sports club.* Then he shook his head. *No, there’s no exercise I could have done that would have boosted these muscles except climbing cliff walls, and I’ve not heard of any clubs that consider that a recreational activity.*

The shield behind him shuddered at a sudden impact. He fed more magic to it, trying not to picture himself squashed like a bug on the cliff wall. Was Miko right about the locals? Would they dare to kill him? Or was the priestess simply gambling that he was a good enough sorcerer to ward off her attacks?

“Nearly there,” Miko called.

Ignoring the fire in his fingers and calves, Tyen glanced up and saw Miko disappear into the cave. *Not far now*, he told himself. He forced his aching limbs to push and pull, carrying him upward towards the dark shadow of safety. Glancing up again and again, he saw he was a body’s length away, then close enough that an outstretched arm would reach it. A vibration went through the stone beneath his hand and chips flew off the wall nearby. He found another foothold, pushed up, grabbed a handhold, pulled, felt the cool shadow of the cave on his face . . .

. . . then hands grabbed his armpits and hauled him up.

Miko didn't stop pulling until Tyen's legs were inside the cave. It was so narrow that Tyen's shoulders scraped along the walls. Looking downward, he saw that there was no floor to the fissure. The walls on either side simply drew closer together to form a crack that continued beneath him. Miko was bracing his boots on the walls on either side.

That "floor" was not level either. It sloped downward as the cave deepened, so Tyen's head was now lower than his legs. He felt the book slide up the inside of his shirt and tried to grab it, but Miko's arms got in the way. The book dropped down into the crack. He cursed and quickly created a flame. The book had come to rest far beyond his reach even if his arms had been skinny enough to fit into the gap.

Miko let go and gingerly turned around to examine the cave. Ignoring him, Tyen pushed himself up into a crouch. He drew his bag around to the front and opened it. "Beetle," he hissed. The little machine stirred, then scurried out and up onto his arm. Tyen pointed at the crack. "Fetch book."

Beetle's wings buzzed an affirmative, then its body whirled as it scurried down Tyen's arm and into the crack. It had to spread its legs wide to fit in the narrow space where the book had lodged. Tyen breathed a sigh of relief as its tiny pincers seized the spine. As it emerged Tyen grabbed Vella and Beetle together and slipped them both inside his satchel.

"Hurry up! The professor's here!"

Tyen stood up. Miko looked upwards and pressed a finger to his lips. A faint, rhythmic sound echoed in the space.

"In the aircart?" Tyen shook his head. "I hope he knows the priestess is throwing rocks at us or it's going to be a very long journey home."

"I'm sure he's prepared for a fight." Miko turned away and continued along the crack. "I think we can climb up here. Come over and bring your light."

Standing up, Tyen made his way over. Past Miko the crack narrowed again, but rubble had filled the space, providing an uneven, steep, natural staircase. Above them was a slash of blue sky. Miko started to climb, but the rubble began to dislodge under his weight.

"So close," he said, looking up. "Can you lift me up there?"

"Maybe . . ." Tyen concentrated on the magical atmosphere. Nobody had used magic in the cave for a long time. It was as smoothly dispersed and still as a pool of water on a windless day. And it was plentiful. He'd still not grown used to how much stronger and *available* magic was outside towns and cities. Unlike in the metropolis, where magic was constantly surging towards a more important use, here power pooled and lapped around him like a gentle fog. He'd only encountered Soot, the residue of magic that lingered everywhere in the city, in small, quickly dissipating smudges. "Looks possible," Tyen said. "Ready?"

Miko nodded.

Tyen drew a deep breath. He gathered magic and used it to still the air before Miko in a small, flat square.

"Step forward," he instructed.

Miko obeyed. Strengthening the square to hold the young man's weight, Tyen moved it slowly upwards. Throwing his arms out to keep his balance, Miko laughed nervously.

"Let me check there's nobody waiting up there before you lift me out," he called down to Tyen. After peering out of the opening, he grinned. "All clear."

As Miko stepped off the square a shout came from the cave entrance. Tyen twisted around to see one of the locals climbing inside. He drew magic to push the man out again, then hesitated. The drop outside could kill him. Instead he created another shield inside the entrance.

Looking around, he sensed the scarring of the magical atmosphere where it had been depleted, but more magic was already

beginning to flow in to replace it. He took a little more to form another square then, hoping the locals would do nothing to spoil his concentration, stepped onto it and moved it upwards.

He'd never liked lifting himself, or anyone else, like this. If he lost focus or ran out of magic he'd never have time to recreate the square. Though it was possible to move a person rather than still the air below them, a lack of concentration or moving parts of them at different rates could cause injury or even death.

Reaching the top of the crack, Tyen emerged into sunlight. Past the edge of the cliff a large, lozenge-shaped hot-air-filled capsule hovered – the aircart. He stepped off the square onto the ground and hurried over to join Miko at the cliff edge.

The aircart was descending into the valley, the bulk of the capsule blocking the chassis hanging below it and its occupants from Tyen's view. Villagers were gathered at the base of the crack, some clinging to the cliff wall. The priestess was part way up the scree slope but her attention was now on the aircart.

"Professor!" he shouted, though he knew he was unlikely to be heard over the noise of the propellers. "Over here!"

The craft floated further from the cliff. Below, the priestess made a dramatic gesture, entirely for show since magic didn't require fancy physical movements. Tyen held his breath as a ripple of air rushed upward, then let it go as the force abruptly dispelled below the aircart with a dull thud that echoed through the valley.

The aircart began to rise. Soon Tyen could see below the capsule. The long, narrow chassis came into view, shaped rather like a canoe, with propeller arms extending to either side and a fan-like rudder at the rear. Professor Kilraker was in the driver's seat up front; his middle-aged servant, Drem, and the other student, Neel, stood clutching the rope railing and the struts that attached chassis to capsule. The trio would see him and Miko, if only they would

turn around and look his way. He shouted and waved his arms, but they continued peering downward.

"Make a light or something," Miko said.

"They won't see it," Tyen said, but he took yet more magic and formed a new flame anyway, making it larger and brighter than the earlier ones in the hope it would be more visible in the bright sunlight. To his surprise, the professor looked over and saw them.

"Yes! Over here!" Miko shouted.

Kilraker turned the aircart to face the cliff edge, its propellers swivelling and buzzing. Bags and boxes had been strapped to either end of the chassis, suggesting there had not been time to pack their luggage in the hollow inside. At last the cart moved over the cliff top in a gust of familiar smells. Tyen breathed in the scent of resin-coated cloth, polished wood and pipe smoke and smiled. Miko grabbed the rope railing strung around the chassis, ducked under it and stepped on board.

"Sorry, boys," Kilraker said. "Expedition's over. No point sticking around when the locals get like this. Brace yourselves for some ear popping. We're going up."

As Tyen swung his satchel around to his back, ready to climb aboard, he thought of what lay inside. He didn't have any treasure to show off, but at least he had found something interesting. Ducking under the railing rope, he settled onto the narrow deck, legs dangling over the side. Miko sat down beside him. The aircart began to ascend rapidly, its nose slowly turning towards home.

## CHAPTER 2

It was impossible to be gloomy when flying with a steady tail wind on a clear, beautiful night. The bright reds and oranges of the setting sun had ended the banter between Miko and Neel, and an appreciative silence had fallen. Leratia's capital and home of the Academy, Belton, could put on some grand sunsets, but they were always tainted by smoke and steam.

To Tyen's senses, the aircart appeared to have a bow wave. Unlike a boat in water, the ripple in the atmosphere was caused by the removal, not displacement, of something: magic. In its place the dark shadow of Soot remained, and trailed behind them like smoke. Soot was hard to describe to anyone who couldn't sense it. It was merely the absence of magic, but when fresh it had texture, as if a residue had been left in magic's place. It moved, too – shrinking as magic slowly flowed in to fill the void.

As Tyen drew in more magic to power the propellers and heat the air in the capsule he relished the opportunity to use magic without restraint. It felt good to use it, he reflected, but it wasn't a physical pleasure. *More like the buzz you feel when something you're making is all coming together exactly as you planned,* he thought. Like the satisfaction he'd felt when making Beetle, and the other little mechanical novelties he sold to help finance his education.

While it was not difficult driving the aircart, it did demand concentration. Tyen knew that his skill with sorcery had guaranteed him a place on the expedition, as it meant Professor Kilraker didn't have to do all the driving.

"Getting chilly," Drem said to nobody in particular. Kilraker's manservant had dug around in the luggage earlier, careful to avoid losing any of it overboard, and found their airmen's jackets, hoods, scarves and gloves. Tyen had been relieved to know his bag must be in the pile somewhere, not left behind in the rush to leave Mailand.

A hand touched his shoulder and he looked up to see the professor nod at him.

"Rest, Tyen. I'll take us from here to Palga."

Letting his pull on magic go, Tyen rose and, holding the tensioned rope railing for balance, stepped around Kilraker so the man could take the driver's seat. He paused, considering asking why Kilraker had let him dig where the Mailanders hadn't wanted them to, but said nothing. He knew the answer. Kilraker did not care about the Mailanders' feelings or traditions. The Academy expected him and his students to bring back treasures, and that was more important to him. In every other way, Tyen admired the man and wanted to be more like him, but he'd come to see on this journey that the professor had flaws. He supposed everyone had. He probably had a few as well. Miko was always telling him he was well behaved to the point of being boring. That didn't mean he, or Kilraker, weren't likeable. Or so he hoped.

Miko and Neel were sitting with their legs dangling over one side at the central, widest, point of the chassis, while Drem sat cross-legged on the opposite side for balance, surprisingly flexible for a man of his age. Settling on the same side as the servant, but a small distance away, Tyen took off his gloves,



tucked them in his jacket pocket and drew the book out of his satchel. It was still warm. Perhaps he had imagined it earlier and now it only gave off the body heat it had gained from Tyen himself through the satchel pressed to his side. In the hours since then he'd almost convinced himself he'd imagined the conversation he'd had with it, though he hoped not.

He ought to hand her over to Kilraker now, but the man was busy and Tyen wanted to establish exactly what he'd found first.

"So, Tyen," Neel said. "Miko says you found a sarcophagus in that tomb. Was there any treasure in it?"

Tyen looked down at the book. "No treasure," he found himself saying.

"No jewellery? None of those baubles we found in the other caves?"

"Nothing like that. The occupant must have been poor when he died. The coffin lid wasn't even carved."

"Nobody buries poor men in stone coffins. Robbers must've got in there. That's gotta be annoying, after you wasted all that time working out where a tomb might be."

"Then they were very considerate robbers," Tyen retorted, letting a little of his annoyance enter his voice. "They put the lid back on the coffin."

Miko laughed. "More likely they had a sense of humour. Or feared the corpse would come after them if they didn't."

Tyen shook his head. "There were some interesting paintings on the walls. If we ever go back . . ."

"I don't know if anyone will be going back there for a while. The Mailanders tried to kill us."

Tyen shook his head. "The Academy will sort it out. Besides, if I'm only drawing the pictures on the walls, not taking anything away, the villagers might not object."

"Not take anything? Maybe when you're rich and can pay

for your own expeditions.” From Neel’s tone, he didn’t expect rich was something Tyen would ever be.

*It’s all right for him. Dumb as a brick, but family so wealthy and important he’ll pass no matter what his marks are or how little work he puts in.* Still, Neel was genuinely interested in history and did study hard. He idolised the famous explorers and was determined that he’d be able to hold a conversation with one if the opportunity came.

Sighing, Tyen opened the book. It was too dark to see the page now, so he created a tiny flame and set it hovering above his hands. Making a flame involved moving a tiny bit of air so quickly it grew hot and began to burn the air around it. Refining it to such a small light took concentration but, like a repetitive dance step, once he got it going he could focus on something else. When he fanned through the pages he was disappointed to see that the text that had appeared before was gone. He shook his head and was about to close the book again when a line appeared, lengthening and curling across a page. He opened the book at the new text.

*You lied about finding me.*

He blinked, but the words remained.

*You’re not what they’d consider “treasure”. Wait . . . how do you know that? I hadn’t opened you yet.*

*I only need someone to touch me. When they do I can form a connection to their mind.*

*You can read my mind?*

Yes. How else could I form words in your language?

*Can you alter anything there?*

No.

*I hope you’re not lying about being unable to lie.*

I am not. I am also as open to you as you are to me. Whatever information you ask for, I must give. But, of course, you must first know that information exists, and that I contain it.

Tyen frowned. *I suppose there had to be a price to using you, as with all magical objects.*

*This is how I gather knowledge quickly and truthfully.*

*I have the better side of the deal, then. You can hold a lot more knowledge than I do, though it will depend on what was known by the people who have held you. So what can you tell me?*

You study history and magic. Obviously I can't tell you about the last six hundred years because I was in the tomb, but I existed for many centuries before then. I have been held by great sorcerers, historians, as well as philosophers, astronomers, scientists, healers and strategists.

Tyen felt his heartbeat quicken. How much easier would it be to learn and impress his tutors with a book like this at his disposal? No more searching the library and studying late into the night.

Well, not as much of it, anyway. Her knowledge was at least six hundred years old, and much had changed in that time. A great revolution in reason and scientific practice had occurred. She could be full of errors. After all, she had collected knowledge from people, and even famous, brilliant people made mistakes and had been proven wrong.

On the other hand, if the Academy was wrong about something he couldn't use her to convince them. For a start, they'd never accept one source, no matter how remarkable. They would not accept her as proof of anything until they'd established how accurate she was. And then they'd decide she had more important uses than allowing a student to satisfy his curiosity, or take short cuts with his education.

*Your friends and teacher keep some discoveries for themselves. Why shouldn't you keep me?*

Tyen looked over at the professor. Tall and lean, with short-cropped hair and moustache curled as was the current fashion, Kilraker was admired by students and peers alike. His adventures had brought him academic respect and furnished him

with many stories with which to charm and impress. Women admired him and men envied him. He was the perfect advertisement to attract students to the Academy.

Yet Tyen knew that Kilraker didn't quite live up to the legend. He was cynical about his profession and its benefits to the wider world, as if he had lost the curiosity and wonder that attracted him to archaeology in the first place. Now he only seemed to care about finding things he could sell or that would impress others.

*I don't want to be like him, he told Vella. And to keep you could mean I was depriving the Academy of a unique and possibly important discovery.*

*You must do what you feel is right.*

Tyen looked away from the page. The sky had darkened completely now. Stars freckled the sky, so much more brilliant and numerous away from a big city's glow and smog. Ahead and below the aircart lay lines and clusters of lights more earthly than celestial: the town of Palga. He estimated they'd arrive in an hour or so.

The book – Vella – had already connected with his mind twice. Did she already know everything about him? If so, anybody who held the book could find out anything about him. They had only to ask her. She had admitted that she must give whatever information she contained to whoever asked for it.

But what did he have to hide? Nothing important enough to make him wary of using her. Nothing that wasn't worth the risk of others finding out embarrassing things and teasing him about them. Nothing he wouldn't exchange for the knowledge gleaned from centuries of great men handling the book.

Like the "great sorcerers" she had mentioned. And Roporien himself. He looked back down at the page. He wouldn't reach the Academy for several days. Perhaps he would be forgiven

for holding onto her until then. After all, Kilraker might not have time to examine her properly during the journey home. Tyen might as well learn as much from her as possible in the meantime.

*Do you know everything that Roporien did?*

Not everything. Roporien knew that for me to be an effective store of knowledge I must be able to access the minds of those who hold me, but he had secrets he wasn't willing to risk revealing. So he never touched me after my making. He had others ask questions of me, but he rarely needed to.

*Because he already knew all that there was to know?*

No. Since a stronger sorcerer can read the mind of a weaker one, and Roporien was stronger than all other sorcerers, he did not need me in order to spy on anyone's mind. Most of those he wanted information from did not attempt to withhold it. They gave it out of awe or fear.

Tyen's mind spun as he contemplated sorcerers with the ability to read minds. They must have been powerful indeed. *But why would Roporien create a book that he couldn't use?*

Ah, but he didn't have to touch me in order to use me. By having others touch me he could teach them and spread knowledge.

*That is an unexpectedly noble act for a man like Roporien.*

He did so for his own benefit. I was a tool for teaching his fighters the lessons of war, to show his servants how to provide the best in everything, and inspire the greatest makers and artists in all the worlds so that he could use the magic produced by their creating.

*Magic produced by their creating? Wait. Are you saying . . . You're not saying . . .?*

That their creativity generated magic? Yes, I am.

Tyen stared at the page in dismay. *That's superstitious nonsense.* It is not.

*It certainly is. It is a myth rejected by the greatest minds of this age.* How did they disprove it?

He felt a flash of irritation as he realised he did not know. *I will have to find out. There will be records. Though . . . it could*

*be simply that it has not been proven to be true, rather than disproved.*

So you would have to believe it, if someone proved it was true?

*Of course. But I doubt anyone would succeed. Rejecting primitive beliefs and fears and embracing only what can be proven is what led us into a modern, enlightened time. Gathering and examining evidence, and applying reason led to many great discoveries and inventions that have improved the lot of men.*

Like this aircart you travel in.

*Yes! Aircarts and aircarriages. Railsleds and steamships. Machines that produce goods faster than ever before – like looms that make cloth quicker than twenty weavers working at once, and machines that can print copies of a book, all the same, by the thousands, in a few days.*

Tyen smiled at the thought of all that had changed in the world since she had last “lived”. What would she make of the progress men had made, especially in the last century? She would be impressed, he was certain. A feeling rather like pride swelled within him, and suddenly he had another reason to delay handing her over to Kilraker and the Academy.

She needed to know how the world had changed. She needed her store of knowledge updated. He would have to teach her before he handed her over. After all, if she still believed in superstitions then they might not just declare her an inaccurate source, but a dangerous one.

A familiar, unsettling feeling in his stomach told him that the aircart was beginning to descend and he looked up. Palga was much closer now. Closing the book, he slipped her into his satchel, which he’d kept slung across his chest since escaping the Mailanders, and let his flame die, but Vella was foremost in his thoughts as they slowly dropped towards the small town.

*I suppose there is no way she could be an accurate source of knowledge, having missed the last six hundred years of progress and knowing nothing more than what the people who held her did. Yet*

*that makes her a fascinating insight into the past. In return for what she teaches me it seems fair that I give her the knowledge she was designed to absorb. The Academy will only be interested in what they can take from her, so I must do it before I hand her over.*

Palga's landing field was, as with most towns, on the outskirts in a field next to the main road. Two more aircarts lay on the grass, their cooling capsules carefully pegged down next to their chassis. As Kilraker's descended Tyen moved to the front to take the looped nose rope, while Drem ducked under the railing in preparation to leap to the ground. Neel had taken the tail rope and Miko was at the rear.

"That's Gowel's cart, isn't it?" Miko said as they floated past the landed carts.

"It certainly is." Kilraker chuckled. "Let's hope he's recently arrived, or there'll be no good dusky left at the Anchor Inn. Ready?"

Drem and Miko barked an affirmation.

"Jump!" the professor ordered.

As the pair leapt to the ground the aircart's descent slowed abruptly and, with less weight bearing it down, it began to rise again. Kilraker looked up at the capsule. Flaps lifted, allowing hot air to spill out. The ascent slowed, then the cart began to sink again.

"Ropes!"

Tyen tossed the nose rope down to Drem, who caught it and drew up the slack. They were a well-coordinated team now, having landed the cart several times on this expedition. As the chassis settled on the ground, Tyen tossed a ring peg down and used magic to ram it into the earth. Drem fed the rope through the ring while Tyen hurried to the back to repeat the process with Miko.

With the cart secured, Kilraker, Neel and Tyen could step off the chassis. The professor strode away to arrange transport

to the Academy Hotel, while Drem set to untying their luggage.

"Put what's to be locked inside the chassis on the right and what you're taking to the hotel on the left," he told them as he lifted the first item.

"Left," Miko said. Then, as the servant sorted through the luggage: "Hurry up, Drem. Gowel's been away for a year. He'll have some tales to tell."

"I'm going as fast as I can, young Miko," Drem replied. "And there's plenty of hours left until the ridiculous time of the night Gowel will keep us all up to."

"I'm sure the professor will let you go to bed long before then," Tyen said. "One of us has to be lucid enough to get this thing off the ground tomorrow morning."

"Tomorrow afternoon, most likely," Drem grumbled.

By the time they had the deck clear, the capsule had cooled enough that it could be tied down beside the chassis. A hire cart had rolled up and Kilraker had haggled down the fee to a reasonable rate. Tyen helped Drem to pack luggage into the aircart chassis and the servant locked the hatch, then they all grabbed their bags and hastened to the hire cart.

Kilraker was smiling as they piled on board. *Looking forward to catching up with his friend and competitor*, Tyen thought. *I wonder . . .* perhaps he should slip Vella down his shirt again. She might learn something from the stories the two archaeologist adventurers would tell that night.



## CHAPTER 3

The Academy maintained a hotel in every city and town in the Empire worth visiting. Though Palga was too small to be called a city, Tyen wasn't surprised that the town had one. Favourable winds made it a favourite stopover for air and sea travellers, of which many were Academy graduates of some sort.

He had been amazed at the size of the hotel, however. It seemed disproportionately large for the town, and most of the locals were employed in servicing or supplying it. Yet though everything was of exemplary quality, Kilraker assured them that it was to the Anchor Inn, the establishment on the other side of the road, that the younger graduates flocked to share a "bite" of dusky and boast of their journeys to the far reaches of the Empire and beyond. Adventurer men, and the occasional woman, of the non-academic and foreign kind also frequented the inn, and were often willing to share a tale or two.

As Tyen followed Kilraker and the other students into the inn's public room, noise and warmth surrounded him. At the same time he was conscious of the book tucked into his shirt, its shape hidden under his waistcoat. Drem had insisted they all change into their usual city clothes: shirt, waistcoat, trousers, jacket and cap – not worn since they'd passed through Palga on the way to Mailand, after which they'd donned

practical dust-coloured mar-cloth trousers and shirts along with warm airmen's jackets, hoods, scarves and gloves.

As he entered the drinking room, Kilraker set his hat on one of a row of nails along the nearest wall. The students set their caps in a line below it and followed the professor towards a cluster of four men sitting at one of the inn's trestle tables. One of the four looked up, his teeth flashing in a well-tanned face as he saw them.

"Vals!" he bellowed. "I thought you weren't due back for another week or two."

"I wasn't," the professor replied, moving around the table so he could slap the other man's shoulders in greeting. "We had a bit of trouble with the natives. Nothing I couldn't have dealt with by myself, but I didn't want to risk harm coming to the boys." He turned to Tyen, Miko and Neel. "I think you have met Tyen Ironsmelter and Neel Long before, but not young Miko Greenbar. Boys, this is Tangor Gowel, the famous adventurer."

"Famous?" Gowel waved a hand dismissively. "Only among our kind, where fame has less value than friendship." He gestured to the other men. "Kargen Watchkeep, Mins Speer and Dayn Zo, my travel companions. Friends, this is Vals Kilraker, professor of history and archaeology at the Academy. Now sit and tell me where you've been." He waved at a passing server. "Four more glasses here!"

"Tell me where *you've* been first," Kilraker retorted. "I heard you'd crossed the Lower Latitudinal Mountains and reached the Far South."

Gowel grinned, his moustache broadening. "You heard right."

"In that little aircart we tied up next to in the landing field?"

"Indeed."

"Did the air get a little thin during the crossing?"

All four men nodded. "But we found a pass of sorts. A passage through the peaks."

"And what lay on the other side?"

The server arrived with the glasses, and Gowel poured a generous measure of rich, dark dusky into them and those of his friends. "The Far South is as Discoverer Lumber described," he answered, handing them each a glass. "Strange animals and stranger people. The atmosphere is strong in magic and what they do with it . . ." His eyes brightened with the memory. "We saw the legendary Tyeszal – which Lumber translated as Spirecastle. A city carved into a great pinnacle of rock as tall as a mountain. Suspended platforms haul people and produce up and down its hollow centre, and children fly around the outside carrying messages and small items."

Kilraker took a good swig of dusky, his eyes never leaving Gowel's face. "So not an exaggeration after all." It seemed to Tyen that some muscle twitched or tightened in the professor's face, and gave a fleeting impression of envy. "What are the natives like?"

"Civilised. Their king is friendly to foreigners and open to trade. Their sorcerers are well learned and they have a small school. Though far behind us in technological invention they have developed some methods and applications I had not seen before." He shrugged. "Though I could be mistaken. Magic is not my area of expertise, as you know. My mission was not for the Academy but for Tor and Brown Associates, who directed me to find untapped resources and new trade, as well as an aircart route through the mountains."

Kilraker finished his drink. "Did you find any resources and new trade?"

Gowel nodded and drew a large, leather-bound book out of his jacket. He flicked through the pages, giving them glimpses

of neat writing and sketches. The adventurer stopped at a page to describe the plants and animals, both domestic and wild, that he'd found. He opened the book at a map, where he pointed out the location of the different peoples he and his companions had encountered. Tyen noted a line threading through an arch of mountains bordering the top of the map. Was this the route the adventurers had taken?

When Gowel had finished, Kilraker looked from the book to his friend and smiled.

"Surely that's not *all* you brought back with you?"

"Oh, the usual samples of flora and fauna, minerals and textiles."

"No treasures to sell to the Academy?"

Gowel shook his head. "Nothing that would have weighed down the aircarts."

The professor grunted in reluctant agreement. "Gold and silver are cursedly heavy."

"Knowledge is of greater value than gold and silver," Gowel told him. "I make more money from my books and lectures than from treasure these days, even if the Academy calls me a liar. Perhaps because they do." His gaze shifted from Miko to Neel and then Tyen. "Don't let the venerable institution narrow your minds, boys. Get out there and decide for yourself what is folklore and what is truth."

"It's all very well for wealthy men like you, Gowel," Kilraker said. "But most of us can't afford to come home empty-handed. We need to justify the Academy financing our expeditions by adding to the venerable institution's wisdom or wealth. Preferably wealth."

"And we don't want to get ourselves thrown out of the Academy, as you were," Neel added, giving the older man the sort of challenging stare that only those from his class would dare. Kilraker chuckled.

Gowel stared back at the boy. "Contrary to what the gossip papers say, I wasn't thrown out: I resigned from my position."

Neel frowned. "Why would you do a thing like that?"

The adventurer's smile was grim. "I once found a marvel – an object of little monetary value but great magical potential that might have benefited thousands – and they locked it away where nobody but they could see and use it."

Tyen felt his heart skip a beat. *Is that what they will do to Vella? Lock her away where nobody would touch her? She would hate that.* But surely, once the Academy realised how useful she could be, she would be held and read all the time. By men with greater knowledge and intelligence than his. How could he deny her that when it was what she'd been made for?

"I should have kept it." Gowel scowled, and Tyen was surprised to see Kilraker nodding. "From what Vals tells me, it's sitting unused and forgotten in the vault. The Academy is greedy and selfish. Knowledge and the wonders of the world should be available to all, so that anybody can improve themselves if they wish to," Gowel continued. "My dream is to build a great library in Belton that people may come to free of charge, to learn of the world and its wonders."

It was an admirable dream, and Tyen felt a stab of guilt at his wish to keep Vella. To do so would be selfish. Others should benefit from her, too. But if the Academy treated her the same as the object Gowel had found, would anyone benefit from her? And while Kilraker's words about justifying their expeditions had reminded him of the other reason he should hand her over to the Academy, wouldn't doing so simply to gain higher grading be just as selfish?

Whatever he did, he ought to update the information she contained first. And work out if she did always tell the truth. It would increase the likelihood of the Academy seeing her as a valuable object worth using, and it was what she would want,

since her purpose was to gather knowledge. It would also give him time to decide what to do.

The longer he kept her the worse it would look when he finally did, so he'd have to work quickly, taking every opportunity to teach her. It was clear telling her that she was wrong about something wasn't enough to change the information she held. She had resisted when he'd tried to correct her on the relationship between creativity and magic. He needed proof to convince her of her error. And by the time he handed her over to the Academy he must be able to demonstrate that her knowledge could be corrected.

He looked around, wishing he could start now. It would draw premature attention to Vella if he took her out and started reading in the inn, but if he went back to the hotel it would be hours before the others returned. Miko and Neel would be amazed he was willing to miss out on Gowel's tales – not to mention free dusky – but it had been a long, exciting day and he'd spent a large part of it driving the cart, so they'd believe him if he said he was tired. He drained his glass, set it down and yawned.

"Forgive me," he said. "But I'm going to turn in for the night."

The other students were staring at him in surprise, but Kilraker nodded sympathetically. "It has been a long day. Perhaps you all should—"

"I'm fine," Neel declared. "Not tired at all." Miko straightened and nodded in agreement. The pair looked at him sidelong.

Tyen hesitated as if nearly persuaded by their mockery, then shook his head. "I'm bound to get the first driving shift tomorrow," he retorted quietly. He rose and nodded politely to Gowel and his companions, then Kilraker, then strode over to retrieve his cap before climbing the stairs to the main doors.

He slipped out and crossed the road. The Academy Hotel was quiet, two older men reading papers in the lounge and few staff about. Tyen hurried up the stairs to the dorm he shared with the other students. Though more simply furnished than Kilraker's suite, it was much finer than the room he shared with Miko back at the Academy itself.

He hauled his bags off the bed he'd claimed when they'd first arrived and took off his boots. Then he settled with his back against the headboard and fished Vella from inside his shirt. Opening to the first page, he waited for the letters to form.

Hello, Tyen.

*I have a few hours before the others get back. Can I ask you some questions?*

Of course. Answering questions is what I was made for.

*Where to start? I have so many. Where are you from? What were you before you became a book? Why did Roporien choose you? How did he make you?*

One question at a time is best. Each new question nullifies the previous one.

*I beg your pardon. So . . . Where are you from?*

I was born in the city of Ambarlin in the country of Amma in the world Ktayl.

*The world Ktayl? Are you saying there are other worlds?*

Yes.

*How many other worlds are there?*

Nobody knows. Not even the great Roporien knew.

*A lot, then.*

Yes.

Tyen felt a thrill of excitement. The theory that other worlds existed was often debated in the Academy. Many historical sources referred to worlds beyond this one, yet nobody had been able to physically prove it. Some well-respected academics believed it to be true. They had formed the Society of

Other-Worlders, a group that was mocked, but not as loudly or derisively as other, equally strange societies.

*Can you prove that there are other worlds?*

I can teach you how to travel between them, if you have the strength — or, as you call it, the reach.

His heart began to race. To explore other worlds . . . he'd become more famous than Gowel.

*How much reach do I need?*

That depends on the amount of magic this world contains. From what I have seen of it in your mind so far, I doubt it would be within the reach of any but the most powerful sorcerers.

Tyen's heart sank. He knew his reach was good, but there had to be plenty of other sorcerers with greater ability than him.

*Could you still prove there are other worlds even if I didn't have enough reach to travel to them?*

Judging by your disinclination to believe me when I tell you that creativity generates magic, I doubt it.

He laughed quietly at that.

*Tell me more about yourself. How did you meet Roporien?*

When I was not many years an adult I travelled to Uff, a great city that attracted artists and writers from all over Ktayl. I established myself as a sorcerer-bookbinder and my wares were soon so sought-after that I began to grow famous and wealthy.

*From making books?*

Yes. My books were not only beautiful, but they used magic in new ways to display, preserve and hide their contents. They might glow so you could read them in the dark. They might use magic to preserve themselves, so they lasted longer. They might contain a magical lock, or burst into flames if taken too far from their owner. My clients were wealthy and powerful: sorcerers, successful artists, intellectuals, the rich and powerful, and even royalty. That was how Roporien learned of me. He saw one of my books and realised that I knew something he did not, so he came to me to seek my secrets.

*And you refused to give them to him?*



Of course not! I knew of Roporien, as anyone who moved among the powerful did. Only a fool would deny him what he sought. Since he could read it all from my mind anyway there was no point in trying to hide anything. My mistake was pride. He approached me while I was drinking one night with my friends. They were all artists of one kind or other, and I could see they were impressed and afraid. I wanted to show off and prove I was not fearful, so I invited Roporien to my home. He accepted.

*But you were afraid?* Tyen guessed.

A little. But he was also very handsome, or so I thought at the time. I learned later that he could alter his appearance to enhance what a woman found attractive about him. It was said he had always valued artists, for that reason you consider superstitious nonsense.

Tyen went back to read the last two paragraphs again.

*Are you saying . . . ?*

That I took him as a lover? Yes.

He stared at the book to remind himself that it was a collection of pages and binding that he was conversing with, not a full-grown in-the-flesh woman. Did it make it easier, somehow, to accept what she had told him without thinking less of her? He wasn't sure. *She lived in a different time and a different place – a whole other world if that is true. Perhaps this was acceptable behaviour for a respected woman in that place and time.*

It wasn't the scandal it would be in this time and place. But it was a stupid thing to do.

*Because it led to him making you into a book?*

Not directly. But it is dangerous to put yourself in the presence of someone who has lived so long that the lives and feelings of others are of no concern.

*He was . . . you invited an old man to your bed?*

Yes, but not as you imagine. Roporien was many, many centuries old, but, like most of the unageing, he had the body of a man in his prime.

*Unageing? But he is only mentioned in history over a fifty-year period.*

He found this world in the last fifty years of his life. As I told you, there are

many, many worlds. Even a man as old as Roporien could still discover new ones.

Tyen wanted to ask more questions about Roporien, but he also did not want to stray from Vella's story.

*So what happened that led him to make you into a book?*

I showed him the books I had made, including a new kind that I had recently succeeded in creating that allowed the person holding it to write on the page using mere thought. But in creating it I'd had another leap of insight, and saw a way to make that writing remain invisible until the reader willed it to appear. He was impressed. In the morning I rose to find him examining the book closely. He lifted me up and laid me on the table, but I realised too late that his purpose was not seduction. Instead he began to make his own book, using my body as the sole source of his materials.

Tyen shuddered. *He killed you.*

I am not dead.

*But you're not walking and breathing either. Surely you aren't happy with what was done to you?*

I am not happy, but neither am I unhappy.

*You were rich and young and I imagine you were beautiful, too. He took all of that away. I'd be furious!*

I do not feel in the way that I would if I had a whole body to express it with. I know that what was done was cruel and unjust. I am aware of the absence of a body somewhat like an amputee is conscious of the absence of a limb. But without it I cannot rage or grieve.

*Can you feel pain?*

No. Not since the transformation began.

Since it began. *So most of it did not hurt?*

Yes. His work was easier once he blocked the pain.

*How did he . . . no, I don't want to know.*

You do, but you fear I will be offended by your revulsion or distressed by the memory. I do not mind. Remember, I cannot feel such emotions.

Tyen looked at the book lying open in his hands, noticing for the first time the elegance of the script, and a sadness

welled up inside him. She hadn't asked to be made into a book. If she could not feel emotions then she had lost not only the ability to feel fear or revulsion, but also love and hope. She might have lived a thousand years, but not as a whole person.

He heard familiar laughter from somewhere beyond the door and sighed. Closing the book, he slipped her into his satchel.

*The Academy had better take good care of you, Vella, he thought. You've been through too much to end your life unconscious and slowly deteriorating in a lost corner of the vault.*