

Preview

Cold Magics

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Autumn was well underway in Hawksmouth, bringing with it cold winds from the sea that held the vague threat of snow to come. The bright reds and golds of the changing seasons had mostly given way to the grey and brown of empty branches. The leaves still in the city were lying in the gutters or in the alleys, discarded by trees bracing themselves for the bitter cold of a northern seaport in winter. The first of the truly cold days was yet to come, but it was only a matter of time.

Thomas, heading through the streets with a bag on his shoulder, shivered as he walked. He had money to buy a winter coat and new boots, and swore to himself that he would do so in the next few days. Now, though, a wind was blowing from the sea and up the streets, bringing with it a damp that snuck between layers of clothes and nestled against the skin before burrowing into the body and sinking into bones. Anyone who could had retreated indoors, either home or to the nearest tavern for a warm fire and companionship.

Thomas had done neither thing, instead letting the cold and damp follow him as he went from his apartment to one of the many book-sellers in the city. This one had been in the poor quarter, and almost everything in it had shown signs of previous wear and cheap printing. Thomas had spent several hours pouring over volumes that had nothing to do with his studies at the Academy. His ability to see magic where others could not extended to the written word, and it was for those words that Thomas was searching.

Most of the books he had seen that day had been useless. Recipes and bits of muddled religion mixed with odd references to The Ones Below and a "dark goddess" that Thomas eventually deciphered to be a reference to the Daughter, youngest of the four gods and supposed bringer of magic

to the world. Thomas was very sceptical of her existence, and the books he found that mentioned her contained no magic, only words. In the end, he only found one book with any magic in it.

It was a thick, leather-bound notebook handwritten in shaky script, and labelled "Memoir." It looked like the poorly written memories of an old man who had done a fair bit of travelling in his youth. In the midst of it all, however, was a short chapter called "Charms" which gave a long list of charms the man's mother and sisters had used around the house. Most were only rhymes with no power behind them. Three were actually magic. Thomas could see the words glowing on the page. The charms for making dough rise and warding off illness glowed blue; the one for driving away dogs, red. Thomas bought the book, along with copies of three short plays that could be done in a small parlour and which would make ideal entertainment for himself and his fellow students when the snows came and drove them indoors.

The wind gusted, blowing dirty leaves up from the gutters and making the beggars in the streets shift further into their corners, huddling against each other for warmth. The few stands left in the square were closing themselves up. Thomas spotted one of the pastry sellers still open and spent a pair of coppers on a meat pie and a fruit tart for his dinner. He hadn't eaten since breakfast—his own fault for wandering so far and spending so much time in bookshops. He contemplated a bottle of wine, then decided to leave it alone. Wine was fine, but without anyone to drink it with, there was little point.

Thomas had found himself increasingly unsociable this year, and not just because his roommates were gone. Henry had been called home to Frostmire late that summer to help the Duke, his father, fight off raiders, and hadn't been able to return before the start of term. And Thomas didn't have the heart to rent out Benjamin's room, even though the door to it seemed on occasion to be a gravestone, its blankness accusing Thomas of the young theology's student's death.

Thomas had other friends, and could have been as sociable as he wanted. Instead, the magic that he possessed was taking up his time. He wanted to learn more about it, to practise it and study it, and it wasn't something he could share with others.

He still went out, of course. To not do so would be to risk a reputation for oddness that might lead some to wonder what he did with his time. So he went out with the other law students and philosophy students, contributed his thoughts on the nature of reality or the latest doing of the courts, drank far too much some nights and woke up with a hangover some mornings. Still, it was much less than it had been. Most nights he spent at home, dividing his time between his studies at school and his studies of the magic that ran through his body. He still had the book that he had taken from the locked library under the theology building, and the two that once belonged to the Bishop, hidden in a compartment he had cut in the wall under his bed, and he was going through it one spell at a time, trying those he could without attracting attention. He had successfully warded his apartment against vermin—no mean feat in his building—and his belongings against theft. He did not have the courage to leave anything truly valuable out in the street to see how effective his work was, but so far, nothing he owned had gone missing.

He reached the courtyard that sat between the two student apartments, and headed for his own. The balconies which in summer were filled with students looking for cool air were mostly empty. The plants and clothes that had hung on them all summer were inside now, near the small braziers the students kept in their rooms in their vain attempts to keep warm. He could hear snatches of conversation, laughter, and music from the various apartments as he walked past them.

He took the stairs with an easy stride, three floors up to his own apartment. It was a snug place, now. It had been draughty and cold last fall and winter, but Thomas, in his search for books on magic, had come across the memoirs of a master carpenter. It had not been the most exciting read, but what he gained out of it was more than worth the effort. Now, the drafts in the walls fixed and the holes around the windows were plugged. George, he thought, would have been proud. The others around him were envious, and Thomas was certain he could make a pretty good living, had he the time, repairing the other apartments. Instead, he had loaned out the book, and those who had applied the information within reported remarkably improved living conditions.

He put his new books on the shelves he'd had made since his return. It was a humble library—only fifty or sixty books—and a very eclectic one. Most held no magic. There were his schoolbooks and a dozen plays and another dozen badly printed treatises about various injustices in the kingdom that had been thrust on Thomas at one student meeting or another. Many others, like the plays he'd just picked up, were only for fun and interest.

And interspersed among them were a dozen or so books of magic. All were secondhand; most were old and worn. There was the commonplace book of a merchant's wife with a half-dozen charms in it. A pair of treatises—one by a nun, the other by a priest—with a two dozen spells disguised as prayers to the High Father. The log of a ship's captain where he'd found the spell against vermin, and a half-dozen other books with tidbits of magic in them.

Thomas didn't make copies of the spells, or take them from their books. The trial he and his friends had sat through at the beginning of the summer made him wary of anything that could directly connect him to what the Church claimed was witchcraft. Instead, he claimed to have bought them for their contents; to give him a better insight into human nature. Those who visited him gave him strange looks but said nothing.

Thomas put the pie and the tart on the table and retrieved a knife and fork from the cupboard. He had just sat at the table when a knock at the door made him jump. He hadn't been expecting company, and certainly not on a night like this. "Who is it?" he shouted at the door.

There was no answer for a moment, then, "It's Alexander."

Thomas froze where he was, recognizing the name and the voice behind it at once.

"Thomas, please. It's me. I have to come in. Please." Thomas took a moment to make himself move, he was so surprised. From outside the door he heard, "Please, Thomas, I'm cold."

Thomas stumbled to the door and opened it. Eileen, dressed as "Alexander"—the disguise she'd worn when they'd first run from Bishop Malloy—stepped in through the door and collapsed, crying, into his arms.

A quarter hour later, Thomas had Eileen wrapped in blankets before the brazier in the main room, sipping at a mug of tea she clenched in her chapped, shaking hands, and letting him feed her bites of the meat pie.

"I'm sorry," she said, between swallows of the tea. "I didn't mean to collapse like that. I've just..." She stopped, took a deep breath. Thomas fed her a bit more of the pie, and she chewed and swallowed it before she continued. "I just haven't eaten for a few days and I was very cold and you weren't here before and..."

"You were here before?"

Eileen nodded. "Earlier this afternoon. I came and I knocked and there was no answer. I wanted to stay and wait but it was cold and I thought I'd be better off walking around so I went to the Academy but of course they wouldn't let me in and no one knew where you were." She paused, took another deep breath and another sip of tea. "I'm babbling."

"You are," agreed Thomas, feeding her a bit more of the pie. He watched her take it, waited for her to chew and swallow. "Eileen, what in the name of the Four are you doing here?"

Eileen looked down at her hands and didn't say anything for a time. Thomas held up another forkful of pie. She took it, drank some more tea, then shrunk deeper into the blanket.

"It..." she started, but her voice faltered. She took another sip, then started again. "It seemed like a good idea."

Thomas's eyebrows went up. "Coming here by yourself? How could that possibly seem like a good idea?"

"I didn't think it would be so much trouble."

"Trouble? You could have been killed!"

"You weren't when you travelled alone," said Eileen, glaring at him as she pulled the blanket tighter.

"That's different!"

"How?"

"It was spring," said Thomas. "And I had money. I could pay for food and inns and a boat if I needed one."

"I had money!"

"Not enough if you're starving!"

"I'm not starving! And stop shouting at me!"

"I'm not—" Thomas realized that he was as the words left his mouth and stopped speaking.

Eileen, huddled in her blanket, was glaring at him. Thomas took a couple of deep breaths before he spoke. "I'm sorry. But in the names of the Four, Eileen. Why? I'll be home in six months—"

"It wasn't for you!" Eileen snapped. "I could have waited for you, but..." Her tone was changing, her voice becoming shaky. "But George didn't want to fence, and the nuns don't teach anything except the lives of saints I never heard of and the history of the convent and gardening and the uses of herbs and I want to learn!"

Tears were starting to flow, now, and she swiped at them with a sleeve. "I mean, I want to learn about real things. About history, and philosophy and math. And I want to keep fencing and I want to know as much as you do."

"I was sending my books—"

"And I brought them," Eileen said, gesturing at the bundle that Thomas had set by the door. "But they aren't enough, Thomas. I want to learn more."

Thomas remembered how he crushed he had felt when Bishop Malloy had convinced his father not to let Thomas return to the Academy. He could see the same feeling in Eileen's face. "So you came here."

"And the worst of it," Eileen said between sobs. "The worst of it is that its not going to do any good. I realized that when I was standing outside the gates of the Academy, looking in. I'm not going to be allowed to stay. I got cold and wet and hungry, and all that will happen is that I will have to go

back." She wiped her face again. "No one will teach me anything. I can't afford to have anyone teach me anything." The tears were flowing again, but she didn't do anything to stop them. "All I'll be is a burden and a pain in your neck. Elisa probably won't speak to me anymore, and Da will kill me when he finds me!"

Thomas had been thinking about that last one from the moment she had walked in through the door. Worse, he had been thinking about what her father would do if he found the two of them together under one roof.

The haunted, hurt look in Eileen's eyes made him put the thought aside.

"It wasn't stupid," said Thomas, taking one of her hands and squeezing it. "Insane, yes. And poorly thought out. But not stupid. I would have done the same thing." He smiled, then. "In fact, I did."

"Aye, but you had money," said Eileen, wiping at her face.

"Aye, but I was wanted for murder."

"True," said Eileen. She pulled him close and leaned into him. "I am really, really sorry."

"I know," said Thomas. He wrapped his arms around her and rocked her gently. "We'll deal with your father when he comes. And George," he added, when Eileen opened her mouth. "How long do you think we have?"

"It took me twelve days to get here," said Eileen. "I left a note saying I was going to visit Eliza in Laketown, to buy me some time." She looked to him, "I had some money from selling eggs and helping at the stalls in the markets all summer, but it wasn't enough. The rooms were expensive and no one trusts someone travelling alone. Especially with a sword." She shook her head. "I walked two days south to Greenwater where we caught the raft from the last time. I got a raft and paid them what I could and they dropped me at a town upriver. They wouldn't feed me so I had to buy my own and that was the last of my money." She shivered. "I ran out of food four days ago."

Thomas fed her the last bit of the pie, ignoring his own rumbling stomach.

"I found some late season apples, but they were pretty bad, and there was some squash that fell off a farmer's waggon..." She began crying again, shaking where she sat. Thomas tightened his arms around her, rocking her gently until the worst of the tears stopped. "By the Four, I've messed up everything," she said, wiping at her face.

"Well, not everything," said Thomas. "I mean, I get to see you six months early..."

She pulled one hand out from the blankets and hit him. Thomas winced.

"Idiot," she said.

"Aye, that's me," Thomas agreed, picking up the plate and fork. He went to the table and got the fruit pie, then got a second fork and mug from the cupboard. "Pour some more tea," he said. "Then share this with me and we'll figure out what to do."

* * *

What they did, in the end, was go to bed. Thomas put her in Benjamin's room, guessing that Benjamin would probably have come back from the grave to lecture him had Thomas suggested she sleep with him. He could have put her in Henry's room, but Henry had paid the rent on the place, and Thomas was loath to let anyone else take his room, in case the young lord came back.

So Thomas gave Eileen his extra blanket and they piled a couple of Thomas's robes over top of the bed to keep the chill off, and, after kissing her gently good night, Thomas went to bed where he lay awake for most of an hour wondering what he was going to do. In the end, no answer came, and he allowed himself to drift off to sleep.

The morning came far too soon, the bells of the Academy ringing to announce to all that it was time to rise and prepare for a new day. The air was cold, the sky bright and clear, and Thomas realized that he had not so much as a crumb of food left in the apartment. Grabbing the bucket he kept expressly for the purpose, Thomas went down to the fountain in the courtyard and secured enough water for the morning's ablutions. He took out enough for another pot of tea, then washed himself before leaving the bucket in front of Eileen's door. He knocked on it and was answered with a grunt,

followed by a slightly embarrassed question. Thomas gave her directions to the middens, then went to make the tea. By the time it was prepared, Eileen was finished her own ablutions and sitting across the table from him, shivering and cradling her hands around the tea for warmth.

"Still being Alex?" Thomas asked, looking at her clothes.

"I didn't pack any others," she said. "I figured it would be easier to pass as a boy than to try to make the trip as a girl by myself." She managed a smile. "Especially with the rapier."

Thomas nodded, took a sip of his tea. "Just as well. I have classes today, and there's no way they'll let a girl on to the Academy grounds."

"Should I dress as a student again?"

Thomas shook his head. "No. At my level, the classes are small enough that they will pick you out at once. You will be my friend Alex, visiting from home, whose father has asked him to examine the Academy, to see if the law holds any interest for you. I'll ask the keeper of the gate if I can escort you in, and then get permission from my professors to have you attend classes with me."

"Can you do that?"

"I think so," said Thomas, smiling. "I'll need to talk rather quickly, though."

"And when they ask about my education?"

"Schooled by a tutor, and hoping to expand what you've learnt. Pretend to be eager. It makes them happy."

"No need to pretend. I'll just try not to sound desperate."

"Good idea."

"Thomas?"

"Yes?"

"Is there anything to eat?"

"Not a thing," said Thomas. "Come on. And leave your sword. You can't take it into the Academy with you, so you might as well leave it here."

Thomas gathered his books and papers, then led Eileen out into the street. Instead of heading directly to the Academy, though, he led her past the gates to a very busy bakery on the corner. There were easily two dozen student there already, with more converging all the time. The line moved quickly, and soon Thomas and Eileen were back on the streets with a meat-filled pastry each and a loaf of bread besides.

"The bread is for later," Thomas explained. "There's not much time to eat between lectures, so we tend to buy for the whole day. Come on."

The next stop was the gate and the Master of Keys, who listened to Thomas's explanation and grunted something unintelligible before waving them through. Thomas took that as assent and led Eileen into the Academy.

In fall, the Academy had a sombre look. The ivy that covered the grey stone of the buildings had dropped its leaves, leaving twisting ribbons of dark brown on the walls. The trees were bare, the grasses brown, and the students were wrapped in their black robes. The conversations, on the other hand, brought the liveliness of the summer with it.

Older students walked together, arguing, or stepped quickly along alone, books in hand, obviously late for class. Even at this early hour, there were several students, sitting on the grass, robes pulled close against the wind, noses buried deep in the books. Younger students raced one another or kicked balls at each other—none of which came near the library, whose tall glass windows were sacrosanct.

Several times as they walked across the grounds Thomas was stopped by other students. Thomas introduced them to "Alex" and gave them each the story of "his" arrival. Eileen was looking slightly overwhelmed by it all, but kept to the story. Most nodded to her politely, then turned the conversation elsewhere. By the time they had reached the Law building, Thomas had agreed to meet with one group of students at the Broken Quill, promised to give notes to a student who had been sick the day before, and dodged a half-dozen questions about his summer romance, much to Eileen's amusement.

Thomas led Eileen to the building near the Northern edge of the Academy grounds. Large, grey,

square and squat, studded with windows to let in some light, it was much like the other buildings
There was no adornment on it except a plaque reading "College of Laws."

"This morning is mostly Laws," said Thomas. "This afternoon is fencing and philosophy."

"Fencing?" Eileen looked interested. "That should be fun."

"For me," said Thomas, grinning. "You will get handed your heart on a plate."

"Probably," agreed Eileen. "But it will be fun to try."

Thomas laughed at the eagerness in her voice. "Come on. I'll introduce you to the professors."

Both professors with whom Thomas had lectures that morning had no objection to having "Alex" sit in and listen, provided that was all she did. It was made perfectly clear that no talking would be tolerated in either class, and no talking was. Thomas was rather impressed that Eileen managed to stay awake for both lectures, and even managed to be alert during a long and rather involved debate about the virtues of common law versus written law, and the effects of each on the nobility and the common people in the past century.

"That was amazing," said Eileen, when they stepped out into the cool autumn air after the last lecture.

Thomas's look must have conveyed volumes.

"No, really," she protested. "I mean, I didn't understand it all because I don't know the law, but it was amazing how you all managed to put all the pieces together. Especially concerning the rights of men to farm their land versus the rights of the nobility to demand their service on the nobles' farms. And I loved it when the tall student in the front—"

"Michael."

"Michael pointed out how it was necessary for the nobles to have access to the common man's labour during harvest to maintain the protections they provide and you said that the common man would not be protected if he starved to death because his own crops were destroyed while they were harvesting the nobles' fields—"

"I was there," said Thomas, quite pleased that Eileen had noticed him. In fact, the chance to show off his knowledge before her was probably the only thing that had kept him awake. Especially since the argument was a re-hash of one they'd had the year previous. "Let's find a place to eat, then it's off to fencing class."

They ate at one of the benches in the Academy churchyard, huddling close together for warmth. Around them, other students were doing the same, sitting shoulder to shoulder and sharing their repasts with one another. They argued about what they had heard that morning or in classes days before, talked about girls and pubs and all the other things that young men talk about. Eileen listened to everything, and only blushed occasionally when one of the speakers got a little too descriptive.

They shared their bread with several others, who in turn shared some fruit and a bit of wine. Then the bells rang again and everyone trooped off to their classes. Thomas led Eileen to the fencing hall and found the master. He welcomed Eileen, asked her about her experience, which she answered honestly, and agreed to let her in.

"Thank you," said Eileen.

"Oh, don't thank me," said the Fencing Master. "At least, not until you've finished the class. If you're still standing, thank me then."

An hour later, Eileen managed to gasp to Thomas, "Now I see why you're so good at this."

The Master had them run, first on the spot, then around the room. He had them climb ladders attached to the walls and pull themselves up on bars set into the walls. He made them jump over wooden "horses" set up for just that purpose. After a quarter hour, there was no one who wasn't sweating. By the end of a half hour, there were few who weren't gasping. He led them all, taking the front of the run and driving them all as hard as they could manage. Eileen did her best to keep up, though she didn't manage it. Several times the Master came over, told her to stop and walk for a bit, or come down from the ladder before she ruined herself.

After the half-hour was done, they turned to drills, advancing and retreating across the floor with

heavy wooden sticks in their hands, running through guards, parries and strikes for another half-hour. Eileen again did her best to keep up, but was having trouble holding the stick by half-way through the drill.

After the single drills, he went into paired drills, having them work with different partners, practising dodging and parrying, thrusting and cutting, riposting and counter-riposting. Thomas, used to the drills, went through them with ease, moving from partner to partner with little effort. He was the best fencer of the class, and he worked hard to keep it that way. At these times he missed Henry even more. The young Lord had been Thomas's match, and would have kept him on his toes.

"Right!" bellowed the Fencing Master, bringing all action to a halt. "Matches next. Before that, I think a hand for young Alex here," he gestured to Eileen, who was leaning forward, hands on knees, gasping for air. "He's still standing, which is more than can be said for most of you the first time you did it. Well done."

The students politely applauded, including Thomas, who was grinning at her in spite of himself. Eileen managed a nod and gasped out a "Thank you, sir."

The master grinned, an expression that looked more than a little sinister on his face. "Right, everyone into masks and vests. Let's see how you do against a blade, young Alex."

Thomas helped her find a mask and a jacket that would fit, then took his place on the floor. The matches were chosen randomly by the Master, who had the goodness to let Eileen rest a while before calling "Alex" to the floor.

Thomas found himself almost holding his breath as Eileen faced off against a tall student. Each match went until one partner scores a hit that would be considered a killing blow, or one of them took five hits in non-vital areas, by which time, the Fencing Master explained to Eileen, one would probably be dead anyway.

Eileen's first match ended very quickly, her opponent scoring three non-vital hits and a kill in short order.

"You need to relax more," said Thomas, while two others were taking their turn. "Just breath and focus on getting the hit, just like at home."

"No one was watching at home," said Eileen.

"Doesn't matter," said Thomas. "If you get in a bar brawl there will be spectators. On a battle field, hundreds will see you. In a duel your seconds are watching. Focus on your opponent."

"Thomas!" called the fencing master. "You're up."

Thomas put on his mask and stepped into the ring. He was back moments later, having handily disposed of his opponent.

Eileen went again after two more matches. This time she scored three hits before being killed.

"Not bad," said the master as she saluted her opponent. "You'll have one more."

Thomas finished two other matches before Eileen's last one. The first he won as handily as he had the previous. The second took much longer and became a war of attrition, each scoring four non-vital hits on the other. Thomas broke through the other student's guard, though, and scored the killing blow to end the fight.

"That was amazing," said Eileen.

"It was shoddy," said the Master. "You each could have had the other a half-dozen times. Rest up. Alex, you and John."

John was a lanky young man, with acne and a sneer on his face. He had defeated most of his opponents, and was no doubt looking forward to an easy victory against "Alex."

"Stay relaxed," called Thomas as she stepped in.

They took guard, and the practise rapiers began flashing back and forth. Eileen kept her distance, moving continuously, her blade slipping in and out of the other's reach. John kept up a lazy guard, doing only enough to keep her out of the way. He obviously thought of his skills as superior, and was far too sure of himself. His attacks were flashy, made with little care for his opponent's skills. Eileen had to dance back a dozen times as he cut and lunged at her, but each time she came back with a cut or

thrust of her own. And with each one her attacks were getting closer. Even so, John scored three non-vital hits on her without her getting one in return. He was grinning when he launched his final attack of the fight, a feint with a cut, then a deep lunge to Eileen's chest.

Eileen slipped out of the way as Thomas had taught her, and drove her blade under his, scoring on his wrist along the way to driving the point home into his chest.

"Well done!" shouted the Fencing Master. "Match to Alex!"

Thomas barely remembered to restrain himself from kissing her. Instead, he pounded her back and shook her hand. "Well done!"

"Too well," said John grumpily as he pulled off his mask. He was looking quite disgusted with himself, but held out a hand to Eileen "My own fault for getting cocky," he said when she took it. "I hope you become a student, so I can beat you in the rematch."

"I hope so, too," said Eileen, shaking his hand. The smile vanished from her face with the words, though, and Thomas watched her realize that she would never truly be a student at the Academy, no matter what she did. She turned away, went to hang up her gear with the others.

After the class, Thomas and Eileen moved at a relatively slow pace down the path to the philosophy building. He waited until they were out of an earshot of other students before asking, "Are you all right?"

"Fine," said Eileen in the tone Thomas had learnt to recognize as meaning the opposite. "What's next?"

"Philosophy," said Thomas. "Two hours."

"Ah."

"We're examining the arguments of the Bedulan philosophers, who come from very far south of here and don't recognize the existence of gods at all. So far, it's been quite enlightening."

"I'm sure."

A group of students passed by them, chattering and rushing to their next class. Thomas waited

until they were gone by to say, "I'm sorry."

"I know," said Eileen. "But it doesn't change anything."

"I know."

"Well then," she said, forcing a falsely cheerful tone. "Let's keep going, shall we?"

They did. Thomas took her to his philosophy class, introduced her to Professor Dodson, and led her to a seat. The professor made a point of introducing her to the rest of the class, then included her in the discussion. Eileen pleaded her ignorance of the topic, but the professor informed her that, in matters of the Bedulan philosophers, everyone was ignorant, and therefore her opinion was as valued as any of the others.

It took some time, but soon Eileen was as involved in the discussion as any of them, and by the end of the class was chatting with several of the students while Thomas talked to the professor. In fact, she nearly left with them, only turning back when she realized Thomas wasn't with her.

"Sorry," she said, when they left the building. "Geoffrey was trying to prove that the High Father existed, but that is was impossible for the other gods to exist, and Mark was trying to prove that none of them exist, and John from fencing was insisting that just because we can't prove something exists doesn't mean it doesn't." She stopped for breath.

"Enjoyed the class?"

"Very much," said Eileen. "Wish I could go back to it."

"Me, too," said Thomas. "Now come on. We'll get our rapiers, then go to the theatre. They have one more show before it gets dark. After that, we'll go to the Broken Quill for dinner."

"Can you afford that?"

Thomas smiled. "This year, I can. Henry paid the rent before he went off, so I've got money to spare."

"But don't you have work to do?"

"Nothing due tomorrow," said Thomas. "And how many more chances will we have to go to the

theatre together?"

"Not many." Eileen sighed, "Oh, Thomas, if only..."

She didn't say anymore, and Thomas didn't bother to finish the sentence. It was impossible, and both of them knew it. Even if Lionel didn't come to drag Eileen back to Elmvale, there was no way for her to keep up the charade of being male for more than a few days in close quarters. Someone was bound to notice, if not in the classroom, then definitely in the baths, which the students went to regularly as much for warmth as cleanliness, this time of year.

So he put his arm around her shoulder, gave her a quick squeeze, then let her go, which was all he could do without anyone becoming suspicious. "Come on," he said. "We have tonight, at least."

"Aye, we do," agreed Eileen. She smiled at him, said, "Race you!" and took off at a run.

Thomas sprinted after her, his longer legs shortening the distance between them with each stride. Eileen reached the passage to the courtyard before him, and got through the gate before he could catch up. They were neck and neck by the time they reached the stairs, and Thomas took the lead as they raced up the three stories to the apartment.

He came to a dead halt on the top step, and Eileen slammed into him, nearly knocking him over.

"Hello, Thomas," said Henry, when they straightened themselves out. "What's she doing here?"

"Me?" said Eileen, recovering first. "What are you doing here?"

"Starving slowly," said Henry. He stood up from his place on the balcony floor. He was wrapped in a long, warm travel cloak, much stained and looking rough. Several days worth of beard covered his face. His movements were stiff, and he favoured one leg, Thomas noticed. He looked at them and smiled. "Is there any food inside?"

"Not a scrap," said Thomas. "But there's a kettle and water to heat. We'll get you warm and cleaned up, then go out to eat."

"The Quill," suggested Henry. "The food on the ship was mediocre at best."

"The Quill is just where we were going," said Thomas. "Though we were heading to the theatre

first."

"Skip that," said Henry. "We need to talk." He looked at Eileen. "Still have a pretty pair of legs on you," he said. "Now can we get inside?"

Thomas unlocked the door and led them all in. Henry went straight to the brazier and began building the fire up. Thomas fetched the kettle and filled it with enough water both for washing and for tea.

"You don't keep enough kindling," said Henry.

"I'll do it," said Thomas. He looked to make certain the door was closed, then stared at the fire. A moment later, one of the pieces of tinder burst into flame. Henry and Eileen both jumped back, startled.

"How did you—" began Eileen, but Henry cut her off.

"Magic," he said, stepping forward and adding a few other wood shavings to the small blaze until it grew, then adding several large sticks to it. "Learnt some new tricks, have you?"

"A few," said Thomas. "Found some instructions in some old books." He pointed to the shelves. "I collect them, now."

"Wow," said Eileen, going to the shelves. "Are these all spellbooks?"

"No, they're mostly textbooks and plays. But about a dozen are memoirs and most of them have a spell or two or six."

"Have you written them all down in one place?" asked Henry.

Thomas shook his head. "Collecting old books is allowed, if odd. Collecting bits of magic is frowned upon."

"Write them out," said Henry. "Tomorrow. Get them all into one book. Do you still have that one from the school of Theology?"

"Yes," said Thomas. "And the three the Bishop had. They're hidden."

"Good," said Henry, holding his hands out to the small flames. "I'll need them. And I need you."

"Me? What for?"

"The war," said Henry. "They're using magic against us." He looked at Eileen. "And you still haven't said what she's doing here."