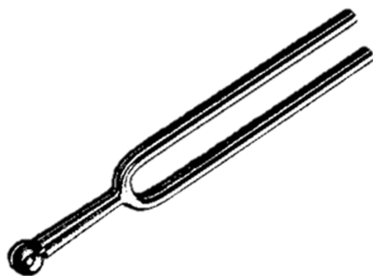


SLEIGHT OF MIND



RISE OF MAGIC
BOOK TWO

STEFON MEARS

Thousand Faces Publishing

The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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*For all the people who took a chance on **Magician's Choice**.*

The year is 2026

Six decades after the Rise of Magic

Chapter One

DONAL CUTHBERT SPRINTED THROUGH the near-empty private section of Kennedy Spaceport on Earth's moon, Luna, cursing his footwear. Loafers were all wrong for this. No support. No grip.

He should have been wearing sneakers. His girlfriend's fault. Li Hua had Donal dressing better and looking sharper, but he never thought to buy shoes enchanted for combat the way she did. Even her high heels.

But then, Donal rarely had to run for his life.

Unfortunately, once might be enough.

No help around him. Just wide blue-gray spaces that echoed his pounding steps. They would echo his pursuers in short order.

In the public part of the port he would have found security guards, other passengers, maybe a small crowd to lose himself in. But here he saw no one. Not even a janitor. Only hangar openings that seemed to go on for days, and arrows pointing the way to the one he sought: Bay Forty-Nine.

The place even smelled deserted. Nothing in the air but a vague

herbal smell leftover from alchemical ship maintenance.

Donal sucked air and clutched his messenger bag — distressed leather, of course, which suited his state of mind. He could feel the bag rubbing his hip and shoulder raw as his legs stretched for more speed and his feet protested with blisters.

How much further was the damned ship?

Suddenly running beside him appeared his familiar, Fionn, a spectral deerhound of emerald green, a meter tall at the shoulder and eyes that blazed with courage. It spoke in an accent somewhere between Scottish and Irish.

"I have alerted the ship, but the captain dismisses this as a local problem."

Donal wanted to swear, wanted to beg Lugh or the Dagda for help, but could not spare the breath. His heart pounded faster than his feet. Sweat blurred his vision alongside matted strands of black hair. His legs burned with effort.

"What ... about..."

"We should seek shelter in a hangar and try to lose them."

"No time," Donal managed. "Spoil ... aim."

Fionn understood. The *cú sidhe* fell back and would weave in the path to distract any attempts to use slingers, alchemical projectiles that could carry deadly effects. Difficult to make, expensive to commission, and illegal outside of military applications, slingers required spells strong enough to make them obvious to even the most casual customs inspections or weapons checks.

Just Donal's luck that he fled from a local family powerful enough to carry slingers anywhere they wanted this side of a helioship.

Cramp building in his stomach, legs beginning to falter from the sustained speed, Donal pressed on. Two more hangars to pass...

A spell ball the size of Donal's fist flew past his head. Smashed on a hangar wall. The spell took, cracking lines even in the thick, shaped rock. Donal pushed his legs harder, trying not to think of what that spell would have done to him, wishing he could have pulled off a moving protective circle.

Every part of Donal's body screamed in protest at his exertion. He had to have run flat out for half a mile by now, but still he could hear his pursuers. They had the air to shout curses, damn them, even while Fionn mocked them in Gaelic that would have made Donal's mother blush. Probably his father too.

Not his big brother Bran, of course, but Bran would have been in good enough shape to lose them. Or he would have taken them all on and won. But that was Bran.

At least no travelers crowded around Donal this time, to risk becoming 'collateral damage.' Not like on Mars.

Donal put his head down and threw the last of his energy into a final sprint.



JOHN JACOBS PACED THE breadth of his Starchaser Spacelines office. He should have been at the docks. He had a ship to inspect, a route plan to confirm one more time, and no doubt another dozen forms to fill out. Someone in the San Francisco bureaucracy must have decided that forms meant fees, which meant more money.

And now Zoltan, his business partner, was late.

Jacobs paused at the sound of wood under his boots as he stepped off the throw rug in front of his huge purpleheart desk. He spent so many of his days listening to the sound of ship ceramics underfoot that oak flooring sounded wrong in his ears. Artificial. How could he consider retiring when only ships felt like home?

Jacobs returned to pacing, five steps fore, three steps starboard, five steps aft, three steps port, and on. He paced as though in his office aboard the *Horizon Cusp*, the ship he had commanded for the last decade, and not in his spacious Earth office, with its conference table, hide-a-bed sofa, and comfortable visitors chairs, most of which went unused even when Jacobs was on Earth. Clients met with Zoltan. But Zoltan insisted that Jacobs, as co-owner, had to have a big office in the home branch of Starchaser Spacelines. Something clients would find impressive.

Jacobs paused to shake his head. Appearances shouldn't impress. People should learn to judge actions, histories. But with his eighty-sixth birthday approaching, Jacobs felt like little more than history himself, one of the dwindling few who remembered life from before the rise of magic.

A knock at the door. Finally.

"Come," said Jacobs, and Zoltan entered.

Jacobs felt his eyes narrow, his jaw clench at the sight of his partner: jowls shaking just a touch, fingers playing with the buttons of his silk shirt, and pants wrinkled, which at oh-nine-hundred meant that Zoltan had been awake for hours already, had likely not slept well. Even his graying curls had not been tamed to their normal positions.

Jacobs' nostrils flared a calming breath. Zoltan had earned the right to deliver bad news his own way.

"Rough night?"

"Rough couple of days. Mind if I sit?"

Jacobs held back the urge to say 'out with it.' Zoltan was not a member of his crew. Instead Jacobs nodded, and returned to his own ridiculously large padded leather chair.

"John, you know business has been down since the *Beamrunner's* accident."

"It's been rebuilding, and the business-class shuttle runs we've added have made the difference. Worried about your bottom line?"

"Always." For just a moment Zoltan smiled and looked like himself. But then the smile faded. "And you should be worried about your retirement."

"After this next voyage. I promise."

"You said that two years ago."

"This is different. The Venus run." Just the thought of it sent a thrill through Jacobs' system, made him rub his hands together like an eager boy. "A final hurrah for me, and peerless advertising for Starchaser Spacelines. We can sell when the value of the business is high, and—"

"I've already sold."

Jacobs's head snapped back, feet down flat on the floor and hands

flat on the desk.

"What?"

"I've already sold." Zoltan took a deep breath. "John, even you have to admit this flight is risky—"

"You're abandoning ship?"

"—and if this goes wrong the press will murder us. We'll never recover."

"I captained the first commercial flight to Mars. I think I can handle—"

"And how long ago was that?"

"Don't you dare—"

Zoltan leapt to his feet, leaned across the broad, dark desk. "Sell! Retire! Take that cat of yours and get that place in Mazatlan you've talked about."

Zoltan must have seen the battle stations in Jacobs' eyes, because he softened his tone. "You've had a hell of a career. Accomplished things that will get your name in the history texts. You've done enough. Live to enjoy it."

"Not enough. Not yet."

"I knew it." Zoltan shook his head and deflated back onto his overstuffed chair. "I had to try. Have it your way, John." He sighed again and looked up. "One last drink with your old partner?"

"At oh-nine-fifteen?"

"You never give a fraction, do you?" Zoltan stood, dusted his shirt and pants with his hands. "Your new partner will be here in an hour or so. If you can forgive me, stay in touch. I've left my contact information with Cindy."

Zoltan started toward the door. "Good luck with the Venus run."

"Zoltan." Jacobs waited until Zoltan looked back at him. "It's been good working with you."

Zoltan smiled and left. Jacobs wondered whether he should have had that drink after all. He had a feeling he might need it.



DONAL WAS LOSING GROUND. He knew it. He had to be.

His pace flagged, despite how he pushed. His legs weighed tons. His lungs burned. Even his arms and back were sore.

Another slinger-shot flew past. Fried a section of spaceport flooring to Donal's right. Too close.

Any second they would be on top of him.

Finally Donal reached Bay Forty-Nine, and he saw the twenty-meter-long owl shape of the helioship *Archimedes*, tawny wing up and passenger portal open. He could see the young steward standing at attention just inside the portal, memoboard against his side and with the clear intention to not interfere.

Donal's legs gave out and he tumbled forward into the landing bay, barely able to keep his head from slamming against the stone flooring, even though every other part of him seemed to bang into it.

Pain jolted through him. Squeezed tears from his eyes and a sob from his throat as he stretched with one hand toward the ship, determined to reach safety.

"Easy, Journeyman," said a strong, certain voice behind him. "You're safe now."

Another person might have only looked up to see a tall, handsome man with flowing brown hair and tailored clothes. A man who looked slender more by habit than by exercise, despite the rapier at his side.

Donal saw these things too, but what he saw first was power: immense personal power, more than Donal could ever have mustered, even more than most of Donal's professors back at U.C. Santa Cruz, when Donal was still studying for his Bachelor's in Thaumaturgy. And Donal recognized this man. This Hierophant. Had met him once at a conference years before.

And by the power Donal felt now, he would guess that Nicholas Mason had achieved much even since attaining his Doctorate in Thaumaturgy.

Donal knew he should have felt elated at reaching certain safety, but instead he felt humiliated. Exhausted, sweaty, crying and pursued by would-be murderers was not how Donal wanted to renew his acquaint-

tance with what amounted to a childhood hero.

Mason stepped into the hangar doorway and waited. Fionn arrived and came to his master's side. "I made them waste only the one shot, I fear. No doubt they have others..."

"I doubt ... that matters now..."

"True." The fae deerhound regarded the Hierophant. "If such a one stands with us, we are safe."

Donal managed to sit up as the pursuers arrived, considerably less out-of-breath than Donal thought they should have been. Ten men, dressed in security jumpers, eight of them carrying Pacifiers, batons enchanted to disable even without a direct hit. On their chests they bore the crest of the Romanov family.

"I declare this man under my protection," said Hierophant Mason, one hand relaxed on the hilt of his rapier. "Come against him at your peril."

"We represent Natalia Romanov," said the leader with a slight Romanian accent, "who sends her regards, Hierophant." The leader bowed, and his men followed suit.

Mason acknowledged them with a nod of his head.

The leader continued, "Donal Cuthbert is participating in a moral crime against the Romanov family, which grants us power to pursue him under Lunar Code Section four eight—"

"I may not have maintained my champion's license in many years," said Mason, his voice still so casual he might have been discussing sports scores of teams he did not care about, "but I am acquainted with all sections that pertain to the Lunar Code Duello."

Mason raised his voice the barest bit. "Donal Cuthbert, can you swear to me that you have committed no legal or moral crimes against the Romanov family?"

"I can swear ... that I have not knowingly ... committed any crimes at all ... since I entered Lunar space ... and that I have behaved ... at all times ..." Donal drew a deep breath to finish, "...in accordance with my duties as an IIX courier and a certified Journeyman."

“Good enough for me,” said Mason. He folded his arms. “Please return my regards to Natalia Romanov, and inform her that I still intend to accept her invitation to hospitality on my next visit. However, my statement of protection stands.”

The security men gazed uncertainly at each other, then those gazes all settled on their leader. He drew a deep breath and said, “We have slingers—”

“I was consulted in the invention of slingers. Before your men could pull their triggers, I could have your toys dump their spells on the lot of you.”

Mason raised one hand, leaving the other on the hilt of his rapier. “Shall we consider this matter ended? Or do you require a demonstration?”

The security guards hesitated. Even their leader seemed at a loss for how to respond.

“The weak points in the bindings are really quite simple to exploit. I could make a lesson of it for young Cuthbert here. You still intend to pursue Enochian research, do you not, Donal?”

Donal could not decide if he felt more flattered to be remembered or embarrassed at his arrival. Either way, he managed a shaky nod, and Hierophant Mason continued.

“Their binding spells are largely Earth of Earth. Air-pected Air of Fire works best against them. Snaps them like so.”

The Hierophant focused a tiny erg of the power Donal saw about him and made a show of moving to snap his fingers...

Before he could, the leader bowed again and said, “If contacted, will you confirm that we found Donal Cuthbert, but that you refused to allow us to complete our duty?”

“Of course,” said Hierophant Mason. “So long as you do not embellish my actions.”

The security guards left, and the tall magician gave Donal a hand up.

“Thank you, Hierophant,” said Donal.

“When I was your age,” said Mason with a wistful smile, “magi-

cians didn't stand on ceremony. Not among ourselves. Once you proved yourself competent to be called a Journeyman, you got to speak to other magicians as equals, no matter their skill or experience."

He shook his head. "But times change, and I'm too young to lament the past."

If Mason were a day over thirty-five, Donal could never have guessed it from looking at him. Of course, Donal knew that some magicians experimented with age magics...

"Enough of that," said Mason. "You might avoid Luna for a time. The Romanovs are a powerful family, and they know how to nurse a grudge."

"But I didn't even go near them."

"Your delivery had to do with the Dockers Guild?"

Donal opened his mouth, but checked his initial reply and said instead, "I'm not supposed to answer—"

"Questions about a package. Of course. Just consider it an educated guess. On to other topics then. How is your brother Bran? I understand he successfully challenged for the rank of Magister without first completing his MaT training." He began to lead Donal toward the helioship. "First American I've heard of who accomplished that. You must be very proud."

Donal sighed. Of course that was why a Hierophant like Mason remembered him. Everyone remembered Bran. Donal was always an afterthought.

"Of course, Hierophant. We all are."

Donal recalled Fionn into the inappropriate silver faun pendant that served as his familiar's material base, and boarded the ship with Mason, telling the Hierophant about his brother's successful mission to explore Ganymede and a few of his other various successes.

If only Donal could think of a few of his own accomplishments to mention.



STARCHASER SPACELINES: THE SHIPS that launched a thousand forms, mused Jacobs. It seemed to him sometimes that he spent every stop in port at his office desk, filling out forms for one local authority or another. Mars was still the worst, but San Francisco was starting to give them a run for their money.

At exactly ten hundred hours, the comm pad on Jacobs' desk glowed red. He slapped it, and the round face of Cindy, the receptionist, appeared above the pad. Jacobs still felt uncomfortable calling her by her first name, but she seemed to find it more cordial.

She saved him the trouble by speaking first. "A Ms. Tai Shi Li Hua here to see you, Sir. Says she's expected."

Expected? Then his new partner had to be...

But no. Even Zoltan would not have sold to...

"Send her in," Jacobs said, steadying his breathing and forcing his fists to unclench.

Tai Shi Li Hua entered the room with the feral grace of a predator, which was one of the reasons Jacobs respected her. She wore a spotless chestnut brown skirt suit with matching heels that even Jacobs had to admit complemented the red Martian overtones of her Chinese heritage. She stopped two paces inside the room, and her patient posture told Jacobs that she meant the distance as a gesture of respect, to give him the opportunity to invite her in or dismiss her.

Under the circumstances, that showed more presence of mind than he would have expected from someone under thirty. But most magicians developed their presence of mind faster than regular people.

"Captain Jacobs," said Tai Shi. "Thank you for seeing me."

"So Mancuso bought out Zoltan."

"Technically, 4M bought Zoltan's share of Starchaser Spacelines to reflect the growing concern of space travel to our business interests. But the effect is the same, yes."

Jacobs gestured for her to sit. He definitely should have had that drink. "Coffee?"

"No, thank you," said Tai Shi as she sat, her posture relaxed, but balanced. Ready. As though even here she expected an attack.

"I thought you handled 4M security for Mars. How did you end up playing messenger?"

"I'm not. The recent expansion of our business interests has prompted Mr. Mancuso to create the position of Director of Security for Inter-Business Relations. I've been promoted."

"Sounds like a very specific position."

"With broad reach. Anyone we do business with has to accept my oversight of their security."

"To prevent the infiltration of your security teams, such as happened on the Mars run?"

That damned Mars run. Smugglers, murderers, conspiracy theorists and a threat to destroy the ship.

"Exactly."

Firm confidence in her voice suggested that she had figured out exactly what had gone wrong on that voyage and that she knew how to prevent anything like it from happening again on her watch.

Her watch?

"Wait," said Jacobs with a scowl. "Does this mean I'm expected to let you oversee security for *my* ships?"

"Our ships now, Captain Jacobs. 4M owns half-interest, and has equal say in—"

"I run my ships my way. My chief handles my security."

"Nevertheless I need to run a personnel check."

"I'll sell."

"No one will buy. Mr. Mancuso will see to that."

"I'll quit."

"Captain Jacobs," said Tai Shi with wearing patience in her voice. "If you try to quit, Mr. Mancuso will sink the business, write off the loss, and not lose a moment's sleep over leaving you ruined."

Jacobs stared at her impassive face and felt anger pump through his veins. *Belay that, Old Man. She's the messenger, not the target.* He made her wait while he wrangled his temper under control, never letting any of it get past his eyes.

Tai Shi simply sat, without so much as a fidget.

"Fine man you work for."

"I like my job. Doesn't mean I always like my employer."

"He's going to ruin me anyway, isn't he?"

"No. He wants you to stay through the Venus run. Then if you still want out, he will buy out your shares at two hundred percent value."

"So that's why Zoltan sold."

"Normally," said Tai Shi reaching into her inner jacket pocket, "I would send this to you from my zephyrpad, but I recall that you prefer actual paper."

She pulled out a trifolded piece of paper and slid it across the desk to Jacobs.

Jacobs picked it up and read it twice. Sure enough, Mancuso seemed to be offering to purchase Jacobs' share of Starchaser Spacelines for two hundred percent of peak market value over the two week period following the successful completion of the Venus run. That would give the public time to absorb the news and for everyone to think of Starchaser Spacelines first when they thought of traveling off-planet.

The offer even included a retirement bonus large enough to buy Jacobs a house anywhere he wanted, and guaranteed health and care insurance for life for himself, and included a provision for a spouse should he marry.

As though Jacobs would ever meet someone who could replace Rhonda. He never had. Not in the fifty-eight years and seven months since her death.

Jacobs looked up at Tai Shi, who smiled as though honestly pleased.

Jacobs needed a moment to remember why she was smiling.

"It's a good offer," said Tai Shi, "and all you have to do is what you were going to do anyway. Captain the first commercial voyage to Venus."

"What's the catch?"

"Well," said Tai Shi, and Jacobs felt his jaw set. Just that one word told him he would not like what followed, but she had more to say. "The circumstances of that voyage will not be what you expect."

She passed Jacobs another piece of paper. This one a passenger list

and cargo manifest.

"Ridiculous," said Jacobs, his eyes still on the paper. "There are twenty names on this list, double the maximum passenger load for a little ship like the *Lark's Song*. And three times as much cargo as we're allowing."

He slid the paper back to her across the desk. "Besides, a proper full load of passages has already been sold."

"About that..." Tai Shi drew a deep breath. "Those passengers were false fronts, 4M employees buying the spaces to hold them while Mr. Mancuso prepared to purchase—"

"Did Zoltan know?"

"I was not involved in this aspect of the transaction."

"So this is why Mancuso didn't come himself."

"You did punch a representative of Transterran Properties on the Mars run."

"That idiot was stabbing someone he had no business stabbing."

Tai Shi tried to say something, but snorted out a laugh.

"Excuse me. It's just that I agree. Mr. Mancuso, however, is a man of a different sort of action."

"Fine."

"I beg your pardon?"

"The passenger count and cargo tonnage are both too much for the *Lark's Song*, and since the *Last Night* and the *Star Wave* are committed to other flights, we'll have to use the *Horizon Cusp*. That means a more experienced crew, but greater risk and greater expense. 4M is picking up all costs above and beyond those budgeted for the voyage as I've planned it, agreed?"

"Agreed." Tai Shi tried to continue, but Jacobs spoke over her.

"Furthermore," he said and waited until he had her attention. "My ship, my security, my way. Goldberg handles *all* security for *this* flight. No 'private guards' this time, 'personal bodyguards,' or anything of the like. You get executives and support staff only."

"Agreed, with the proviso that I will be among the executives and oversee—"

"Anything Goldberg allows you to. You'll meet with him before takeoff, and I'll tell him what's coming. If he agrees to your oversight, you get it. Otherwise, the best you get to do is assist him. Yes." Jacobs let command infuse his deep voice, and even the walls rang out with compliance. "Your boss has pulled his tricks to get a Venus flight with me in command. Well, heaven help him, he has it. And that means I run things my way. No oversight. No interference. This is a dangerous voyage, and I'll be damned before I'll risk my crew on the meddling of landlubbers.

"Is that clear?"

"Yes, I believe so," said Tai Shi, eyebrows up and face impressed. She handed him a business card. "Have Security Chief Goldberg contact me at his convenience."

After she left, Jacobs gathered the forms he would need for the docks, at least those he had finished, leaving behind the ones now rendered inaccurate by changes to the passenger list, cargo manifest, and most of all the helioship.

The *Horizon Cusp* was too much ship for this voyage. Added risk. But, Jacobs admitted with a sigh, at least Benny Sugg would be happier. The old tomcat hated change as much as Jacobs did.



TWELVE HOURS AFTER HIS confrontation in Docking Bay Forty-Nine, Donal disembarked the *Archimedes* with the other efficiency-rate passengers, probably a good half-hour after Mason would have departed from his luxury-class personal cabin.

That thought made Donal smile. Someday he too would fly in luxury-class personal cabins at someone else's expense. In five months he would move into his graduate student accommodations on the CalThaum campus in San Luis Obispo, ready to begin his own doctoral studies. No more courier work with its promise of exotic travel and its reality of cramped quarters and occasional threats to life and limb.

At least it paid well, especially when threats to life and limb got involved. And in a few years, Donal would make Hierophant himself and

get to choose his field of research. People might remember him as more than Bran Cuthbert's little brother.

Donal stepped out of the hangar and into the Spaceport of San Francisco proper: huge, organized, and teeming with life. The third largest spaceport in the United North American States — after Toronto and Durango — tens of thousands came through every day. And with the chaos of noise and movement pressing on him, Donal felt as though every single one of those travelers surrounded him right now.

Too much.

After three days among the sparser population of Kennedy, Donal was not ready for the press of San Francisco's spaceport. Luna's population counted in the millions now, but they never seemed as crowded as the cities of home. There they moved in knots and groups. Here they moved in packs and throngs.

The smell was better here in San Francisco though. Solid enchanting work kept a fresh spring scent in the air.

Still, Donal retreated back into the hangar for relief, where the only other people were low-grade alchemists in their stained jumpsuits, here to see about the *Archimedes* fuel needs.

Donal calmed himself with a breathing technique. Regular practice had enabled him to shift his levels of awareness — key to his magical perceptions and work — but at moments like this he found their familiarity comforting.

He called forth Fionn, who emitted as a green beam of light from Donal's pendant before coalescing into shape. The emerald spirit deerhound determined the lay of the land in a sniff of the air, a shifting of its eyes and a quick angling of its ears.

"Are we hunted?"

"No," said Donal. "The Hierophant took care of that."

Fionn sat and regarded the immense foot traffic, then looked back at its master with emerald ears still pointing to check for threats.

"Exactly. I need you to keep an eye on me while we head for the IIX office. I need to catch myself if I tighten up."

"You still consider field work." Fionn snorted with a twitch of its

head. "Research is safer and more to your taste."

"People keep trying to kill me. I need the skills of field work, even if I don't use them to earn money."

"Your continued association with Tai Shi Li Hua endangers you."

"Because she loves field work?"

"That, and her employer." Fionn thumped its tail. "You should sever your connection with her. Sooner is better."

"Look," said Donal with a sigh, "just keep an eye on me, all right?"

And with that, they moved into the crowd, working their way through clusters of humanity — some accompanied by familiar spirits or illusory guides — and down the broad halls.

Subtle magics worked into the carpeting and walls freshened the air and drew out the smells of travel: fast food, sweat, competing perfumes and colognes, and periodic improper hygiene.

Donal passed alcoves where hallucinatory scenes advertised travel destinations and local products, barely sparing them a second glance. Of course, it helped that local noise regulations kept their volumes low enough not to interfere with casual conversation. At least, not any more than the thousand competing casual conversations did.

He did pause at an interactive map, seeing that the port had improved their map system again. When Donal had left for Kennedy, the maps had been six feet wide and could tilt, zoom and search when travelers used the proper series of gestures and key phrases.

But now Donal saw people surrounding a nearby map and pulling down personal copies, each still fully interactive, that looked as though they would maintain their integrity for some time.

The siren song of new spellwork called to Donal, and he stepped out of the traffic zone to shift his consciousness and dig into the spells, intending to study the decay rate of the duplicated images. He hoped to find some new approach to direct enchantment duration, a weakness in his own work.

The feel of Fionn's teeth lightly denting Donal's wrist brought him back into his own head before he had gotten his answer. Donal gave Fionn an irritated look.

"Research magicians can pause to study new spells," said the familiar. "Field magicians must keep their attention on their surroundings."

Donal sighed. Fionn was right, as usual. Had someone been following Donal, they could have taken him down with even a commercial-grade Pacifier while he was busy focusing on the map. On the other hand...

"I have a familiar to track threats while I study."

Fionn sat and regarded its master, head at a slight angle and ears perked in silent statement.

"...and if I thought the area might be hostile I would have sent you off to scout." Donal checked his messenger bag, an empty reflex as he had no package to deliver. "You want me to say it? I'll say it. You're right."

The *cú sidhe* sat. Waiting.

"You think I missed something else?" Donal scanned the crowd, saw no threats among the throngs. "If you aren't going to tell me, we should get moving."

Fionn looked once over its shoulder, and Donal would have sworn that his familiar managed to assess their entire surroundings in that single movement. Fionn then stood and fell into step alongside Donal as he began to walk.

Three steps later, realization made Donal slap himself in the forehead. Fionn must have been waiting for Donal to start walking.

Fionn snorted, possibly to cover a chuckle.

Some five minutes later, the two entered the main office of IIX, Intraplanetary and Interplanetary Express. The businesslike storefront had no counter, only generous floorspace surrounding private cubicles, and roving salespeople in suits eager to help anyone who needed enough security on a package to have it delivered by a magician.

Three elegant illusions demonstrated the service to passersby: one, silent, that scrolled through images and text showing every city, nation and planet IIX delivered to; the second, a three-dimensional montage of famous and important people receiving IIX deliveries by hand (simulated from real events, so the couriers would look more handsome or

beautiful than any Donal knew of on staff); and the third and most impressive, a scene of IIX partner Hierophant Jane MacDougall thaumaturgically sealing a package against tampering.

Donal knew that the scene was also simulated, to avoid giving even a hint about the spells used to protect IIX packages, but he still enjoyed looking at it. Hierophant MacDougall was a handsome, statuesque woman who looked decades younger than her rumored sixty-three years.

And he found the “spell” itself entertaining: dramatic gestures and Gaelic chanting (actually a list of ingredients needed to make haggis), vivid jewel-tone colors moving in patterns that looked nothing like actual spell structures, and a subtle press against the skin of those watching, as though the spell created pressures that pushed out even through the dramatization.

Donal occasionally wondered which shadow play director had designed that display, but he never got around to asking. And he had no intention of losing himself in yet another spell while still in what amounted to a public place.

Donal nodded to the salespeople he knew as he passed through on his way to the back door leading to the employee area. He slipped on his courier signet ring and knocked twice with the ring, letting the ward chime a verifying acknowledgment before he opened the door and stepped through.

Donal had studied that ward once, a complex enchantment also performed by Hierophant MacDougall. After a solid half-hour of deep contemplation, he had learned that it tracked who passed, verified the ring and the wearer, sealed out detection spells and probes, barred unauthorized personnel and familiars, and also contained an intricate self-defense system.

And Donal knew he had only scratched the surface.

He stepped through the employee lounge, with its Spartan couches and chairs, on which two other couriers attempted to nap while their familiars — a crow and a snake — exchanged ideas in that language that all familiars seemed to know. To Donal they sounded as though they spoke some variant of Arabic, but he knew they were not using any human

language.

In one corner sat the sort of kitchenette one might see in an moderate hotel room: drawers, cabinets and counters of cheap-but-decent wood, plus one heating plate and one chilling plate. Two sodas sat on the chilling plate, frost coating their glass bottles and suggesting that the sleepers had forgotten them.

Donal continued through the room and down the hall, passing the rest rooms, to the manager's and accountant's offices at the back. He turned right and paused in the doorway of Aafiya, the accountant. Donal had always thought accountants were supposed to be middle-aged, overweight men with bald spots, but Aafiya kept trim and dressed sharp, his small beard and black hair as tidy as his gray pinstriped suit. And if Aafiya was any older than Donal, Donal could not have guessed it.

Donal waited in the doorway for acknowledgment while Aafiya finished manipulating numbers in the chimeric display floating above his desk. Finally the accountant looked up and smiled.

"Donal, back from the moon in one piece I see. No combat pay this time?"

"Actually..." said Donal as he entered and sat in the square guest chair, Fionn settling on the floor beside him.

"Oh, come on. Not again."

"Check it." Donal tossed his enchanted silver IIX seal onto the desk. "That's both my off-planet flights and the Sydney mishap. I'm starting to think there's a target on my back."

"I don't believe it." Aafiya shook his head as he swept the seal through his chimerical display and it acknowledged the chase, the shot from the slinger, and Donal's vitals throughout. "I'm starting to think you've found some way to rig this thing."

Fionn emitted a low growl, and the *cú sidhe's* fur began to rise.

"Come on, Aafiya," said Donal, waving one hand to placate his familiar. "I'm just a Journeyman. How am I going to rig it?"

"You have two more years of magical training than most of our couriers, and you specialize in conjuration and deception. Maybe you figured something out. Hate to say it, but it looks like I'll have to ground

you until I can get your signet checked.”

“I had a feeling you were going to give me a hard time about this.” Donal reached into his messenger bag and pulled out his zephyrpad. He transferred a document to the accountant, and saw it show up in the chimerical display. “Hierophant Nicholas Mason witnessed, and was good enough to sign a testimonial.”

Donal smiled at Fionn while Aafiya looked the document over. “Like my mom always taught us: ‘get it in writing.’”

Aafiya broke into a broad smile. “That’s why I like you, Donal. You make my job easy. I’ll need a few minutes to verify this, but I should be able to approve your combat pay within the half-hour.”

A knock came from the door frame behind them. The two men looked up to see IIX Regional Manager Tracy Washington, who dressed as neatly as her accountant, with skin the color of wet, fertile soil and just enough height and weight to lend intimidation to her already impressive title.

“Cuthbert. My office. Now.”

