

SET HERE A SPELL

by Gary Jordan

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(A Somewhat Belated Entry For The Virago Blue Challenge)

It wasn't that long after The Great War, and a lot of people still distrusted magickers of any type, but I'd been there when the king bound The Wizard to his oath, and I knew the terms of the treaty. The key item had been the new oath that every apprentice witch, warlock, wizard and mage must take, using his True Name:

"I, <state your True Name>, vow not to harm humankind or their allies, nor through inaction, allow humankind to come to harm; not to harm my liege lord, nor through inaction, let my liege lord come to harm save where such actions or inaction might cause harm to humankind; to obey the orders of my liege lord or those appointed by him over me, save where obedience would harm humankind or my liege lord; and not to harm myself or allow myself to be harmed, save where that would harm humankind, or my liege lord."

That Oath was administered as part of an incantation and placed a geas on the Oath-taker, and was done before the Oath-taker had power enough to deflect it or suborn it; it was administered under conditions which precluded the influence of an outside party to do so as well.

To an independent observer, it might have made our kingdom *too* civilized. True, we had more thaumaturgists per capita than any other kingdom I've ever heard of since Lost Atlantis, but they were royally sanctioned, licensed, and approved. My grandfather might mutter that in *his* day, no town would *ever* suffer a witch to live within the city limits, but we live in modern times. His muttering cantrips for warding off evil were as unnecessary as tits on a boar hog.

Me, I'm a soldier, and practical. Believed all my life in cold steel as the best way to settle an enemy's hash. But if you think I turned away the support of the Lightning and Fireball Artillery Companies in combat, or even turned down a sharpness spell on my blade, you're crazier than grandpa.

Besides, little cousin Reanna, Grandpa's third wife's second (by her first husband) son's daughter, had apprenticed at the Academy, and gone into military intelligence. She had a touch of the second sight, and the tools and training to make a good little spy. Grandpa might not approve, but I sure wasn't surprised — she'd been spying on me for years.

Anyway, being part of the band that stormed the Wizard's Keep (and surviving it) was good for my career. I became one of the lieutenants of the Captain of the Royal Guard, got showered with gold (a very brief shower, but enough to wash away all my family's debts and let grandpa retire), and gifted with a parcel of land on which to settle when I got old and grizzled. I turned down being ennobled — didn't want to pay taxes or wear them fancy costumes. No barony for me!

But like I said, "too civilized." We had us a standing army of almost a thousand trained men-at-arms, and could call up twice that number in an emergency, including allies under various levels of obligation. We had supporting corps of thaumaturgists, like the artillery corps and the corps of engineers. There wasn't a kingdom within two hundred leagues that could challenge us in the field. So, the bulk of the army was used in police duties and training exercises, or dealing with the occasional rogue dragon or ogre.

When the Captain summoned me to the chambers of the Military Pentagonagram, I was eager for an assignment. Barracks duty is the worst kind of duty for a soldier. Not that I'm some bloodthirsty barbarian, but let's face it — when all you have to do is polish your armor and sharpen your weapons, people start to expect you to do just that. I've never believed that an army needed to be pretty, it just has to hack the enemy down before it got hacked down itself. I needed to get away from headquarters and back in the field.

"How's your sword arm, Lance?" Captain "Cleave" Mida asked me as we traded warrior's salutes, fist to buckler. He always called me Lance, rather than some form of my True Name. Come to that, most everyone did. Harkened back to the Wizard's Keep, when the Wizard's minions counter-attacked and Fletch screamed, "They're boiling out of the castle!" I'd shouted something stupid to rally the men; most quote me as saying, "Let's lance the boil!" The name stuck. Of such inane babbling are legends made.

"Can't complain, Captain Cleave." Well, I could, but not to *him*. If I was famous for a silly rally cry, *he* was famous for slaying the troll that threatened the king's back. With a single blow. "Got a job for that arm?"

"I just might," he answered. "Military intelligence has gone all oracular on us, and nobody can make heads or tails of that gobbledygook. There *might* be something happening, and that's enough to give us cold-iron types gray hair. Nothing for it but to go and look."

You know the deal with oracles — they never say what they mean, and there's always six different ways to interpret what they said. Once the eggs hit the skillet, you find out the seventh way, and it always looks obvious... in hindsight. And you always want to choke the shit out of the scribe who recorded it, because half the time the problem might have been solved earlier if they'd written *they're* instead of *their*, or *nose wet* instead of *no sweat*. Remind me to tell you what I did to the scribe who wrote *lair* when he should've said *layer*.

So: "You want I should take a company out in the field to figure out whether the scribe should be flayed or filleted?"

Captain Cleave looked annoyed. “It can’t be a whole company. Politics and shit involved.” He frowned. “MI is sending a specialist, and she needs an escort. Squad sized. She asked for you, specifically.”

“She asked for me?” It was my turn to frown. I know everyone knows the names of the Heroes of the Wizard’s Keep. The freakin’ Bards and Balladeers had a field day for years making sure nobody could forget. On the plus side, it was pleasantly easy to never sleep alone unless I wanted to. On the other hand, you couldn’t scratch your nuts without someone speculating about an old battle wound and trying to sell you a magic salve. Fame ain’t all it’s cracked up to be.

Setting that aside, I only knew one person in MI and....

“She asked for you by your True Name.” Well, that settled the who. **Had** to be Reanna, nobody else could know—there were spells on top of spells to keep *that* private. It wouldn’t do for one of the King’s associates to be influenced by a binding spell.

“She’s a seer,” I said, acknowledging her identity. “I suppose we’ll be along to keep her from bein’ disturbed while she’s touchin’ artifacts and seein’.”

He nodded. “You’ll keep her unmolested while she unravels the mystery.”

I wished later that I’d paid closer attention to his choice of words.

The rest of that meeting involved dry boring details like where we was to go and how little of the privy purse we could take with us so’s not to have to pill... er, *forage* through the countryside, and what kind of skills might be useful to have along. By the end of the day I had picked my volunteers and told them to be saddled up and outside the drawbridge by sunup. I was looking forward to seeing my cousin again—she was rarely home when I was, not that I got home all that much. On reflection, I hadn’t seen her since her eleventh year.

The sun found me and my select companions mounted and waiting outside the moat at the end of the drawbridge. I’d already inspected the troops and was satisfied with their arms and armor. Their mounts were small but sturdy ponies that’d have no trouble in the hinterlands; there were four extras to serve as pack animals and spares. Some of them had served with me in other campaigns and knew what I expected. The rest took their cue from the veterans and were at ease.

That ease seemed to evaporate when we saw a small party working their way across the drawbridge. My own nerves ratcheted up when I saw the hooded figure on the peculiar mount. Surely that couldn’t be... but it was, I saw. I recognized the face—I’d glimpsed it often enough peeking through windows or from the loft when I’d invited a woman to share my pallet. My cousin Reanna, the agent for military intelligence, was riding a unicorn.

Gods and demons! Was this supposed to be a secret mission? How could we possibly blend in as just another band of soldiers on an errand for the king with her riding bareback on a unicorn? I mean, I recognized that face, but the rest of her had acquired a certain curviness I didn't associate with my little cousin. In fact, there were several features I couldn't associate with little, period. My cousin was a woman grown. At least in some respects. Well, she *was* riding a unicorn.

I ain't a bumpkin. I'm as aware that certain spells and powers are greatly enhanced by a certain lack of familiarity with earthy pleasures as any court mage or priest. But Reanna had to be, let me think... that can't be right... twenty years old?

But it must be, even if it couldn't. Twenty years a virgin. Her magic must be awesome!

And that's when the mission truly struck home, and I remembered the Captain's words. We were going to be traipsing all over the countryside, fighting where and when we must, following where she might lead, for the sole purpose of saving Reanna's privates.

I got over my own shock and tuned in on the combination of muttering and speculation around me. Shut 'em all up with a harsh glance. Then I urged my pony forward to meet the my cousin and her spymaster.

She greeted me first. "Ho, cousin. Long time, no see." She wore a girlish smile, like someone who successfully pulled off a huge practical joke.

I smiled. Had to smile, even if I was the butt of the joke. For one thing, that smile and an open cloak were all she was wearing, not even sandals. She'd be something to smile at, even if she weren't a cousin to be damned proud of. Appropriate to her abilities, she was bewitching. "Well met, cousin. A long time, for sure. You're all grewed up!"

The Captain of Military Intelligence cleared his throat, cutting short the family reunion. "Greetings, Lance of the Royal Guard," he spoke formally. "My fellow Captain of the Army assures me that you and your band are the best for this mission." He seemed doubtful.

I couldn't help but bristle at his tone. "My soldiers and me'll fight to the last breath to protect her, never mind that she's my cousin. Have no doubts about that!"

He waved a hand. "We've never met, but I've heard of your exploits. Even allowing for exaggeration, I know you'll acquit yourself well in any test of arms, and inspire the rest to exceed their abilities." That soothed me some, but he wasn't done. "Despite that, the auguries for this journey are disturbing. There are indications...." He shook his head. "No doubt you've heard the expression, 'as though through a glass, darkly.' The future is never clear to us, whatever spells or talents we employ. To be blunt, some of the ambiguities center on you, personally. But the alternatives all seem worse, and Peeper here insists all will turn out well."

Peeper, is it? Somehow her familiar name suited her, and would have even in her youth. “Does she? How will it?” I asked.

“She does, and we’ve had reason to trust her vision. As to how, we don’t know; it’s a mystery. But she’s one of our very best, so despite misgivings, I entrust her safety unto your care.”

“I’ll protect her like she was my own sister.” I noticed an expression flit across Peeper’s face, when I said that. Almost seemed like annoyance. Wasn’t there long enough to be sure. Probably she felt she could take care of herself.

We gathered up the two ponies with her gear and added them to the baggage train, and set out riding two abreast, save point and rearguard. Now’s as good a time as any to mention the rest of the party. I’ll start with Dirk, at point. Short, dark and dangerous. Handier with a knife than any ten men I ever met, in hand or thrown. He was a hundred paces ahead of the rest of us, keeping an eye out for ambush.

Next rode Chick and Flake leading pack ponies. I knew Chick’s skills with a bow from another mission. He got his familiar name from putting so many arrows into a dragon’s belly that they looked like a chicken’s breast feathers. Flake I’d never seen in action, but he came with Chick’s commendation. He claimed the man could hit a specific snowflake in a blizzard at two hundred paces. I hoped he was right. He was much of a size with Chick.

Behind them were Bitsy and Nick, leading Peeper’s pair of pack ponies. Bitsy was **very** familiar to me. She was a priestess of the healer’s temple, long on loan to the Army. So long, some doubted she still knew all the rites. That didn’t matter to me; she knew the spells of healing more than well enough, and had healed my loneliness on more than one occasion. She was called after her familiar expression, “Now this won’t hurt a bit, see....” That was a soothing lie more often than not, but she was welcome in any band I led. Her only weapon was a staff, but I’d seen her defend with it. She was *good*.

Next to Bitsy, Nick seemed a blond giant, for all that he was no bigger’n me. I had no idea of his combat skills, but the Captain had commended him as from the quartermasters, so his thieving skills were probably excellent. His seduction skills might be as well, for I’d seen him ruffle Bitsy’s red mane and an answering grin. Something told me she’d be warming someone else’s blankets this mission.

Peeper and I rode side by side, and for the first hours merely traded gossip about the family. There were mission details to discuss, but we’d put some distance between us and the crowded roads before we spoke of that, lest an ear overhear and a tongue wag out of turn. I’ve mentioned Peeper’s looks only in passing, but she had grown up. I kept stealing glances. Every time I did, her unicorn turned his head to glare balefully at me. I don’t think he liked me.

Behind us, Dick and Blue and the rest of the ponies were a hundred paces in front of Tucker. Dick was a tall, swarthy man with long, graceful fingers usually wrapped around the haft of a huge axe. He got his name... well, we'd seen him bathe. Blue was a former barbarian. She was lean and mean and muscled all over, and those muscles were covered in blue dye and little else but fur. Even her hair was dyed blue. Some kind of barbarian ritual for warriors, no doubt, even though she was one of us now. I don't think it was a coincidence that the swordswoman rode next to Dick; she'd seen him bathe, too. Both were archers as well.

Tucker brought up the rear. At first glance, enemies tended to dismiss him as a harmless old fat man. That was a mistake, as precious little of his girth was fat. He was simply huge and muscled all out of proportion. When he struck something with his great mace, it tended either to gong or to splatter; either way it went down. His pony was stout as well, to support his bulk. His name derived from the appetite he displayed to fuel those muscles.

We made good time, stopping only to rest and water the ponies, until mid afternoon. We dined on travel rations walking beside the ponies, feedbags on their long faces, except for the unicorn. He disdained a bag, and while the rest of us walked, galloped away to fend for himself. Peeper assured me he'd return in due course, before the rest of us were ready to remount, and he did. Remounting, I had Dick and Blue trade with Dirk and Tucker, and we proceeded onward.

Peeper startled me as she leapt onto the unicorn's back. What I had taken for a hooded cloak became long, flowing hair. She laughed at my surprise. "Surely you knew that no maiden can ride a unicorn clothed," she teased. "It was only a seeming for prying eyes."

"Seems to me," I muttered, "that if you were worried about prying eyes, that cloak would have closed in front."

"Silly!" she teased again, "the cloak wasn't for *modesty*. It was to conceal *Lily*." When I continued to look puzzled, she reached up to her throat and began to fondle what I had first taken to be the cloak's clasp and now to be some sort of enchanted talisman. Under her touch, the necklace writhed and wriggled and separated to become a snake.

"I get it. The cloak wasn't to cover your ass, it was to cover your asp." I sometimes consider myself a wit. I'm usually half right.

The serpent rattled her tail menacingly. "Lily is **not** an asp, as you can plainly see from the diamond pattern on her back. And she's very sensitive about such things. You'd best apologize." She extended her arm toward me with the viper wrapped around her wrist.

So I did. "I'm sorry if I gave offense, Lily," I spoke directly to the serpent. You don't trifle with a witch's familiar. "I was just trying to offer teasing for teasing. I sure didn't mean to insult **you**." The rattling stopped and her fangs retracted.

I almost wished they hadn't. Lily uncoiled from Reanna's wrist and slithered across the palm to wrap around my arm, and from there to slide under my collar and beneath my jerkin. I ain't all that ticklish, but I could feel that little forked tongue everywhere as two feet of slender snake slithered around betwixt me and my armor. I for sure didn't know whether to feel honored or annoyed. This was more, um, *familiarity* than I cared for. When I felt Lily winding her way down my sleeve, I extended that arm toward Reanna. She extended hers in return.

Our fingers touched, and I felt a jolt. Lily entwined herself about both our hands briefly, forcing us to remain in contact, before returning once more up Reanna's arm to her throat. I didn't drop my hand until I was startled by the unicorn's snort.

Lily shook her tail twice and hissed. Reanna giggled. "Lily likes you. And she forgives your joke earlier. But she thinks you're about due for a bath."

I snorted, this time. The unicorn looked back at me—I wondered what I'd said. I still think he didn't like me. But I addressed only Lily and Reanna. "Lily, I'd guess you're probably right about that. But I don't know if I want to get naked around anybody called Peeper. She came by that name honest."

Another rattle and hiss. Reanna blushed. "What did she say?" I asked.

"Never mind." Hiss, rattle-rattle. Hiss. Rattle. "Oh, fine. Be that way." She looked at the sky, and her blush deepened. "She said to assure you that she's not jealous of *your* serpent familiar, because he's only half as long. Although his rattles are enormous. Anyway, he must be blind, since he only has the one eye."

The whole party turned in their saddles when I let out a guffaw. "*She's* a bigger tease than **you** are!" I got control of my laughter and the party returned to watchfulness. "Besides," I murmured, grinning, "you know darn well that 'half as long' is an exaggeration, from back when you were earning your name as a girl."

That comment did nothing to lighten her blush. I'd swear she muttered "Not by much" under her breath, but if she did, it's only because everything seems bigger when you're young.

I don't mean to imply that I spent all my time at Reanna's side. In fact, I introduced her to Bitsy and spent at least a few minutes with each of the troops in turn, drawing them out about their skills and strengths. Much as I dislike sharing command, Reanna would be in overall strategic command, deciding where we went, when we went there, and roughly how we would travel. But tactical command is my bailiwick. I command the troops, and you can't decide tactics without knowing your assets.

Some of the troops I already knew well enough. I spent the time with them catching up, swapping lies, and getting their opinions of the other “red jerkins,” as we called the royal security forces. Bitsy did her damndest to get me to blush in front of Reanna. She had this belief that our mental health was as important as a healthy sword arm. She accomplished that by combating loneliness, one bedroll at a time, and didn’t mind reminiscing. Reanna blushed more than I did, but listened avidly to every comment.

Blue was another veteran I could be at ease with. She was no red jerkin—if not for her barbarian origins, she’d be an officer in the King’s Guard. I tried to tease her about the attachment that seemed to be forming between her and Dick the axe-man. Was she finally getting civilized? She doesn’t tease easily. She just shrugged. “I have never denied that this warrior is a woman, also. I see my weaker sisters enjoying the benefits of your ‘civilization.’ Someone must protect them from the barbarian hordes. This I can do. But I lately think I can enjoy some of the benefits as well. It is too soon to tell if that one can enjoy them with me. For now, he swings a mighty axe. That is enough.” It wasn’t until I was riding back with Reanna that I wondered which ‘axe’ she was referring to.

I found myself spending a few extra minutes with Flake. Despite a basic shyness and self-deprecating style, he struck me as one to watch. During our talk, it was like he was very subtly determining *my* strengths and weaknesses as much as the other way around, and making tactical...not suggestions so much as hints. I listened to those hints, and would remember to commend him to the Captain of the Guard on our return. Like Blue, this one might be officer material, but without the stigma.

Just before sunset, I called a halt for the day. We’d come to a well-worn campsite near a brook, used by many travelers but empty now. Despite the lack of danger you’d expect within a day’s ride of the capital, I set half the party to scouting around while the rest of us set up camp. As soon as Reanna dismounted, the unicorn galloped away again. Our own mounts we corralled and hobbled.

I allowed a cooking fire, though the light would do for night vision. The kingdom really is over-civilized, and we were well within the borders. Most of us would sleep on blankets around the fire, while the troops took turns as sentries. Reanna had her own tent. More of an awning, really, open at the bottom. It assembled itself magically with a brief incantation.

Tucker demonstrated how he got his name and lightened the pack ponies’ load; the rest of us ate more reasonably. Nick and Bitsy did kitchen duty with the utensils before “Seeing if we can forage something to make up for Tucker’s dinner,” together. They disappeared into the dark.

Dick and Blue were less circumspect. They merely moved their saddles and blankets further from the fire, and climbed under one of the blankets before making the beast with two backs. From the motion of the blankets, I suspect that Blue won two falls out of three.

Reanna retired while they were announcing completion of the first match. She lay in the center of her tent, her hair fanned out from her head, while Lily coiled on her stomach. I didn't worry about her open arrangement. I was certain Lily would give alert to any intruder, and I was a very light sleeper. When Nick and Bitsy returned, I closed my eyes.

It seemed like seconds later that I opened them, but must have been hours. The fire was little more than cinders and a few red coals. I lay still while trying to hear or feel what might have awakened me. I heard a creak of leather off in the distance that I identified as the sentry. That wouldn't have awakened me. What little moonlight there was served more to deepen shadows than illuminate. Then I heard a whimper.

I turned only my head to look over at Reanna's canopy. The moon was low enough that its dim light shone on Reanna. As my eyes adjusted, I began to smile.

My cousin might lack the experience that would disqualify her as a unicorn rider, but she didn't lack for passion. I could see one hand teasing a breast while the other teased lower. Her toes were curled at the end of spread legs. Lily was obliging by coiling about her other breast; maybe she was part constrictor. I could only guess in the dark, but from the position of Lily's head, I'd bet her little tongue was darting out at Reanna's nipple.

I watched for a while, until she arched her back and moaned, her fingers a blur. With a satisfied sigh, she disposed herself once more for sleep.

Not me. For one thing, the sentry had heard that moan, and I could hear him coming to investigate. I rose as silently as I could, and went to intercept. We exchanged recognition signals well beyond the campfire. He mentioned the noise; I reassured him it was just me groaning about having to get up to relieve myself, and he returned to the darkness.

Relieve myself I did. Took myself in hand and stroked until the image of Reanna caused my seed to spurt. That was the other thing, and once done and bladder emptied besides, I could return to sleep, myself.

At first light, Blue restarted the cooking fire when relieved of sentry-go. She'd stuck some night-fowl and plucked it while watching over us, so we had fresh meat to augment the travel rations. Tucker swore he'd marry her if she could provide like that every day—she just laughed. Shortly after sunrise, we were packed and on the road again.

Riding today, Reanna and I exchanged war stories. I'd talk of battles; she'd talk about visions and their interpretation. We kept each other in stitches. It seems that thaumaturgists observed the same law of nature as soldiers: "If it can get fucked up, it will, as badly as possible, with no warning."

I told her the story of the “dragon lair.” “It was another case of the scribe writing the oracle’s words wrong. It’s bad enough tryin’ to figure out what the Oracles are talkin’ about, without translatin’ errors creeping in. We wasn’t overmanned for the mission, but we had enough to take on a dragon, barely. ‘Beware the dragon lair.’ That’s what was writ, and we were taking every precaution. Well, what should have been wrote down was, ‘Beware the dragon layer.’ And what lays a dragon? Another dragon, that’s what!”

Reanna blushed and giggled, then turned serious. “So you were ready to fight a dragon, but not two dragons, and a mated pair at that. How did you manage to defeat them?”

“Badly.” I turned away for a moment. No need for her to see my expression as I recalled how close a thing that had been. Four warriors for every five who went never returned. I brought my expression under control and turned back. “The female was gravid, and close to layin’ her eggs. That slowed her down enough to let us deal with her mate. He made up for it in ferociousness, tryin’ to protect her. It was nip and tuck all the way, and if it weren’t obvious she was about to nest, we’d’ve scrubbed the mission and gone for reinforcements.”

I looked at Reanna warmly. “Nobody fights harder than family protectin’ family.” She blushed and looked down. “If we’d run, when we came back there’d’ve been two mated adult dragons protectin’ a nest full of hatchlings. It would have taken the entire royal guard plus a company of magicians.” I was exaggerating, but not by all that much. I looked over my shoulder at Chick, and nodded in his direction. “He was there, and Bitsy. Chick was scorched more than once in the battle. Claims he had a vision that he’ll die in flames. Won’t go near dragons. Any chance of that, this time?”

She shook her head. “The portents show no sign of draconic involvement, however vague they might be otherwise. Nor have I seen anything like that in my own visions.”

“Is there anything you can share?”

“Well, a portion of the Oracle’s verse goes, *Peal of lightning; Sound of thunder; Scaring those who; Dodge and blunder; Underdog.*’ Does that mean anything to you?”

I shook my head. Oracles. Can’t live with ‘em, can’t feed ‘em to the fish. “Are we the underdogs? Is it a weather forecast, or an encounter with demons? Damn all Oracles!” I might have been a bit vehement.

Reanna placed a calming hand on my forearm. It tingled. If she’d been another woman, I might have enjoyed that tingle—now I shook it off mentally as a sign of the magic she commanded. “The Oracles aren’t deliberately obtuse. It’s just the nature of the magic involved. The ones I’ve spoken to personally are as frustrated as we are, and just as confused. Imagine the consternation of the Oracle at Wheeler every time his consort asks what he wants for dinner—which she does—just to tease him.”

I accepted the defense without changing my own opinion.

Noon caught up with us near a copse of trees, so we used the shade while grazing the ponies. Bitsy checked for saddle sores, not always accepting the denial of her patients. Several times, she insisted on a visual check. She has her opinions on the stubbornness of soldiers, and doesn't let it interfere with her duties. To my amusement, Reanna was the only one who needed treatment. Riding bareback, even on a unicorn, can have that effect. She tried to protest, even though her unicorn had disappeared at a gallop once dismounted.

"Peeper, just bend over and accept the inevitable." Bitsy would have her way and Reanna would appreciate it down the road.

"He says that to *all* the women," Bitsy said. We *both* blushed, and I decided this'd be a good time to check the ponies.

The rest of this day and the next passed as uneventfully as the first. The nights were much the same as well, with me waking in the dark to peep at the peeper before taking care of my own needs. Bitsy spread her medicine without favoritism, though I was amused to hear Flake very politely decline both nights. The third night of our trek, I did the same. It would have been hard to explain what I was doing in the middle of the night while sharing blankets. Blue, in contrast, seemed to have staked a claim and went about solidifying it with the same vigor she brought to every quest.

On the morning of the fourth day we were following the road through a cut in a hill when Reanna suddenly said, "This will do!"

I looked all around. Scrub brush, no trees. Nobody in sight ahead or behind. Hadn't passed a farm or a house for miles. I asked, "Do for what?"

She said, "Help me unpack the wormwood chest. I need some things." I called Blue back from point and had Tucker close up. Everyone took positions for a protective circle while Reanna and me dismounted and got that chest from her pack animal. For once, the unicorn didn't race away. Like most of the chests that pony carried, this one was fairly small. When she opened it, I saw bunches of small glass phials and jars full of all kinds of roots and herbs and potions. Tools of the trade for a witch, I assumed.

Using mortar and pestle, she ground together the contents of several of the jars, in proportions she must have memorized, since she didn't use a book. Or maybe the recipe was some of the weird language she was half-singing. I didn't know for sure what she was cooking up, but I used hand signals to let everyone know to stay alert. She sure didn't need her elbow jostled, not even by me.

She waved the pestle five times over the mortar with a rising inflection to her voice and then stopped. Turning to me, she said, "Hurry! I need a couple of large rocks, one planted on either side of the trail. There and there," she pointed.

I shouted orders and fought back the usual annoyance of mundanes with thaumaturgists. I mean, if she needed rocks in a particular place, why didn't she say so *before* she started? They never explain what they're doing or why and then the rest of us have to move in a hurry, and they always blame *us* if the spell gets screwed up. When this was done, I was going to strike a blow for mundanes everywhere, by putting those very points to my cousin.

The second rock was being placed when she pulled a skinny little dagger from the chest and started waving it while chanting. I flinched when she poked it into the meaty part of her hand and let the blood mingle with her concoction. As she chanted, her hair began to stand away from her, crackling with energy. She carried the mix to the first rock and started drawing mystic runes on it. Then she did the same for the second stone, never ceasing the chant.

Fog began to form from nothing and shroud the entire area. I hastily had everyone else remount in close formation, so's not to lose anyone. In short order, you could barely make out the tips of your toes, it was so thick. I grabbed the chest. The chant ended. "Now! Fast as we can, everyone touching, between the stones and down the path!" See what I mean? No warning at all!

"Form on me, tighten up nuts to butts!" I yelled, mounting my own pony. I had to lean over to touch Reanna. I took her hand while still shouting so the others could find us. When the last sounded off, I called "At the trot, forward!" and we did. The only light I could see was a glowing unicorn's horn, which let me keep position on Reanna. I worried that one of the ponies might stumble, or tangle its legs in another's, but there was nothing to be done.

Then my ears popped. I worked my jaw and they popped again. When my ears began to clear, so did the fog.

Reanna braced and turned to look behind, still clutching my hand. "We can slow down; all are safely through," she said, sighing. She was trembling. I felt it through her hand.

Through to where, I did **not** have a clue. Ahead was a vista, the road before us winding down, much of it hidden. To our left a swift-running rivulet ran over cataracts. But I had to see to our safety. "Point guard, POST! Everybody fan out and check for ambush. Stay concealed if possible. Find a defensible campsite." The others jogged off to obey, until only Reanna, Bitsy and I remained with the pack animals. It was time to find out, and I meant what I said about bringing thoughtless mages to heel.

I never got the chance. "That's the Ouroer River ahead, I think. If everything worked right, anyway." Heavy sigh. "Sometimes I hate the way magic works! I have to memorize so many new spells from the spell books, and I don't understand any of what I've memorized until it's already started." She looked at me. "What if there hadn't been any stones about? And it would have been nice to anticipate the cloud." Another heavy sigh. "Well, at least I'll know *next* time." Her trembling began to fade.

I let go her hand, and noticed both our hands covered in blood. She noticed, too. “Virgin’s blood,” she giggled. “Necessary ingredient in so many of the more potent spells.”

Smiling, I raised my hand to my mouth and began to lick. “A good vintage,” I joked, and sucked at my palm.

Reanna’s eyes got really big. After a few heartbeats, she closed her eyes and chanted something musical. I don’t know what it was, but I recognized my true name in it, and hers, and looked around quickly to see if Bitsy had heard. She was on the far side of the pack ponies and hadn’t, or at least affected not to.

When she finished, the unicorn was dancing around skittishly. I looked around for snakes, but the only one in sight was Lily. “What was that spell?” I asked.

“I... It was just something to make me feel better.” Her voice was low.

“You’re not feeling well?” The spell must have taken a lot from her. I glanced about for Bitsy again.

“I feel *fine*, now, she replied. “How do *you* feel?” She cocked her head, waiting for the answer.

I thought about it. My ears had hurt at first, but that had passed. Maybe that was a side effect of the magic? I grinned to reassure her. “I feel marvelous.” She grinned back. I reached for her hand, the one that she’d jabbed, and held it with my palm putting pressure on the wound. It must have hurt—she started trembling again. But this time the tips of her ears turned pink. Must be the pressure I’d felt, bothering her, too.

Without letting go of her hand, I pulled my nag closer. “Open your mouth,” I said.

She gulped, tilted her head toward me with her eyes closed, and parted her lips. That wouldn’t do it—I’d had to practically yawn. Before I could tell her so, the unicorn snorted and danced away, forcing me to let her hand go. While she was distracted, I waved Bitsy up and told her to bind the wound or close it.

About then, some of the riders returned, indicating a satisfactory campsite not far ahead. We shepherded the pack animals betwixt us and moved on to that site. For once I was happy to see her unicorn disappear.

I wasn’t about to wander around the border country without more information than I’d been given. All Military Intelligence types are secretive, even Reanna, but every soldier tries to obey the adage, “know your enemy.” The point had been made, repeatedly, that us throat-slicers were only here to keep Reanna’s throat unslit, and her slit unpoked while she did her thing. We could do that a lot better if we knew at least a little of what to expect. It was time to draw the line.

I walked over to Reanna's tent to do just that. She was squatting in the dust, wielding a gnarled stick covered in runes, and drawing a line of her own. "Stay over there," she said, not looking up. I looked at her drawing. Near as I could tell, it was a representation of the main river, plus the smaller feeder that sped nearby and the windy route beside it. She reached into a bag and pulled out a fistful of bird bones. Chanting once again, she tossed them into the air.

Logically, from the way she tossed them, they should've scattered all over camp. I mean, she put some serious arm action into that toss. They barely cleared her head before dropping back to her dirt map. They looked like two dozen tiny spokes to a wheel, all aligned toward a central point. Some were nearly touching that point. Reanna gasped.

"What's it mean, Peeper?" That gasp didn't sound good.

"They know we're here, they know where we are, and they're closing in!" she almost shouted.

Well, shit! Next time I decide I want information, somebody remind me to ask for **good** news.

I turned around and cried, "Havoc!" that being the code for imminent attack, and everyone burst into sudden activity. I turned back to Reanna, who was busy herself. I drew my sword. She looked up. "If we mount up, can we break through back the way we came?" I asked.

She shook her head. "That way," she pointed. "It's our only hope."

I didn't ask why. There wasn't time. Just then a spear of lightning flashed through the camp and turned old Tucker into barbecue.

"**That** way! Save what you can! Fighting retreat!" I still hadn't seen what we were up against, but it was clear we were outnumbered, and they had some serious magic of their own. Fighting magic. I was sure Reanna would have her own arsenal, but there was only one of her and it wasn't her specialty. Bitsy grabbed her staff and a backpack and led the retreat. Nick hefted whatever cases or chests Reanna pointed to and followed her; the rest of us advanced to the rear leapfrog fashion.

A skirmisher popped up in front of Bitsy. Flake, facing that way, put a quarrel in his eye. At least the back door was unblocked, even if it led up the side of the mountain. We continued falling back as spearmen entered what had been our camp and torched Reanna's tent. The archers were accounting for the closest pursuers, but the arrows wouldn't last forever and a bow is useless in a sword fight.

When we were three hundred paces out and thirty up from camp, a party of robed types entered. One of them gathered a fistful of arrows from a soldier and began to wave his hands about. "Flake! Can you take out the guy with the arrows?"

He didn't answer, just lined up the shot and let fly. Seconds later, arrow-guy sprouted feathers from his chest. We must have interrupted a critical point in the spell, because he burst into blue flame for about two seconds, and collapsed as ashes.

Unfortunately, we attracted their attention. Their archers let go a ragged volley—the next would be more coordinated. We scrambled up the hill.

I thought we were gonna make it, at least out of their line of sight. No such luck. Just as he cleared a crest, Chick reaped what he'd always sown. Their archers were good, too. Chick had maybe ten quills in his back out of a flight of forty, and he was definitely done for. At least it wasn't fire.

The trail had turned into a series of switchbacks with spotty cover, but at least we were making time. I worried about our flanks, particularly with the warlocks they'd shown. Nothing to do for it but keep moving.

We reached a shelf, and I called a brief halt. Reanna did her thing again and pointed at the mouth of a cave. I entered to check it out, with Reanna following. The cave was shallow and occupied. The occupant was a wizened little gnome of a man, leather skinned and gaunt, wearing only a breechcloth. "Who're you?" I challenged.

"Anoracle"

"An Oracle?"

"No. Anoracle"

"I don't have **time** for this shit! Explain quickly or I'll cut your throat and use the blood to divert our followers."

I'm not **an** Oracle. That would be **The** Oracle, at whatever place. I'm **The** Anoracle. The only one, so I needn't name a place."

Like that made any sense! "What's the difference?"

He snorted. "All the difference in the world! Oracles tell you the future, couched in ambiguities and non-sequiter and obfuscation. I tell you the present and the past that made it so. I use little words even you can understand. My way is far more useful."

"The present?"

"At present, thirty-one swordsman and a dozen spearmen under the direction of six arch-mages and supported by forty-two archers are closing on precisely this position from two directions. The nearest group is less than two hundred paces distant."

"How do we escape?"

"What do I look like—an Oracle?"

I wasn't going through that again! "Why are they chasing us?" After all, we are on our own side of the border.

“Ah, the right question at last. They’re chasing you because they’re chasing her, and they’re chasing her to kill her and destroy her magic. They want to destroy her magic and any other magic or mage in your kingdom because the enormous increase in magic use in the kingdom has created a high pressure ridge in the ether, while they live in a thaumaturgic low pressure area. Where the high and low pressure areas meet, there is an instability in the ether which destroys crops, deranges spells, and in general wreaks havoc. They feel you have created a magical pollution problem that will rip a hole in the celestial sphere. With me so far?”

I nodded. Grandpa was right. And I did understand.

“They are after your nubile young companion because she possesses magic beyond any five of their warlocks and is easily tracked on that account. They’re within a hundred paces now.”

I grabbed Reanna and fled the cave. We’d needed the rest, but now it was time again to climb.

For the next hour we played mountain goat, barely ahead of the timber wolves. Several times we made a brief stand to buy time for Reanna to try to conjure a vision that would help us escape. But every time she began a spell, lightning or fireballs would arc into our position, disrupting her. If the “not an Oracle” was right, using her magic was like painting a target on us.

Dick caught one of the fireballs, and Blue disappeared while we were avenging him with a flight of arrows. Not much vengeance, but at least he’d have side boys when he boarded the ferryman’s barge. We resumed our retreat. Another hundred yards up (which is over three hundred of switchbacks), we halted when we recognized a blood-curdling war cry. Down below, Blue had erupted in the midst of our pursuers. She was a virago, bouncing and screaming from warrior to warrior, chopping and slashing. I couldn’t shoot a bow well enough to miss her, but Flake was doing his damndest to guard her back. She had eight down and more running, and was still surrounded.

Reanna took the pause to slap together some fuming concoction which she poured into a sack. “Quickly,” she said to Dirk, “cast this down into their midst — it’s no danger to Blue.”

He grabbed the sack and whirled it three time around and let heave — a beautiful toss that landed between Blue and the archers that were lining up to lay her out. It exploded into a black cloud of apparently noxious but non-lethal smoke. I hoped Blue had made good an escape.

Dirk didn’t. As he released the sack, an archer had found a target. He was down for good, an arrow through the throat. Dirk, Blue, Chick, Dick, Nick and Tucker dead or missing. Only the four of us left, scrabbling upward, always upward.

Finally we reached another crest of sorts. Three possible paths away and down, but as long as they could track Reanna, our odds of eluding them were no better. A thought nagged at me, then another. I saw a solution. I didn't like it, but I saw no other way. "Buy us five minutes to set a false trail," I told Bitsy and Flake. They just nodded. I left them my nearly full quiver.

Reanna I dragged down the trail to the left, fifty paces and out of sight of the others. "Turn away," I told her, as I untied my armor and trousers. She did, probably assuming I needed to loose my bladder. Instead, I stepped up behind her and reached around to caress her tits. She gasped in surprise.

"No, not here, not now," she cried. Strangely, she sounded neither afraid nor shocked, only exasperated.. I had no time to explore that impression, I only hoped to make her lubricated enough to be less painful than it might be. One hand I dropped below, to rub as I'd seen her rub herself the past two nights.

She moaned, but it again wasn't fear—it sounded musical and low and familiarly passionate. I turned her in my arms, and hers came up to pull my head to hers. We kissed. Oh, yes, her passions were engaged all right. Knowing the lack of time, I lifted her at the waist and began to lower her onto me.

She must have guessed my strategy, because she was actively cooperating, her legs spread and her feet rested on the backs of my calves; a hand guided me to her gate; as gently as I could, I broke the barrier. She issued no cry, just gave a little start. When I settled her on my cock, she finally loosed a sigh. I started to lift her off, virgin no more, but she wrapped her legs about my waist and pulled herself back down. That brought a small cry.

She whispered, "The deed is undone unless you spend inside—hurry!" Lily hissed agreement, which was good—I'd forgotten about her.

I figured she knew what she was talking about, and started thrusting. She was tighter than any sheath that sword had sheltered in, and without concern for her own pleasure, I thrust as fast as I could to mine. It took us both by surprise then when she climaxed seconds before me, and lasted beyond me.

I unhorsed her from my torso and quickly donned breeches and armor. I cast my bow aside to help mark the false trail, and reached for Reanna.

She stood transfixed, facing away. There stood her unicorn. Shaking his head from side to side in disappointment. She started to reach for him—he backed away. I saw a tear on her cheek. No time! I pulled her away. The unicorn turned and ambled slowly down the path.

Had the damn thing arrived sooner, he might have borne her to safety. Without her to focus on, the rest of us might have backtracked and escaped unnoticed. Too late. Too bloody late.

We sped back up the path and bade the others follow us to the right. All the gear except Bitsy's herbs and the chest containing the travel spell we abandoned at the fork. Hours later, bone-weary, we chanced to stop for the night. We couldn't afford a fire, and these mountains were chillier than the plains, so we all huddled for warmth. Reanna slept beneath my cloak, encased in my arms.

Morning snuck up on us. We'd been lucky—I'd set no watch, no sentries, and had the pursuers realized their error, they could have taken us unawares. As we shook ourselves out, Reanna startled me by asking for a knife and then hacking off half her hair, to a length just below her nipples. Then she asked Bitsy for help in braiding it behind her.

Bitsy made no comment, though I know she'd seen the blood on Reanna's thighs when we'd returned from her deflowering, and I'm pretty sure she'd administered a pain remedy or two as we'd hiked on. Reanna's gait had started off gingerly but was normal before dark—that had to have been with Bitsy's aid.

I looked over our meager supplies. A soldier is used to making do, but we had only a day's rations among us, and I couldn't chance a cooking fire should we catch the game to stretch it. We still carried Reanna's travel spell chest, but I was loath to haul it if it was useless. I asked her about it.

She shook her head, earning a yank of her tresses from Bitsy. "No. I'm sorry. That which I now lack was the key ingredient to that spell." I nodded.

Bitsy asked, "What is it you lack? Perhaps I have it among my things."

Reanna giggled and I grimaced with shame. "The lack is virgin's blood."

Bitsy's dimples showed. "Oh, is **that** all? We have *that* in abundance!"

Reanna shook her head again, earning another yank of the braid. "I thought you realized—I cast that supply aside yesterday in my selfishness."

I wondered what that meant, but I thought Bitsy knew as well. I stared at her.

"Don't look at **me** that way! You of **all** people know better!" She still wore her dimples.

"Well, I **know** you don't mean me, neither. So what in blazes are you...."

We all turned to look at Flake.

"What?" he asked, not having heard the discussion. "Did I leave my fly open?"

"No," replied Bitsy, "you left it shut."

We three laughed while Flake looked more puzzled.

An hour later, we were deep in the heart of the kingdom. In fact, we'd arrived closer than when Reanna had used her own blood. Flake had been a virgin longer, and in the face of greater temptation. His blood was evidently more potent.

I was suffering through the usual letdown after a mission. Hours and days to get there in relative boredom, followed by brief terrifying contact before a return to that boring calm. A warrior's life is like that. You can't stay forever in the thrill of a battle; when you're there, you mostly want out. Between times, you look back fondly at the last one and forward to the next.

On foot, we weren't making the best time, so I negotiated—commandeered—mounts from a merchant party that was overtaking us. The crown would compensate them. We needed to get back to headquarters and report.

I also needed to talk to Reanna. I'd done what needed doing to save her life, whatever it might have cost her personally. I figured it had also cost whatever affection or respect she'd ever had for me, and that was *much* more troubling. It was weighing heavy on my heart. We were avoiding each other, and that hurt, too. I enjoyed her company more than I'd care to admit.

Returning as we were, I didn't see any need to rough it, so instead of making a camp, I led everyone to a farm and made arrangements to sleep in the barn. The farmer was torn between the honor of hosting a "famous hero" and his companions, and the desire to be compensated for whatever we ate or used, so I offered—insisted—that he accept a few pieces of gold for his trouble. He was so pleased that he insisted we eat at his table while his family served us. His wife even provided a shift for Reanna while she altered my cloak for a better fit.

The straw was warm and comfortable after the last few nights of sleeping on the ground. When such things begin to matter to a warrior, it's time to consider other work. To my surprise, Reanna joined me where I lay apart from the others. I was still searching for words to ask forgiveness. She spoke first.

"Giari, I must beg for your forgiveness," she started. The use of even part of my true name startled me. "First, though, I must undo a spell."

Well, I was speechless. She needed my forgiveness? While I struggled for words to tell her how backwards that was, she began a singsong chant accompanied by much arm waving and ending when she spat to the side. Even if I'd found the words, I wouldn't have interrupted a spell. I was still searching when she knelt at my feet.

"Now you know why I need to be forgiven," she said, staring at my toes. I was more confused than ever. I was the one that had taken her without consent. Making it harder to explain was the knowledge that I'd wanted her, and still did. It compounded the guilt, knowing that she didn't think of me as a potential lover or husband. She'd wanted no lover at all, and I wanted to be even more than that, and lover as well. Finally, my turmoil burst.

"What in the name of the lower gods and demons are you talking about?" Great—when in doubt, attack.

"I have released the love spell cast when you tasted my blood. Can't you see that it was my doing that you came to me, and not your own will? My love for you, my needs endangered the mission when my powers were most needed. I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

My mouth worked, but nothing came out. Part of my brain was grappling with her underhandedness, futile as it was. Another was screaming joyfully, “She loves me! She loves me!” I shut my mouth with an audible clomp. I rested fingers on the crown of her head while I let the two sides of my brain fight it out. Then I smiled. It would be tricky but the rewards would be great. I lifted her chin.

“Reanna, I love you. Will you take me to husband?”

Her face went through expressions by degrees comical and heart melting. A look of joy made my heart sing as she heard the words. Consternation from believing her most recent spell had failed, somehow. Puzzlement because she knew she’d cast it perfectly. Fear—that could be that she was afraid her powers were gone, or that I didn’t understand. I knelt so that I could speak directly to her.

First, I unlaced my jerkin, and withdrew a pouch and an amulet. “Touch these, and tell me what they are.”

Tentatively, she touched each in turn, unsure of anything and confused. The confusion grew as she examined the items I always carried. “But these are...but then you couldn’t have been...the spell couldn’t have...I didn’t need to...”

I interrupted. “The King cannot afford to have his closest guards and advisors fall under someone’s influence. The Wizard himself crafted these wards against love spells and such. Your spell had no effect—the love I have for you is genuine, and mine alone. I want to share it with you, Reanna, as long as I live.”

Her face lit up and my heart leapt. But the confusion returned to crease her brow. “But...on the side of the mountain, you weren’t...”

“It’s my turn to beg for forgiveness.” Since she was kneeling, I had to squat lower and bow my head beneath hers in abasement. “I would have wanted to do what I did with your consent and agreement, but there wasn’t time to discuss it. The not-oracle said they were tracking you because you had the strength of five warlocks. That strength obtained from your purity. For your life, for all our lives, I defiled that purity. Can **you** ever forgive **me**?” My voice had slowly dropped as I spoke to barely a whisper. Now I waited in silence as she digested what I said.

She giggled. That was a reaction I never expected. I straightened until we were eye to eye. Hers were glistening. “What a pair of halfwits we are,” she whispered. I must have looked confused. “You really, really love me?” I nodded. “Then there is nothing to forgive, only timing to lament. Or lack of time.”

“Then...what is the answer to my question?”

“Your question? OH! Yes! Yes, I will take you to husband.” The confusion was gone, now, her face unalloyed happiness. At least it was, until a playful gleam entered her eyes. “I’m still feeling awfully virginal. Do you think you could complete what you began on the mountain, and this time try not to rush so?” Lily unwrapped from her neck and rattle/hissed agreement.

So we did. Slower than on the mountain, but still too quickly. I'm afraid I fired my bolt wildly when a forked tongue licked me... well, never mind *where* it licked me. To be on the safe side, we repeated it again a little later.

And again in the middle of the night.

And before dawn.

You want the rest of the story? Sure, I can tell you that. We returned safely to the King's keep, and made a joint report to the King's Captains. On the basis of that report, the army tracked and eliminated a radical group called "Grimoire Peace." The Anoracle was persuaded to visit the King and Wizard to explain the magical pollution that threatened the Celestial Sphere, and as a result, a Royal Commission was formed to deal with the problem. This "Ethereal Protection Agency" promptly clamped severe restrictions on the use of magic, and provided inducements for the development of non-polluting alternatives. Better living through alchemy.

Blue reported for duty a few weeks later. We were glad to see she had made her escape. The Army finally got its shit together and made her an officer.

Bitsy finally returned to her temple. I hear she's training acolytes in the proper treatment of battlefield trauma...and her own brand of mental health. I wish her well.

Flake is still in the army but was transferred to the Artillery Corps. As a blood donor and bodyguard. His unit's accuracy and firepower has gone up and attrition rate down.

As for Reanna and me, we've retired from the military, except in an advisory capacity. But the King hates to let anything go, so I teach tactics and swordsmanship at the new military school. Reanna claims to be happy just being a wife and mother. Yes, I said mother. We're expecting our third soon. She says it will be a boy.

The end.