

# THREE FAE MONTE

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STEFON MEARS





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# THREE FAE MONTE



*RISE OF MAGIC*  
*BOOK FOUR*

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*The year is 2027 Six decades after the  
Rise of Magic*





“**Y**ou’re doomed,” Fionn said.

Rough words for Donal Cuthbert to hear from the lips of his own *cú sidhe* familiar, a meter-tall emerald green deerhound, sitting on the grass beside him. That only Donal could understand those words did little for their sting. And that those words carried an accent somewhere between Irish and Scottish only made them worse. As though his whole family tree was pronouncing doom upon his head.

“*Fuist*,” Donal hushed his familiar in Gaelic. He kept his attention where it belonged — on his wards. They would fall. He had no doubt of that, especially since he could do nothing more to improve them. The only question was when.

The mere thought of time was enough to let that ticking sound back into Donal’s thoughts. He banished it, as he banished the rest of the summer day around him.

Right now, only his wards mattered.

A sphere of blues and reds, half in and half above the gray, granite table before him. Wards designed to repel magical intrusion. A swirling ball of magic, the threads of its art shifting and sliding in their efforts to safeguard the secret Donal had concealed within them.

Across the table, his foe worked just as hard to breach those wards as Donal had worked to cast them. He could hear the tones of her efforts in his mind. The sound of her attention brushing against the threads of his magic as though strumming the strings of a harp.

She had the advantage. She already knew his signature. Could account for that element as she sought the barest flaws, the tiniest loopholes in the framework of

Donal's spell. Or even just the frays where his attention might have been less than crystal-perfect while he was casting.

But Donal's focus was better than it had been a year ago, the last time his spells had faced a serious contest. Though that had been a battle for his life, and this—"Ha!" said his foe.

His wards collapsed.

The timer dinged.

Donal sighed and sat back, aware of the day around him now. The grassy park with its gentle swells and its ash and alder trees. The warm sunshine of a June day here on the campus of CalThaum San Luis Obispo. The beads of sweat under the collar of his short-sleeved green airsilk shirt. The cool granite stool he sat on. The scent of the fresh-cut grass, smile-inducing on its own, for the recollections of his older brother having to mow the lawn back in Santa Cruz. Whenever Donal was angry at Bran, he'd sip lemonade while watching Bran mow.

Other students around the park lounged on blankets or participated in a massive game of touch football, that seemed to involve at least twenty players to a side.

And across the table designed for outdoor games of chess, sat Esmeralda. Pretty even at the worst of times, with her smooth dusky skin and waves of curly black hair, but right now she all but glowed in her red and yellow sundress. Her brown eyes flashed with the triumph of her smile.

And she cocked an eyebrow at Donal.

"Not much of a secret," she said.

"Hey, most of our classmates conjured their familiars in their first year of college. How many of them would give me shit for waiting until after not only getting my B.T., but passing my Journeyman's tests before even *trying* for one?"

"I prefer to think," Fionn said, pitching its words so that anyone could hear them, "that you waited until the perfect familiar became available."

Esmeralda glanced at Fionn, but narrowed her eyes at Donal, unconvinced.

"Oh," Donal said, "and I suppose your being jealous of your older sister was some big secret? Come on, Esme, she *teaches* here. Pretty sure the whole cohort has seen the way you look at her."

Esmeralda laughed, a rough, but honest, nasal sound. "Fair enough."

"Still," Donal said, as he stood. "You beat my time, so lunch is on me. Where do you want to go?"

But Esmeralda was looking past Donal, behind him to his right. Her mouth hung open in shock. "Isn't that..."

She let the words trail off, and Donal spun to his right.

Leaning against an alder tree stood a tall, handsome man with flowing brown hair and finely tailored airsilk clothes that ended in knee-high calfskin boots. A man nearly as slender as the rapier at his side.

But the most impressive aspect of the man was his palpable aura of power. Even after a year of studying with a half-dozen Hierophants at the finest university of Thaumaturgy on the West Coast — perhaps in the whole of the United North American States — this man's aura of power was beyond anything Donal had ever felt.

Three times before Donal had met this man, and each time he had felt humbled.

"Yes," Donal said, in answer to Esmeralda's unfinished question. "That's Hierophant Nicholas Mason."

"Good afternoon," Hierophant Mason said. "Good to see that the grad students still play the same games as the undergrads."

"Well, to be fair," Donal said, fighting down the heat he could feel rising in his neck, "we do play a more advanced version."

Hierophant Mason laughed. "I wasn't hiding an insult. Wardbreaking is a valuable skill, but I worry sometimes that newer magicians are too quick to abandon the basics."

"I'd challenge you to a game," Donal said, making Esmeralda gasp, "but I don't think I'd prove much opposition for you."

"Do you *know* him?" Esmeralda whispered to Donal.

"Oh, forgive me," Donal said. "Hierophant Mason, this is Journeyman Esmeralda Villaseñor, currently the top doctoral student in our cohort."

"We're tied, actually," Esmeralda said, losing her fight not to blush. "It's an honor, Hierophant."

"The honor is mine. I look forward to numbering you among my peers." Hierophant Mason gave Esmeralda a slight bow. "But now, alas, I must apologize for interrupting your day. I need to borrow Donal here for a while for a very important task. As some small recompense, name any restaurant you like, and my familiar shall make sure your lunch will be billed to me."

"I, well..." Esmeralda blushed even harder and looked away, as though Hierophant Mason had personally invited her to lunch.

Donal stifled a sigh. It seemed his lot in life to be shown up by more advanced magicians. Usually it was his brother Bran. He was as used to that as he'd ever get. But now Hierophant Mason too?

Competing with any Hierophant would have been bad enough. As Doctors of Thaumaturgy, Hierophants represented the pinnacle of modern magical skill and knowledge. But this particular Hierophant, well, even Bran couldn't compete with him.

Not only had Hierophant Mason cracked no fewer than *sixteen* secrets of that ancient grimoire *The Picatrix* and codified *three new types* of kinetic spells, but he had worked as a *licensed champion* for over a decade before retiring, unbeaten with either sword or spell. And that named only a few of his accomplishments.

The man was practically a folk hero, perhaps the first since Lloyd Bird restored magic to the world, some sixty years ago.

Finally Esmeralda managed to say, shyly, "Well, I've always wanted to try The Cormorant."

Of course she picked the most expensive restaurant in town. The one Donal had been hoping to use as a first-real-date treat, if lunch had gone well.

"Done and done," Hierophant Mason said. "I suggest their veal. Exquisite."

"Thank you!" And then Esmeralda actually giggled as she turned away and sped off with her head ducked and her strides exactly even across the thick grass.

"Oh, dear," Hierophant Mason said, looking back at Donal, who must not have been hiding his disappointment as well as he thought. "I just stepped in something, didn't I?"

Donal sighed and shook his head. "Nothing, most likely. What's going on? You and Hierophant MacDougall said I could finish grad school before—"

"This has nothing to do with investigating criminal magicians." Hierophant Mason frowned. "Well, probably not, anyway. But it's important, and you're the best man for the job. We should go somewhere private to talk."

Donal agreed, and as they walked across the park, Fionn commented once more in words that only Donal could understand.

"I told you you were doomed. Did you think I was talking about your game?"

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IF DONAL HAD TO PLAY HOST TO A HIEROPHANT, AT LEAST HE HAD A good apartment for the job. Far better than he would have been able to afford on his old courier's salary, even with all the off-world jobs he'd taken, and the surprisingly high percentage of them that activated the combat-pay provision.

Of course, it was courier work that had put Donal in the right place at the right time to save the life — and the very mind — of Donatello Mancuso, the head of 4M, a major interplanetary corporation. Mr. Mancuso had been grateful enough to practically give Donal a blank check for education, living expenses, and broadly defined “incidentals.”

And Mr. Mancuso had insisted that Donal not “skimp.”

So the apartment Donal escorted his guest to that fine June day sat at the top of the three-story red brick apartment just off the edge of the CalThaum campus, at the foot of a picturesque hill, with a small river running past.

The sitting area of Donal's current apartment was bigger than any of the three apartments Donal had kept during his undergraduate studies in Berkeley or, after graduation, in San Francisco. To reflect that, Donal had abandoned his old mishmash of college furnishings.

These days he decorated in simple browns and greens, with several rubber plants to make the feel of his apartment suit the cool, Mediterranean climate of San Luis Obispo. Big comfortable couches and chairs, but a small dining set near the kitchen. Some kind of worn, dark wood for the hardwood flooring.

All kept fresh and dust-free through the ministrations of an air elemental named Uulians, conjured and bound by Donal.

“Very nice,” Hierophant Mason said, looking around. “Is that a dedicated laboratory I see?”

Hierophant Mason was looking to the left side of the sitting room, where Donal had converted the second bedroom into his personal library/laboratory, with a permanent magic circle etched in the center of the floor, an alchemy table set to one side, and shelves of books along the walls.

Donal only smiled in answer to the obvious question.

“So Mancuso did right by you.” Hierophant Mason smiled. “Glad to know it. You certainly did enough for him.”

“I was just doing what was right,” Donal said. “Coffee? Tea?”

“Nothing, thanks,” Hierophant Mason said, “except a place to sit.”

And with that the Hierophant eased comfortably into a brown recliner, his sword somehow finding the perfect alignment down his leg without appearing to cause the least discomfort. Might have helped that it didn't have a fancy basket hilt. Just a simple steel handle with tightly wrapped black cloth on the grip, and a faceted, teardropshaped gem of dark purple at the join of the crossbars.

If Donal had tried to sit in that chair wearing a sword, well, the results would have been awkward at best.

Just one of the reasons Donal didn't wear a sword.

Donal sat in the recliner's match, across the wide coffee table from his guest. Fionn sat on the floor beside Donal, apparently as interested in what the Hierophant had to say as Donal was.

Donal's stomach rumbled, as though to spite him. Or maybe just to remind Donal that he'd been looking forward to lunch almost as much for the food as for the chance to get to know Esmeralda better. He hadn't eaten anything since dawn but two slices of toast and a half a cantaloupe.

Hierophant Mason raised an eyebrow, but Donal shook his head and shunted aside his hunger. He'd need food soon enough, but right now he wanted to demonstrate a little control for the Hierophant.

Hierophant Mason smiled.

"You don't need to impress me, Donal. Fix something to eat if you like."

"After you're done. What's going on? Is this about Li Hua?"

Tai Shi Li Hua. Journeyman magician, interplanetary expert in combat and security, Donal's ex-girlfriend — and the woman who had subtly developed iron-clad control over the mind of her boss, Donatello Mancuso, and through him tried to set up her own interplanetary shadow government.

"Tai Shi? No." Hierophant Mason sat forward in his chair, satisfied urgency in his tone as he continued. "She's appealing her case, of course, both the conviction and the sentence. But I don't think she's got a chance. You and Magister Machado, not to mention Mancuso's excellent assistants, gathered too much evidence for her lawyers to find a seam."

Donal's mouth tasted dry. No surprise. The subject alone was more than enough to quell his desire for food. He'd been falling in love with Li Hua when he found out what kind of person she really was. The closest he'd come to dating in the year since then would have been today's lunch with Esmeralda...

"What will be done with her?"

“Fair question. I’m pretty sure they gave her life, under full magical suppression. If there’s anywhere her appeal might find a crack, it’s the sentence. First conviction of its type. And with so little adjudicated case law on the books involving anything close to this scale of magical crime, they’ve had to lean heavily on precedents like conspiracy, racketeering, extortion and the like.” He shook his head. “And, of course, her licenses have been revoked, and I’m pretty sure the U.N.A.S. Thaum Board severed her connection to her familiar.”

Donal shivered at the mere thought of it. He remembered her familiar. Pinyin-Lung, a spirit dragon that was every bit as much a part of her as Fionn was of Donal.

“But I’m not here about Tai Shi,” Hierophant Mason said, waving a dismissive hand. “I’m here about Ganymede.”

“Oh. Ganymede.” Donal sighed. “Which of Bran’s great accomplishments did you want to ask about? The work he did leading that first scouting voyage? The way he saved Ganymede’s entire first ship of settlers? I hear they’re commissioning a statue of him for that one.

Or maybe—”

“Donal.”

“I can introduce you, if you like. It’s no trouble. In fact—”

“*Journeyman!*” Hierophant Mason snapped that word out, and as he did he snapped his open hand into a fist.

Donal jumped as shock jolted through his aura. As though he’d been slapped, hard, everywhere at once. The sting of the aftermath made every hair on his body stand up.

The Jenkins Flash. The basis for Thaumaboxing, and without the spells establishing a boxing ring, a very difficult technique to pull off.

Especially with such sharp force.

“I’m sorry, Hierophant,” Donal said.

“I hate power games,” Hierophant Mason said, sitting forward on the edge of his seat now, and his eyes blazing. “I hate the fact that the climate has changed enough that we’re not all just *magicians* when we’re among ourselves. That even when only surrounded by other magicians we must play the bureaucrat’s game of Initiate, Journeyman, Magister and Hierophant. That was never what Lloyd Bird intended for us. But as all the gods stand witness, if I must accept the state of things, then *I will use it when I must.*”

Hierophant Mason stood. Paced sharply back and forth in front of the recliner.

“So now, Journeyman, I will speak and you will listen, until such time as I ask you to respond.”

He glared at Donal, as though daring him to speak even a confirmation aloud.

Donal said nothing.

“Good. Now.” Hierophant Mason stopped pacing, one hand resting on the hilt of his sword, and faced Donal. “Had I wanted to talk to Magister Bran Cuthbert, I would be in Mazatlán right now, where he keeps his small estate. Tell me, Journeyman, am I in Mazatlán right now?”

Donal blinked. “No, Hierophant.”

“No, I am not. So I trust it’s evident that I have come to talk to you, not your brother.” Hierophant Mason drew a deep breath then, and smoothed his voice as he continued. “I know what it is to walk in someone’s shadow. I trained as a champion under Angus McElroy. Never saw a finer swordsman. For at least two years my name might as well have been ‘McElroy’s Apprentice.’ But I made my own way, and so have you.”

Donal raised an eyebrow and Hierophant Mason nodded.

“That’s right, I said ‘have,’ not ‘will.’ Don’t undervalue your accomplishments just because they haven’t brought you fame. You’ve accomplished more in a year than most Journeymen will in twenty. You’ve saved lives, Donal. And if what we suspect about Tai Shi’s ultimate plans is true, you may have prevented the relegation of all non-magicians to nothing more than second-class citizens at best, a *servant class* at worst.”

Hierophant Mason shook his head slowly.

“Never forget, Donal. The core of a magician’s power lies in his confidence.

Don’t you *dare* sublimate yours to the achievements of others.”

“I’ve told him the same thing,” Fionn said, “at least a dozen times.”

“Then as long as I’m lecturing you,” Hierophant Mason added with a smile, “*listen to your familiar.*” “I like him,” Fionn said.

Donal fought not to squirm in his seat.

“Now,” Hierophant Mason said as he resumed his seat. “Enough lecture. Let’s try to resume something like a conversation, shall we?” Donal nodded.

Hierophant Mason chuckled, then his face got serious.

“Now. I need you to go to Ganymede. There’s ... a situation developing. I need you to check it out. Handle it, if necessary. I’d go myself, but I’ve got to get back to Luna. Today. I presume you know what’s been discovered, on Luna?”

“Of course.”



Donal knew, all right. It was all anyone at school had talked about for months. A new class of spirit — they called themselves the Rhian People — that could self-incarnate using alchemically modified lunar soil. A new form of sapient life, complete with bodies. Donal didn't know exactly what Hierophant Mason had to do with the discovery, but no doubt it was something big and important, that would get written up in the history texts.

"Well, if the rumor I'm hearing is true," Hierophant Mason said, "the settlers may have discovered something similar on Ganymede. And I need you to check it out. Think of it as a summer internship." "But—"

"Donal," Hierophant Mason said in a flat tone, "you're clever, inventive, and have been developing a foundation in Enochian theory, which I suspect will help. I wouldn't tell you you're the right man for the job if I had any doubts."

"No," Donal said, with a slightly abashed smile, "it's not that. It's just, there's no commercial traffic allowed to fly to Ganymede. Strictly military right now."

"I know. So I've arranged private transport for you."

Donal's next question almost lodged in his throat, but he managed to cough it out in a rush.

"It's not Starchaser Spacelines, is it? Because every time I set foot on one of their ships, someone tries to kill me."

"No," Hierophant Mason said, laughing. "I confess I did try to get their Captain John Jacobs to come out of retirement for this. No civilian captain in history has handled more uncertain routes than he has. Thought the lure of Ganymede might have been enough. But alas he was no more eager to transport you again than you are to ride in one of his ships. But that's all right. A cruiser would be too big for this anyway. Guaranteed to draw attention. No." Hierophant Mason rubbed his hands together. "I've found the perfect captain for you."

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EDIK BARSHAI HELD THE SWORD IN A LOOSE GRIP. IT WASN'T *HIS* SABER, but at least it was a saber. Still. Balance wasn't quite right.

No excuses though. Goodness knew the rest of the setting was as good as he would get for a swordfight. The smooth, blue-white stone of his own ship's landing bay, here in Kennedy Spaceport, was free of any grooves or flaws that might catch his boots. All local stone, hewn from the moon herself, but kept

flawless — though not slippery — through steady applications of thaumaturgy and alchemy by the Port Authority.

His helio-ship sat two dozen paces behind him. All around him, the walls of the open-topped cylinder that formed his landing bay, at least that far from where he stood. No crates or cargo to impede the fight.

They had the room to move around all they wanted.

Even Dola, Edik's feline familiar, stood at least a half-dozen paces behind him. No way the meter-tall, shaggy, translucent gray cat could impede Edik's footwork.

The air was cool for a June day, and dry, tasting a little less of licorice than it usually did in Kennedy, where the first attempts to make the moon's surface habitable had left ... marks. The air tasted of licorice, the water of lemons, and the grass outside the spaceport looked more dark blue than green, while the sky above looked more pale green than blue.

Still. Not too hot or too cold. Regular terrain. Plenty of room to maneuver. Everything was as perfect as it could get.

Unfortunately, that included his opponent.

Facing Edik, at a distance of seven paces, stood Carl Jones. Taller even than Edik, and muscled, with the little scars on his hands that came from a life of action. Jones had the kind of ebon black skin that picked up highlights from his muted purple work shirt, worn with black slacks and loafers.

Was that how all licensed champions dressed? Edik didn't know. He'd only met the one, as far as he knew. Maybe it was a kind of uniform, like suits for businesspeople.

"Ready?" Jones asked, and to the man's credit he let the word sound simple. No condescension. No mockery. Jones might have fought a thousand more swordfights than Edik, but he seemed to be giving this no less focus.

Jones held his own saber in a casual grip, point down.

Edik nodded. Raised his saber in salute. Was saluted in return.

"Begin," Jones said.

Edik swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat as he advanced a slow pace. His eyes flicked to Jones' sword, to his easy posture, his casual steps. Edik's heart had lurched to ramming speed, but Jones looked as though he were merely out for a walk, with his sword.

Five paces distant now.

Three.

Edik cut at his opponent's face. Tried to catch Jones between steps.

Jones parried as though he had all the time in the world. Shook his head.

Edik spun his wrist. Tried to turn that cut into a feint. Thrust at Jones' chest.

Another lazy parry. Another head shake.

Edik feinted high, then low, then attacked low. A quick jab at Jones' right hip.

The parry came fast and hard. Beat Edik's sword out wide without ever turning the point of Jones' saber away from Edik's torso.

Jones thrust.

Jones' blunted saber *thunked* into Edik's padded coverlet, right over the heart.

Edik's face burned with shame. He ripped off the training coverlet and threw it down.

"Enough of that," Jones said in a warning tone. "It's your emotions that are giving you away."

"A month we've been at this. And it's not like I'd never picked up a sword before. But I feel like I'm not getting anywhere."

"Your wrist is better. Your attacks. Your stance. But you're still broadcasting." Jones lowered his practice sword. "Not much, I admit. Probably ninety-nine out of a hundred opponents won't catch it. But if a great family comes after you, you can't broadcast anything. Because a great family won't send the ninety-nine after you. They'll send the one."

Edik took a deep breath. He felt more comfortable without the padding anyway. Not that the coverlet was too hot or constricting, only that he preferred his loose, red, button-up shirt, and his black slacks with the silver stripe down the side.

Style mattered.

Edik re-fought their brief bout in his head, looking for his own tell but finding nothing.

"If it's not my stance, and it's not my wrist—"

"Your eyes," Jones said with a nod. "Your emotions bleed into your eyes and tell me everything, even before your hand knows what to do."

"It's about focus," Dola said as he strolled up. The spirit cat spoke in a Russian accent as heavy as Edik's own father had had. "Think of a swordfight as a spell. In much the same way, your emotions must serve your goal."

"Exactly," Jones said.

Edik tugged at his blond Van Dyke beard, as much for the distracting sting as anything else. But before he could gather any words, Jones spoke again.

“Every real duel has consequences for losing. When those consequences are yours, when they really matter to you, of course your emotions will press in on you. But you’re letting that happen even in a training bout. Why?”

It was a good question, and one Edik didn’t have a quick and easy answer for. But he barely had time to look for one before North came roaring into the landing bay like a short, gruff hurricane.

*“What’s this I saw on your schedule?”*

“Calm down, Roger.” Edik pointedly dropped his practice sword and raised his hands. “I was going to tell you all about it later at the daily.”

North might have been short, but he made up for it in muscled breadth. Scruffy, short black hair and beard, North might have looked like a craggy pirate, but he still insisted on wearing that crisp, navy blue faux-uniform, complete with gold clusters at the collar.

And he looked mad enough to draw the cutlass he wore.

Wouldn’t be the first time Edik crossed swords with North. They were enemies for a lot longer than they’d been partners.

“Don’t tell me to calm down.” North punched his palm. “What the hell do you think you’re doing? Leaving Kennedy at a time like this?”

“Well,” Jones said, his deep voice loud enough to carry. “I’ll just be running along then. See you later, Edik.”

*“You wait right there,”* North said, pointing to the spot where Jones was standing.

That wasn’t good. North had to have been even angrier than he looked, if he was willing to risk Jones’ wrath.

Jones cocked an eyebrow and slowly crossed his arms, but if North caught the implied threat in those brown eyes, Edik couldn’t tell.

North turned right back to Edik.

“Well?”

“I know we have a lot going on, but—”

*“A lot going on?”* North gnashed his teeth. “You’ll be skipping close to a month’s worth of tours, *and* leaving me to support Anna on my own.”

That last was the only part Edik really felt guilty about. North was a partner, but Anna Lukyanova was a friend. And this friend was acting as diplomat and intermediary for the Rhian People. Anna was more than capable, and had the resources and contacts she’d accumulated growing up in one of the great families, but right now she needed all the people in her corner she could get.

Pressure was coming at her from all sides: the universities, the governments of Earth *and* Luna — including Kennedy's own governor — and worst of all, every one of the great families of Luna was trying get a piece of the Rhian people.

Including her own father.

Edik hated the idea of abandoning her now.

Jones cleared his throat. True, he was supporting Anna too. And true, Jones was a licensed champion. But he wasn't licensed as a magician, he wasn't a local, and he wasn't part of the Lunar business community.

Even North had more standing in this mess than Jones.

Anna had Edmund on her side too, though neither North nor Jones had mentioned him. Probably took Edmund for granted now that he and Anna were dating. That was a mistake. Edmund had better business instincts, and a better head for organization, than the rest of them combined.

Unfortunately, Edmund was still young enough to be naïve, and inexperienced enough that no one would take him seriously until he gave them no choice.

"Can't be helped," Edik said with a shake of his head. "We said we wanted to expand our charter business? Well, this is a charter for a *Hierophant*, Roger. Nicholas Mason himself."

"Piss on Hierophants, and piss on Mason. We need you and your ship here."

Dola hissed in a pained-sounding breath at North's words, while Jones scoffed.

North whirled on Jones. "What?"

"I dare you to say that in front of Mason."

"Piss. On. Mason." North turned to Dola. "And knock off your commentary. No one asked you."

"Back the fuck up, North," Edik said. Fire burned in his belly now, and he could taste it in his words. "I get that you're angry and you've got reason. But Dola is *my* familiar, and *my* familiar gets to say what he wants, when he wants. You have a problem with that, you bring it to me."

"Thank you, Edik," Dola said with a head-bow.

"Now," Edik said sharply, before North could respond. "I know the timing sucks, but use your head, Roger. My *Third Son* may be a helioship, but it's one of the smallest on the market. We're never going to get big charters. *But*, if we become known as the liner to *Hierophants*, we'll get all the high-end trade. Better rates for pretty much the same expenses."

"That does mean higher profits," Dola added, singsong style.

“What about Anna?” North spat. “What about those Rhian? Gonna leave ‘em with just me and Jones here for support?”

“Don’t forget Edmund. Plus Mason’s coming back, and he swore he’s giving her his full backing.”

“He’s coming back?” North’s eyes narrowed until they just looked like more grooves in his cragged face. “Then who are you flying out to fucking Ganymede?”

“Some Journeyman. Name’s Cuthbert, I think.” “Any relation to Bran Cuthbert?” Jones asked.

“Don’t know. I’ll ask him. Have to have something to talk about on a flight that long.”

“Fuck Cuthbert,” North said, “And fuck Mason too. We don’t know what his agenda is. Anna doesn’t need him. She needs you.”

“Please,” Edik said. “Mason’s *name* is enough to get Anna some breathing room. Maybe even delay any further meetings until I get back. And with the profits from this trip—”

“Profits don’t spend if you get shot out of the sky.” North grinned an angry grin. “Navy hasn’t given the all-clear to commercial Ganymede flights.”

“I asked Mason about that.” Edik sighed a deep breath and wished he felt as confident as he sounded. “With Mars declaring its independence, and Venus already making noises that direction, Earth’s claim to control of space past Luna is legally dubious at best.”

“Big comfort when they’re slinging fireballs at you. Ones bigger than your ship.”

“Mason says Earth’s pressing its claim on Mars. That should keep the Navy too busy to have much of a force watching Ganymede. Especially with the number of ships they’re supposed to have committed to whatever they’re up to in that no-fly zone near Venus. And a ship my size doesn’t need a big gap to fly through.”

“No solid charts for that trip. Think you’re up to facing down zuglodons?”

Zuglodons. Giant, wild spirits that roamed between planets and could rip ships apart to feed on their lacunas, the space elementals that powered interplanetary flight.

If Edik had any worries about this voyage, it was the risk of a zuglodon attack. However...

“Mason says this Cuthbert’s got space combat experience, and has personally handled zuglodons.”

“Are you *sure* you’re not talking about *Bran Cuthbert*?” Jones asked.

“I mean, he’s a Magister, not a Journeyman, but—”

“I’d’ve remembered if it were Bran Cuthbert,” Edik said.

“This is a damn fool mission,” North said, “and you’re a damn fool for taking it. And you’re a stupid damn fool for not discussing it with your *partner* first.”

“I’m sorry about that part,” Edik said, quietly. “It was an opportunity that fell into my lap, and if I delayed I might’ve missed it.”

“You get Mason to pay up front?”

“Half. The rest waits until we get back. The total will more than quadruple what we lose in tours over that time.”

“Good luck collecting it when you’re dead.”

And with that, North whirled and stomped away.

“I better get moving too,” Jones said. “Have to coordinate some things with North, if you’re not going to be around for a few weeks. Anything special you want me to tell Anna?”

Edik sighed. “Tell her I’m just doing what I think Ivan Tsarevich would do. She’ll understand.” Then Jones was gone too.

Edik turned to Dola. The shaggy gray cat blinked up at him.

“This is what Ivan Tsarevich would do, isn’t it?”

“Tough to say,” Dola said. “None of the old Russian folktales included helioships.”

Edik thought about that as he stared down the passageway that led to the port. He turned back to Dola. Lowered his voice.

“I’m doing the right thing,” Edik said. “Aren’t I?”

“Absolutely,” Dola said. “If we survive it.”