

THE THIEF'S GAMBLE
The First Tale of Einarinn
Juliet E McKenna



Chapter One

taken from;
Wealth and Wisdom
A Gentleman's Guide to their Acquisition and Keeping
by
Tori Samed

Gambling

Most gambling revolves around the runes of the ancient races, their use for divination and other such superstitions having long been discarded in civilised countries. Some games are based purely on randomly drawing of a predetermined number of runes; others rely on casting combinations that earn greater or lesser scores. In either instance, cultivating a memory for what has gone before is recommended.

The best place to gamble is with friends, in convivial surroundings accompanied by a good vintage, provided that the stakes and means of redeeming debts have been agreed beforehand. When travelling, many of the better inns in the cities and on the major coach routes will have a permanent gaming table with a resident host. Such games are generally played fair and can run to very high stakes. If you have sufficient skill, you may rise from the table, your purse heavy with coin. However, any debts incurred in such company must be honoured instantly, if you wish to avoid having your goods and luggage seized in payment.

Do not be beguiled into a casual contest in a city thronged at festival time. Beware the amiable stranger who offers you a friendly game to wile away a dull evening in a back-roads tavern. Such men prey on the unwary, turning the game mercilessly to their advantage with weighted runes and sleight of hand. Turned away from hearth and home, disgraced or fugitive, they are little better than mercenaries and thieves.



*The Packhorse Tavern, on the Col Road South of Ambafost, Ensaimin
12th of For-Autumn*

There are some opportunities that should come labelled ‘too good to be true.’ Of course, ten years of living by my wits should have taught me to spot them. You would have thought so anyway; so would I.

The night this particular opportunity came to wreak havoc in my life, I was sitting comfortably full of good dinner in front of a roaring fire and listening to the wind tearing at the snug inn. I was wearing my usual nondescript travelling clothes and with any luck, the other patrons in the tap-room would have been hard put to decide my age, sex or business. Being unremarkable is a talent I cultivate: middling height, middling build, nothing special – unless I choose differently. Feet up on a stool and hat over my eyes, I may have looked half-asleep, but mentally I was pacing the room and kicking the furniture. Where was Halice? We had been due to meet up here four days ago and this unplanned stay was eating into my funds. It was unlike her to be late for a meet. On the few occasions it had happened before, she had always got a message through. What should I do?

I counted my money again; not that anyone else in the room noticed as I slipped my fingers into the pouch under my shirt and sorted the coin. I carry noble coin on me night and day; I’ve had to abandon my belongings a few times and being caught out with no money leads to bad experiences. I had thirty Caladhrian Stars, ten Tormalin Crowns and reassuringly bulky, three Empire Crowns. They were more than enough to give me a stake for the Autumn Fair at Col and I had a heavy pouch of common coin upstairs which would cover my travelling expenses as long as I left in the morning. If I waited any longer I’d have to pay carriers’ coach fair and that would seriously eat into my reserves.

The problem was that I did not want to work the Autumn Fair on my own. Lucrative as it is, it can be a dangerous place and while I can take care of myself nowadays, Halice is still a lot handier than me with her sword and her knives. Working as a pair has other advantages too; when someone feels their luck with the runes is going bad, it’s a lot harder to see why when there are two people adjusting the odds. As an added bonus, people never expect two women to be working the gambling together, even in a big city. I could hook up with other people but Halice is better than most as well as more honest than some.

Of course, the most likely explanation was that Halice was stuck in some lord’s lock-up awaiting the local version of justice. I cursed out loud, forgetting myself for a moment but luckily no one seemed to have noticed. There were only three other people in the tap-room and they were deep in conversation with the inn-keeper. They were merchants by their dress; this was a well-travelled business route and the chances were they were heading for Col. The filthy weather seemed to be keeping the locals by their own firesides, which was fine by me.

If Halice was in trouble, there was no way I could help her. Identifying myself as her friend would simply land me in shackles too. I frowned. It was hard to believe Halice would get herself into trouble she could not get clear of. That was one of the main reasons we worked Ensaimin for the most part. Competition for trade means a reassuring lack of those inconveniences like circulating reward notices and co-operative watch commanders, which make prosy places like Caladhria so inhospitable. Trouble here is seldom so bad it cannot be left behind once you cross a local boundary and we take care never to outstay our welcome.

So there I was, sitting and fretting and sipping rather good wine when a very wet

horseman strode into the bar and beckoned to mine host. I could not hear what they were saying, and that immediately piqued my curiosity, but I could not move closer without drawing attention to myself. The horseman passed over a small parchment and I heard the chink of coins. As he left, the innkeeper unfolded the letter or whatever it was and the merchants crowded round.

‘So what does it say?’ a thin man in a stained yellow tunic asked.

‘Dunno, I can’t read.’ The innkeeper shrugged his fat shoulders.

‘I’ll need to find out before I tack it up though, money or no.’

I bit my lip with frustration; I can read, thanks to a mother determined I should have every advantage to offset my birth but there was no way I was going to make myself conspicuous by offering help.

‘Here.’ The thin man’s companion reached for the parchment and frowned at it. ‘Where’s The Running Hound?’

‘It’s the big coaching inn on the market in Ambafost.’ The third merchant piped up, peering over the reader’s leather clad shoulder.

‘Well, there’s a trader staying there who’s interested in buying Tormalin antiquities.’ The bearded man smoothed out the notice and read it through, lips moving as he did so. ‘This says he’ll pay good prices and that he’ll be buying on market day.’

‘He must be doing well, to be paying to advertise like this.’ The third merchant gnawed at a nail thoughtfully. ‘Is there much doing in antiquities at the moment?’

The bearded man shrugged. ‘Maybe he’s got plans for the Autumn fair. There are collectors in Col and there’ll be traders from Relshaz and the Archipelago as well.’

The thin man stared at the parchment with greedy eyes. ‘Perhaps we should try and get hold of a few good pieces if the prices are going to be favourable.’

They huddled together and the bearded man got out a map as they discussed the possibilities.

I drank the rest of the wine and pondered my own next moves. I happened to know where you could find some very fine pieces of Tormalin Empire work and if I could get anywhere near a realistic price for one, even allowing for a merchant’s cut, I could wait for Halice until the very last moment, hire a private coach to get me to Col and still have money over to stake me for a very high playing game. The trick would be getting the piece to the merchant without the original owner being aware of it and there it seemed that the gods were smiling on me for a change. I should have known better but at the time all I could think of was the profit to be made. There was also the little matter of a very sweet revenge, which would be a substantial bonus. Was it worth the gamble?

The merchants were absorbed in their discussion and I went upstairs without anyone remarking on it. I unshuttered the window and peered out. Rain was still falling but the wind was slackening off and the waxing lesser moon was fleetingly visible through gaps in the cloud.

Should I do this? It would be risky but then again, it could be very profitable. Well, I’m a gambler and no one ever got rich keeping their runes in their pocket, did they? The temptation was just too strong and I changed clothes rapidly, swapping homespun and leather for good broadcloth breeches and tunic, boots, gloves and hooded jerkin all in dark charcoal grey. Black gives hard edges that can catch the eye even in the darkest night. The rough wooden beams of the inn made leaving via the window simplicity itself as long as I took care not to mark the intervening plaster and I was soon jogging through the woods that fringed the road to Hawtree.

It was cold and wet but the prospect of a little adventure warmed me. I did not do much thieving in those days, the difficulties of fencing goods in a strange place are formidable and while weighting the runes in a game of chance can get you flogged, getting caught stealing

from a noble's house gets you the pillory at best and loses you a hand at worst. Unfortunately, only nobles have much worth stealing. You may wonder why I was chancing it this time but I happened to know this particular noble was not going to be at home which did rather weight the odds in my favour. Raeponin's devotees can talk all they want about balance, justice and levelling the scales but you won't ever find me making offerings at his shrine. After all, I gamble for a living, not for fun.

I had sat on my horse under a dripping oak tree a few days past watching the gentleman and his entourage heading north with enough luggage to indicate a lengthy stay somewhere else. I would have recognised him anywhere, even after ten years. You do not easily forget the face of a man who has tried to beat and rape you.

Hawtree was not far and I covered the distance easily; staying fit is essential in my kind of life. I breathed in the damp green scent of the night happily. I love being out in the country at night; it must be my father's blood coming through despite my city upbringing. The village was mostly dark and a few of the wooden houses showed dim lights but this was farming country and most folk here slept and rose with the sun. The larger brick and flint buildings round the market square showed more signs of life despite the fact it was now past midnight so I ducked into an alley and waited to catch my breath. I walked noiselessly through the dark lanes, keeping an eye out for dogs who might advertise my presence.

The house I was seeking was just off a garden square, a nice position for a wealthy landowner's residence. The tall front showed heavy oak shutters barred with iron and a stout door with an expensive lock; this did not bother me as I worked my way round to the alley at the back. I found a dark corner and studied the kitchen and outbuildings round the yard. My mother said I was the most useless maid she had ever known but my years as a housekeeper's daughter had given me invaluable knowledge about domestic arrangements in large houses. A scullery maid would be trying to sleep in the meagre warmth of the dying kitchen range while her more fortunate seniors would have chilled and cramped quarters in the garrets. The cook and chamberlain would have the better rooms overlooking the yard. I couldn't tell how many servants the bastard had taken with him so I had better avoid any of those areas. The room I wanted was towards the front of the house on the ground floor so ideally I wanted to get in through a first floor window. I studied them in the fitful moonlight and blessed the keen night sight that my father had granted me. It did not look promising but I was reluctant to give up; I wanted the money this would provide and the more I thought about it, the more I liked the idea of finally getting my own back on the misbegotten swine who had first brought me to this house. I suppose, to be precise, quite a chain of events had brought me to this house; the bastard with the nice collection of silver simply happened to be the last link.

I had finally stormed out of what passed for my home after my mother had lamented one time too often about the ruin of her life saddled the by-blow of a minstrel, one of the Forest Folk at that. I had already taken to gambling which I had always been good at and working small deceptions to earn my meals. I had formed no real plans beyond some vague idea of trying to find my wandering father and looking back, I am surprised it took so long for me to land in trouble. A panicking attempt to bluff my way out of an inn without paying had left me thrown on the road with a smarting arse and my few belongings taken in lieu of payment.

I had arrived in Hawtree two days later, tired and ravenous, dirty and desperate. Neither of the decent coaching inns had let me past their doors and I had ended up in a grimy hostelry next to the slaughterhouse. It had not taken me long to realise why there were so many women sitting around the taproom and it is a measure of my ignorance and despondency that I decided to try for a customer myself. Lack of food must have softened my brain. It was not as if I was a virgin, I had thought and my mother, ever determined I should not get caught like her, had taken me off to a reliable herbalist as soon as she had first caught the undergardener fondling my bottom. It had not occurred to me to worry about disease and looking at

the competition, I had felt confident that I would be able to earn a meal at very least.

I combed my hair with my fingers as best I could - I wore it long in those days - and pinched my cheeks to heighten my colour. I was still using herbal washes to bring out the red in my hair, cosmetics to make my eyes reflect green rather than grey and despite its stains, my russet dress looked sufficiently exotic in the dingy bar. The chances were none of these yokels had ever seen a real Forest maiden so, their reputation being what it is, I decided to increase my asking price. The next customer to survey the waiting women was tall, dark and handsome in a sharp sort of way and he rapidly passed over the others to catch my eye. The other whores looked away and muttered among themselves and naive as I was, I felt sure they were jealous.

‘Well, well, you’re not from around here, are you?’ He came over and gestured for wine, which I drank thirstily.

‘No, I’m just passing through.’ I did my best to look mysterious and alluring.

‘All alone?’ His hand brushed mine as he poured more wine.

‘I like to travel light.’ I smiled at him and my spirits rose. He was clean, young and looked wealthy; I could have done a lot worse. As I said, I was very naive in those days.

‘What’s your name, sweetheart?’

‘Merith.’ Actually that’s my oldest, spinster aunt but who cared.

‘This isn’t a very comfortable inn. Could I offer you some hospitality?’

That was a new way of putting it but I wasn’t going to argue. I smiled at him from under my dyed lashes.

‘I’m sure we could come to some agreement.’ After all, I wanted some coin out of this, not just a warm bed and food.

He offered me his arm and I flaunted out of the gloomy tap-room, putting the sudden buzz of conversation behind us down to disappointed hopes.

Ten years on, I stood in the dark and looked at the windows thoughtfully. That was the salon where he had taken me, I was sure. He had shown me in and told me to wait. My spirits rose at the thought of food and clean sheets and the business to come even promised to be quite enjoyable. I wandered round the room and noted the fine tapestries, the polished furniture and the superb Tormalin silver on the mantel shelf. Stories from the ballads I had heard my father sing began to echo in the back of my mind - virtuous maiden falls on hard times and is rescued by a handsome noble, that sort of thing.

When I heard the door, I turned with a welcoming smile but my host was not bringing the supper he had promised. He locked the door behind him and his lips curved in an ugly smile as he ran a dog whip through his hands. He was stripped to shirt and hose and flushed with anticipation. I moved to get the table between us; from the glint in his eye, I would not have bet on my chances of talking my way out of this. I may have been naive but I wasn’t that stupid. I realised I was in serious danger.

‘Come here, whore,’ he commanded.

‘If you want something more lively than plain sex, I want more money.’ I countered boldly. If he thought I was going to play, he might get careless and I would be out of there like a rat from a burning barn.

‘You’ll get what I decide to give you.’ He was not talking coin; he lunged at me and the lash flicked my cheek. I screamed as loudly as I could but all he did was laugh. ‘My servants are all paid well to be deaf, you slut. Scream by all means, I like it.’

I could see that he did too. He moved and so did I, we circled round the table and he began to frown.

‘Come and see what I’ve got for you,’ he leered, lifting his shirt.

I dashed for the window but he was too fast and he grabbed a handful of hair. He threw me to the floor and raised the whip but I rolled under the table. He cursed obscenely and

snatched at my ankle. I kicked and twisted as he dragged me out but he was too strong for me. He ripped at my skirts with his other hand and my head smacked against the chair legs. He laughed as he saw the blood and oddly, that was what finally made me lose my temper.

I went limp. As he relaxed his grip, I drew my knees up. He laughed again as he straightened up to unlace himself and I brought both my feet up into his stones. He collapsed, retching and I scrambled to my feet. I grabbed a fallen chair and smacked it hard into the side of his head and ran for the window a second time. As I fumbled with the catches, I heard him groan and curse. I have never been so frightened in my life, concentrating on opening the window, not daring to lose time by glancing behind me. After what seemed like an age, I had the casement open and the shutter beyond. I risked a glance at the bastard on the floor; he had got to his knees but was clutching himself with screwed-shut eyes. I swung out of the window and dropped to the road. With the first piece of luck I'd had in a long time, I didn't hurt myself and I ran as far and as fast as I could.

The first time I'd told Halice that tale, she'd been astounded I could be so matter of fact about it. The memory could still wake me in a cold sweat if I was overtired or feeling low, that in itself was part of the reason I wanted some small measure of revenge. As for the rest, I'd learned I'd got off lightly if you could believe the broadsheets' lurid tales of mutilated bodies and the sad strangled corpse I'd once seen dragged from a river.

As I stared at the window, I could still feel the terror but more importantly for my present ambitions, I pictured the details of window- and shutter-catches engraved on my memory. I had made it my business to learn a range of skills to use if I should ever again get stranded with no money and I knew I could get in if I could find a place where I could work unobserved for a little while. I walked round the house and saw a side window facing the blank wall of the stable block; ideal. It took less time than I had feared and I found myself in a library. That was a surprise; who would have thought the ape could read. I opened the door cautiously but there was no sound or light from any direction. The house smelled of beeswax and had a chill that spoke of several days without fires. I moved along the corridor, soft soles noiseless on the polished floorboards. The salon door was locked but that did not delay me for long. The darkness was troubling me by now, even real Forest Folk cannot see in complete blackness but I could still recall the layout of the room and put my hand unerringly on the mantel.

What should I take? The temptation was to sweep the lot into my little padded sack; I owed the scum for the scars on my cheek and temple and for the old man I had been driven to knock over for his purse further down the road. I dismissed that foolishness; I would take one of the smaller pieces, that would be enough. I ran my hand along the shelf and lifted a long-necked vase. No, too unusual, I could not price it reliably. Next along was a goblet, a coat of arms deeply incised on its side. Too easily identifiable. I passed over a platter and some spoons that felt too light to be genuine and then found a small lidded tankard. It was plain apart from scrolls on the handle and lid but had a reassuring weight. The handle was smooth and fit neatly in my hand; it was just the sort of thing I would have liked for myself. It was towards the back of the shelf behind two ornate wine jugs; did that mean it was less likely to be missed? Perhaps but I intended to be long gone before then. I pocketed the tankard and lifted the remaining pieces to dust the shelf; no point in leaving clues and a dozy maid might not notice the loss for a few days.

By now my eyes were aching from straining in the dim light and I left rapidly the way I had come. Refastening the window took a little time and the sky was starting to lighten by the time I returned to the inn. It occurred to me that some hapless footman or the like would get blamed for the theft but I cannot say that bothered me; serve them right for working for such a turd. I only hoped his anguish when he discovered the loss was as deep as I wanted. My

gamble was paying off nicely so far. I got into my bed for what remained of the night and slept deep and dreamlessly.



*The Chamber of Planir the Black in the Island City of Hadrumal
12th of For-Autumn.*

‘Share a bottle with an Archmage and you’ll be ruined or made for life - that’s what they used to say, isn’t it, Otrick?’ The stout man speaking held out his glass for a refill and laughed fruitily at his own quip.

‘I think those days were already long past when I first came here, Kalion.’ Otrick poured him a full measure and then topped up his own drink, steady hand belying the wrinkles carved in his face and the white hairs now outnumbering the grey in his steely hair and beard.

‘How long ago was that, Cloud-Master?’ The youngest man present asked, taking the bottle with a creditable attempt at ease, given the exalted company he found himself keeping.

Otrick’s close-lipped smile was as about as revealing as a masquerader’s guise. ‘Longer ago than I care to remember, Usara,’ he replied softly, raising his glass. His vivid blue eyes glinted under his angular brows.

‘Anyway, Archmage, what was it you wanted to discuss?’ Kalion half-turned on the deeply upholstered settle to address the neatly built man who was shuttering the tall windows and drawing the thick green curtains precisely together.

‘Oh, it’s nothing vital, Hearth-Master. You were in Relshaz for Solstice, weren’t you? I was wondering if the antiquarians there have turned up anything interesting lately?’

Planir lit a couple of oil lamps and their yellow glow warmed the deep oak panelling around the room, a few gleams here and there revealing choice pieces of statuary in discreet niches. The soft light blurred the network of fine lines around the Archmage’s eyes and made him look barely a handful of years older than Usara. He set a lamp down on the table.

‘Do we want a fire, do you think?’

‘I should think so.’ Otrick said emphatically.

Kalion looked a little askance at the skinny old wizard, dressed neatly if unfashionably in grey wool broadcloth. He contented himself with loosening the neck of his own maroon velvet gown, new from the tailor in the latest style and shade and richly embroidered with a border of flames.

‘You see, Usara thinks he may have turned up something new but equally, it may just be a waste of everyone’s time.’ The Archmage snapped his fingers on a flash of red and dropped a flame into the fire laid ready in the spotless grate. He drew in the silken skirts of his own black robe and seated himself in a high backed chair, warming his glass in his long fingered hands as he leant back against the rich sage brocade. ‘Sweetcake? Do help yourselves, everyone.’

‘What exactly is it you’re studying, Usara? Remind me.’ Kalion asked the youthful wizard indistinctly round a mouthful of fruit-and-honeycake.

Usara’s thin face flushed brightly, the colour clashing with his sandy hair and somewhat cruelly highlighting just how thin it was becoming above his high forehead. ‘I’ve been working on the decline and fall of the Tormalin Empire for some seasons now, Hearth-Master. I met some Scholars from the University of Vanam last year when they came to use the library at the Seaward Hall and they invited me to use their archives.’

Kalion shrugged with evident disinterest, the gesture creasing his chins unappealingly as he reached for more wine. ‘So?’

Usara smoothed the linen ruffles at his neck, glancing fleetingly at Planir who smiled reassuringly over the rim of his glass and inclined his sleek, dark head slightly.

‘Go on.’ The Archmage encouraged him.

‘Well, when Sannin was there over the Winter Solstice, she went to a celebration where the wines were flowing pretty freely and tongues started getting loose as well.’

Otrick laughed abruptly, his thin face alight with mischief. ‘If I know Sannin, that’s not all that got loosened. She’s a fun girl at a party.’ He subsided at a glance from Planir but continued to chuckle into his straggly beard as he munched on a slice of cake.

Usara shot the old man an irritated look and spoke with a little more force. ‘They got talking about history, someone noticed her necklace, it’s an heirloom piece, Old Tormalin, and one of the historians wondered what tales a necklace like that could tell, if only it could talk.’

Otrick coughed on his mouthful. ‘That was an old excuse for looking down a girl’s dress when I was a boy!’

Usara ignored him. ‘There were scholars from all sorts of disciplines there and a couple of wizards and they started wondering if there could be any way to find out more about the original owners of antiquities.’

‘What good would that do anyone?’ Otrick frowned as he shook the empty bottle. ‘Do you have another of these, Planir?’

The Archmage waved him to a collection of bottles on a gleaming sideboard but kept his own grey eyes intent on Kalion.

Usara continued. ‘Once they got talking, Sannin said, they started coming up with some interesting ideas for research.’

‘Did they still look like good ideas when the wine had worn off and the headaches hit?’ Otrick’s tone was sarcastic.

‘When she told us all this, we started thinking about it ourselves. There are some old variants on scrying that we could try and some fragments of religious lore that we might be able to incorporate. We’re coming up with some promising lines for further enquiry.’ Usara leaned forward, face intent, unaware of Otrick’s indignation at being talked over.

‘You see, Hearth-Master, if we can find a way to use Tormalin antiquities to somehow look back through the generations, into the lives of ordinary people, we could have dozens of new sources of historical information. Don’t you see how it could help my studies? In all recorded history, the fall of the Tormalin Empire was the greatest cataclysm to ever befall a civilisation. If we could find clues to help us patch together the fragments of the written record -’

‘None of which is of any more than passing interest and is of no use in the real world.’ Kalion’s disdain was clear as he reached for more cake and refilled his glass now that Otrick had located the corkscrew. ‘Thank-you, Cloud-Master.’

‘Understanding our history is an essential foundation for looking to the future.’ Usara’s thin lips nearly vanished altogether as he squared his shoulders to contradict the larger man.

‘Don’t get pompous with me, young man. I can remember when you arrived here in your clay-stained apprentice rags,’ Kalion said crushingly.

‘Knowledge always has a value, Hearth-Master. It is-’

‘Knowledge only has a value if it has an application.’ Kalion spoke over Usara mercilessly. ‘Why are we even discussing this, Archmage?’ he demanded with a hint of exasperation.

Planir shrugged again and rubbed a hand over his smoothly shaven jaw. ‘I was wondering if we should put some resources into following it up.’

‘Oh, surely not.’ Kalion looked as appalled as a man so well wined could hope to. ‘There’s so much else the Council needs to consider. You heard Imerald’s account of how fast developments in smelting are happening in the North. That’s a real advance, something we should be involved in. Look at the ways Caladhrian cattle stock is improving now most of the Lords are enclosing their pasture. I could give you a handful more examples of other sciences where more progress has been made in the last generation than in the previous five-’

‘Spare us the full speech, Hearth-Master,’ Otrick yawned theatrically. ‘We were at the last session of the Council, remember. We were listening.’

‘You can’t deny that some of my predecessors did take the isolation of senior wizardry rather too far, Cloud-Master.’ Planir’s rebuke was light but still unmistakable.

‘That’s what I’ve been saying for I don’t know how many seasons.’ The florid purple tinge on Kalion’s cheekbones faded a little. ‘Given the rate of the changes we’re seeing on the mainland, if we don’t find ourselves a role, we’ll be left behind. This prejudice against getting involved in politics, for example, is outdated and meaningless - ‘

‘I’m not prejudiced, I just don’t see how it would benefit me to get tangled up in helping to organise the boring little lives of the mundane. If I’m to spend my time on things that take me away from my own research and studies, it’ll be on my terms and to get me something I need.’

Otrick passed Kalion the wine which effectively diverted him. ‘Anyway, save the speeches for the next session of Council, Hearth-Master. That’s the place for important debate. Now, as far as I’m concerned, Usara, you can spend as many seasons as you like finding out who did what while the Empire was collapsing round their ears. What I want to know is whether this little scheme of yours is going to tell me anything about magical techniques and skills that got lost in the dark generations?’

‘Now that would be knowledge worth having.’ Kalion nodded emphatic agreement. ‘I suppose we might discover such things, if we had artefacts that belonged to wizards to work with.’ Usara’s tone looked uncertainly towards Planir. ‘If we can find a way of scrying into their activities.’

The Archmage leant forward and refilled the younger mage’s glass. ‘If I were to support this project, I think I’d want to give it more focus and looking for lost magic seems most relevant.’ Planir paused for moment and looked thoughtful. ‘I think you have a valid point, Kalion. The time has come for the Council to consider our role in the wider scheme of things in the modern world. Equally, there’s something in what Otrick says; if wizards are to become more involved in matters beyond this island, to avoid the mistakes of the past, we need to do so on our own terms.’

‘If we could rediscover some of the magic lost in the disintegration of the Empire, we would certainly improve our bargaining position.’ Otrick allowed. ‘We could make useful contacts if we were able to offer scholars solutions to some of the questions thrown up by the collapse of Old Tormalin power.’ Usara spoke up boldly. ‘Most of the tutors and court advisors to nobilities all the way across the mainland come from the various universities.’ ‘That’s a fair point.’ Planir looked enquiringly at Kalion. ‘What do you think, Hearth-Master?’

‘It might be worth looking into. What do you propose?’ the stout mage asked cautiously.

‘Hall records could give us the family names of the early wizards. We could enquire if those families have minor heirlooms they would be willing to sell,’ Planir mused. ‘Usara and his pupils could concentrate their researches on them.’

‘It’ll be a waste of time and coin,’ Otrick said robustly. ‘You’d be better off sending some agents into the mountains and getting some decent information about this blast-furnace or whatever it is they call it.’

‘That does sound as if it could be a significant development, Cloud-Master,’ Planir

agreed. 'Still, if I can spare a couple of men, it shouldn't be hard to collect a few Empire antiquities with decent provenance. What do you think? We would find out sooner if Usara's project has any value. Who knows, we might uncover some valuable information on lost magic.'

'We might do nothing more than push up the price of Tormalin antiques and land ourselves with a room full of old pots and statues,' Otrick snorted.

'That is also possible,' Planir admitted. 'So, it's something to look at when we have resources to spare but hardly a priority. Do you agree, Hearth-Master?'

'I suppose so.' Kalion still sounded dubious.

A timepiece on the mantel chimed four soft strokes and Kalion looked at it in some surprise.

'You'll have to excuse me, Archmage, I didn't realise it was so late.' He drained his glass and rose to his feet with some effort.

'The longer night chimes always catch me out after Solstice,' Otrick agreed but showed no signs of moving.

'We must make time to discuss your Council speech in more detail, Kalion. Ask your senior pupil to check with Larissa to arrange a convenient time.' Planir bowed Kalion formally into the escort of the lamp-boy who had been dozing on the stairs. He closed the heavy oak door softly and then rapidly stripped off his ornately embroidered robe to reveal practical breeches and a light linen shirt which he covered with a worn and ink-stained chamber coat.

'I meant to ask you when you started using the same tailor as Kalion,' Otrick chuckled around the last mouthful of cake. 'I always say gowns are for girls in garlands.'

This time Planir's smile showed his teeth and, with the gleam in his eye, he looked positively predatory. 'Details are important, Otrick, you taught me that.'

'So did we dance your measure correctly, Archmage?' Much of Usara's diffidence had departed along with Kalion. He crossed to the sideboard and helped himself. 'Cordial, anyone?'

'I'll have some of the mint, thanks.' Planir lounged in his chair and stretched his soft leather boots out to the fire with an air of satisfaction. 'Yes, I think that went very well. If any more rumours about our little project surface, that story should cover them.'

'You think so?' Usara passed the Archmage a little crystal goblet. 'Kalion didn't seem all that convinced.'

'He didn't think it was worth much interest,' Planir corrected him. 'Which is what I hoped for.'

'He's got a lot of influence among the Council, being the senior Hearth-Master and all that goes with it.' Uncertainty continued to colour Usara's tone.

'He has, indeed.' Otrick nodded. 'He's also the man most people round here go to for the inside gossip, isn't he?'

Comprehension dawned and Usara laughed. 'So if someone gets curious about what we're doing, they'll check with Kalion and he'll tell them he knows all about it and it's nothing of any significance.'

'Whereas few things attract more attention than rumours of a secret project with the personal interest of the Archmage and the oldest Cloud-Master,' Planir agreed, sipping his drink contentedly. 'You see, Usara, people have all sorts of ideas about the proper role of an Archmage but very few realise it's spending most of your time persuading people to do what you want them to while making sure they think it was all their idea in the first place.'

'You certainly moved Kalion like a bird on a game board,' Usara acknowledged. Otrick grinned wolfishly. 'Don't ever play White Raven with this man, 'Sar, I swear he could end up with the forest birds serving the raven rather than trying to drive him out.'

‘I haven’t played Raven in years, Cloud-Master.’ Planir shook his head in mock sorrow. ‘It rather lost its challenge after a few seasons as Archmage.’ Otrick rummaged in his breeches pocket for a little wash-leather pouch. ‘So when will you be telling the Council the truth?’ He popped a couple of leaves into his mouth and chewed with relish.

‘When I’ve got a full story to tell them or when someone senior enough brings me a rumour that I can’t ignore.’ Planir fixed Usara with a keen eye. ‘I’d prefer it to be the former. How close are you to finding out what I need to know?’ Usara swallowed his drink with a hint of his former nervousness. ‘We’ve managed to refine the methods of identifying the pieces we need’

‘About cursed time. Sending so-called merchants out with a sack of coin to buy up every piece of late Empire tat they could find is what attracted attention in the first place,’ Otrick snorted.

‘That was unfortunate.’ Usara faced the old mage with dignity. ‘However, I don’t recall you coming up with any better ideas’

Planir forestalled any argument with a commanding hand. ‘Given we’ve had people working on this for close on two seasons, I’d have been amazed if we’d got away with it any longer. Now, what results are you getting?’

‘The information we’re getting is very detailed, almost too much so. We need to give it a context; it’s the gaps in the written records that are holding us back at the moment.’ Usara’s frustration was evident.

‘I think it might be time to get one of the Vanam Histories brought here,’ Planir said thoughtfully. ‘I’d like to see progress on this sooner rather than later.’

‘We have asked but we haven’t been able to persuade the Mentors to release one to us.’ Usara shuffled his feet unhappily at this admission.

‘I imagine I’ll have more success. An Archmage has all kind of power, ‘Sar, and actual wizardry is often the least important.’ Planir’s eyes gleamed in the lamplight. ‘Have you heard from Casuel Devoir lately? When’s he due back?’

‘Equinox, I think,’ Usara shrugged.

‘I said he was a bad choice for this kind of work,’ Otrick sniffed.

‘Do we have a lot of choice? Casuel’s had no pupillage for three seasons so no one’s missing him. He’s bright enough and quite knowledgeable about the Old Empire, isn’t he? It’s not as if we’ve told any of them the full story.’ Planir slid a sideways smile towards Otrick. ‘You remember that business at Summer Solstice a few years back? His determination to outdo Shivvalan should give him the sort of edge he’ll need.’

‘Ha!’ Otrick’s amusement came and went in an instant. ‘If we need to have answers before the Council starts asking awkward questions, we’ve got to move faster. We need more people.’

Planir reached round behind his chair to take a sheaf of papers from a desk. ‘I think I should be able to find three or four suitable agents without attracting too much notice.’

Usara frowned. ‘They’ll need to work with a mage. We’ll have to find a handful or so who could be trusted with this but who aren’t anyone’s pupil at present.’

‘Not necessarily. I got Shivvalan Ralsere hooked when he came to ask me about a pupillage. I could take on at least one more and I think it’s about time we got Troanna involved. No one’s going to comment if she takes on half a dozen, especially if they’re recent arrivals,’ Otrick suggested.

‘True, I’ll give it some thought,’ Planir said thoughtfully. ‘You’ll need to find some scholars who can identify these trinkets as closely as possible, ‘Sar.’

Otrick yawned and rubbed his eyes. ‘You’ll owe me if I have a headache tomorrow, Planir, I’m getting too old to match someone like Kalion cork for cork.’

‘I’ll turn the wine-merchant into a lizard if you feel bad in the morning, Cloud-Master,’ the Archmage promised solemnly. ‘Given the coin he took off me for that vintage, it’ll be a pleasure.’

Otrick heaved a sigh and the animation left his face, his years plain to see for the first time. ‘So what do we do when we’ve got the full story then? If half what we suspect turns out to be true, the mainlanders will be able to hear the uproar from Council clear across the gulf. Anyone wanting to find this particular, mystical, hidden island will just have to follow the noise.’

‘A shock’s greatest when it’s unexpected.’ Planir looked untroubled. ‘I think I’ll give Naldeth’s projects some personal attention. That’ll stop everyone sniggering behind his back and if his theories gain a little currency, you can offer him some co-operation, ‘Sar. Then we can control how and when any new information becomes common knowledge.’

‘If you say so.’ The youthful mage’s uncertainty was apparent. ‘You’re juggling firebrands,’ Otrick warned dourly.

Planir shrugged and rose to replenish his cordial. ‘That’s as good a description as any of being an Archmage. Anyway, that wolf may well be a dog in the daylight; we might have nothing to worry about.’

‘I’d give you better odds on a winning spread of runes first throw,’ Otrick muttered.

‘So you think you’ve got everything under control.’ Usara looked to Planir for reassurance.

The Archmage’s smile gleamed white and even. ‘I do hope not, ‘Sar, that’s the last thing I want. I just set things in motion; what I’m watching for is the loose rune that can turn the game for us. We’ve all got to look for that one opportunity and make sure we seize it.’