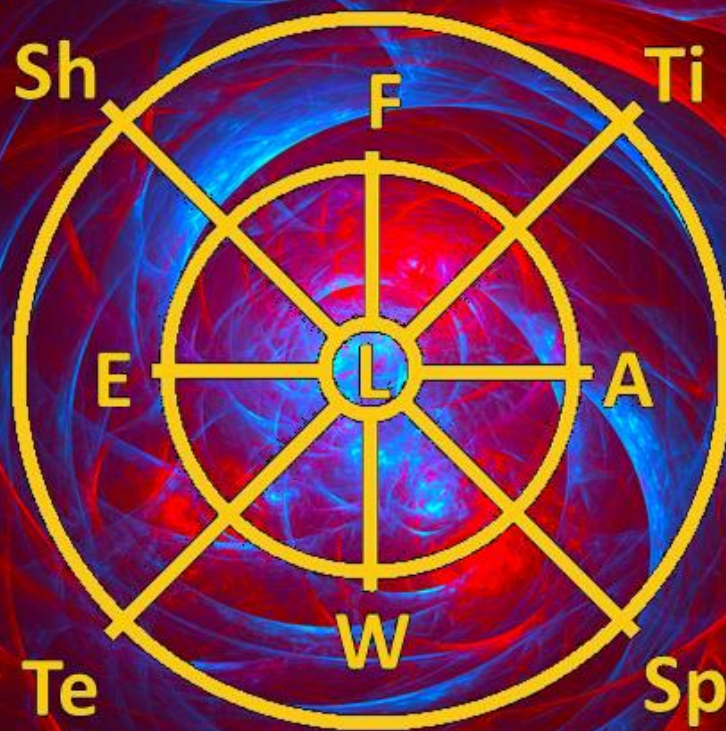


Choice

Book 3 of the Majaos Trilogy



Gary Stringer

Choice

(Majaos Trilogy Book 3)

The Well of Life is the source of all magic on Majaos. Its location has remained a mystery since the time of Merlyn. Eilidh must work with her friends to solve this Ancient puzzle and race to find it before Nilstiar does.

Most of Eilidh's friends are back, but how can she make them stay? People are not exactly her forte, but she knows she can't do this alone. Can she find within herself the skills she needs to keep her party together?

Elsewhere, the Knights of Balance are preparing to rescue the fallen Callie but it will all be for nothing if Loric can't pass his trials. The dragon predator stands between them and time is running out. They must save their silver friend before she reaches Death's Door or she will be gone forever. Is Phaer's strange condition an illness, a curse, or something else?

As the past catches up with them and secrets are revealed, Eilidh must open the door and find the truth. In the end, it's all about her: Eilidh's choice.

Prologue

It had been a long time that meeting; the meeting that had changed his life. Many frustrating months had gone by since setting out on her trail. However long it had been, he wasn't altogether sure he was any closer to his objective, but he had to stick with it. His Master was patient, so would he be.

He remembered the streets of Merlyon that night, filled with a buzz of activity. Daytime businesses were closed, no doubt having done extra trade having been Graduation Day. The city's night-time businesses had no doubt thrived, too, and celebration continued into the wee small hours. He had thought that city would never change. It seemed as if it had always been so and would always be in the future. Hard to believe it was all gone now. The city, all his old haunts, the Great Library, even the Council building that had stood as a living monument since the time of the Ancients. Who knew how many mages were in there when Niltsiar reduced it to rubble? Ah, but his Master survived. Of that he had no doubt. Merlyon, as diverse a culture as one could imagine, had been a place of ordered chaos. Now it was a wasteland. It seemed impossible, inconceivable.

Looking back, that night had started like any other. Many people called out to him, saluted or waved. He was well known in these parts – indeed, where was he not? His profession made others treat him as life and soul of any party, and as such they overlooked his other perhaps grumpier side. He had a short temper with those he felt were mocking him, belittling what he did or just generally wasting his valuable time. He engaged freely in small talk with passers-by – one never knew when one might learn something to be used to one's advantage later. Meanwhile, he kept his own conversation to topics that were already common knowledge. No sense in giving an advantage to others.

He had set out on his own in late childhood, unwilling to wait around for some arbitrary age set down by his people as the threshold of adulthood. He had travelled well, already, but he longed for a chance to test his mettle on an adventure. There were opportunities in adventures that he found quite attractive: Wealth, power, glory. Little did he know he was about to get that chance...

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...When he regained consciousness, his first reaction was puzzlement, since he could not immediately recall losing consciousness in the first place. As the fog in his mind slowly lifted, he recalled something about scarlet robes – war mages. Yes, that was it – war mages. A group of them. He had been briefly curious about where they might be headed in such a hurry, when he realised they were heading for him! That was the last thing he could remember before waking up here. Wherever `here` was.

He did not have long to wait for his first clue.

He was lying on a sofa, in a magically-lit chamber with a disorientating red glow. The colour of the sofa was hardly what he would consider good taste: a kind of green that made him feel somewhat queasy, especially when his head already felt as if his brain had exploded. This green sofa had a purple trim at the bottom, which clashed horribly with the green, red highlights, brown tassels and a single, bright orange cushion. When he tried to prop himself up by leaning against this cushion, he could have sworn the sofa let out a stifled cry, but he put this down to his aching head.

At that moment, a door appeared in the wall in front of him and burst open with a resounding crash that reverberated around the room. The figure that swept in wore scarlet robes with black hood and cuffs, which made them a dark aligned witch or warlock. The war mage was clearly displaying the night blue

symbol of Dark Magic. That symbol was worn only by one person: the Master of Dark Magic and Supreme War Master himself...Drizdar. He who had recently acceded to power following Mistress Chandril's mysterious demise. Drizdar called upon magic and the walls glowed. Clearly a shield spell.

The person on the sofa leaped up immediately, standing straight and focussing his gaze on the Seal of the Council of Magic: *Majaos y Natus* – Magic is Life. He would not dare sit in the Master's presence. The Master glowered balefully, apparently boiling with anger, but gradually regaining control.

“Get out of here, now!” Drizdar commanded.

“I— I'm sorry, Master,” stammered the other. “Please forgive me, I— I don't even know how...”

“Not you, imbecile!” The force of the Master's rage was nearly enough to blow the guest off his feet. Drizdar pointed at him and he half expected flames to shoot out and engulf his body. “You I have sent for,” the Master told him. “You will stay until I am done with you. I'm talking to this quintessential trickster.”

The Master once again addressed someone whom his guest could not see.

“The others may tolerate you popping in and out at will but I don't! You know that. Now get out!”

Apparently, this unseen presence did not obey, for after a momentary pause, Drizdar rolled his eyes and let out an exasperated sigh. “Very well then, it seems I shall have to banish you myself.” The War Master cast a spell and if weren't so ridiculous, the confused guest would have sworn the sofa uttered a squeal of protest as it vanished into the ether.

“What I am about to tell you,” Drizdar said, obviously now satisfied, “is strictly for your ears only. I have a task for you and you will perform it with the utmost secrecy. Betraying yourself intentionally or inadvertently would not be conducive to a long and happy life. Is that understood?”

“Of course, Master,” he replied. “I am sworn to obey in all things.”

“See that you do.”

Drizdar used his guest's name, which was both a surprise and not. It was no surprise that Master Drizdar could find out the name of anyone he wished. It was only a surprise that the guest was in any way significant enough that Drizdar should bother. There was no offer of a seat, so he remained standing, alert and attentive, trying hard not to fidget under the warlord's withering stare. The War Master began to pace as he spoke, the air surrounding him fairly crackling with energy. Life was concentrated around him, glowing intensely in the red part of the colour spectrum, as one would expect from the Supreme War Master.

“You would have to be the world's greatest fool to be unaware of the invasion of chaos creatures, but what you will not know is that this is a symptom of a much larger problem. Niltsiar has returned.”

“Niltsiar? Isn't she one of the Higher Council?”

Drizdar halted and rounded on his guest who suddenly wondered if speaking had been a mistake. But Drizdar seemed to check himself before answering, cryptically, “Until a short time ago she was, but that is not the Niltsiar of whom I speak...and yet they are one and the same. Niltsiar is a name my former master Akar-Sel mentioned more than once and I have no doubt he was working for her. Now she is back under a different guise – in fact, she has worn many faces since her return and now she has devastated the Higher

Council. In so doing, she has put me into a position of power, for which ordinarily I would not be ungrateful. But my change in circumstances is, in of itself, irrelevant if it means I am merely her pawn. It is only significant if I can use my position against her, somehow. I know with every fibre of my being the threat she represents. Gamaliel suspects something of this – he is no fool and I must be careful how I deal with him. For now, I have allowed him to lead the Council – after making enough noise to make my reluctance appear convincing. In reality,” he continued as he resumed pacing, “I am exactly where I need to be. While all eyes are on him, I can move about in the shadows whilst using my War Master role as a front.

“As for Merlana, she is raiding every reference book in the Great Library and should she find anything useful, believe me, I will know about it. But she is insignificant. I am far more interested in what Gamaliel is up to, the cunning half-elf. He might have slipped that girl in and out unnoticed, even by me, if I hadn’t spotted that annoying prankster.”

Drizdar broke off suddenly and pointed at the tall standing lamp in the corner. The other individual could not imagine how it had come to be there - it had not been before. With a turquoise blue base, ruby red stand and bright orange shade, he surely would have noticed. His guest flinched, preparing for the lightning bolt that the archmage, given the mood he was in, would surely send arcing across the room. He then felt rather foolish when Drizdar did no such thing.

“You’ve heard the rest of this conversation before,” said Drizdar to the lamp, though why he should be talking to it as if it were alive was beyond his guest’s ability to guess. “So it will be terribly boring for you if you stay, and I know what happens when you get bored, so I suggest you leave. Permanently this time.”

The lamp disappeared in a huff and Drizdar was apparently satisfied.

“Alright,” he continued to his guest. “Let me start at the beginning...”

* * * * *

A tall tale or two later, Drizdar started to wrap up the meeting.

“Now, you have listened patiently, but--” he began.

He paused again, becoming fixated on a bright orange door hanger, but after swearing profusely under his breath for a moment, he seemed to resign himself to its presence and continued. “But now we come to the role I have mapped out for you. I have tasted Niltsiar’s vile form of magic. It is an abomination - a threat to the very fabric of Life. She must be stopped! Everything depends on it!

“Now, to this end, Gamaliel has sent some Catalyst girl on a quest. Eilidh Hagram is her name.”

“I’ve heard of her,” Drizdar’s guest put in.

“That is not surprising.” The War Master nodded. “But beyond such media sensation, the details I have are sketchy. Obviously, though, Gamaliel believes she is somehow the key to defeating Niltsiar. If that is so, then I intend to send an agent of my own. One who can move around freely, following her wherever she goes, without arousing suspicion.

“That agent is to be you.”

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...That agent is to be you.

Those had been Drizdar's final words to him – other than one quite bizarre command.

“On your way out, throw that door hanger from the top of my tower to the protective moat of molten lava below. I can't imagine it will destroy him, but with any luck it'll hurt enough so he'll think twice about coming here again for a while...or ever, ideally.”

Bizarre or not, his was not to reason why, just to obey orders.

So now he was an agent of Supreme War Master, Drizdar. Considering his approach carefully upon leaving Drizdar's tower, he decided to head for Shakaran. By all accounts, this Catalyst girl had something of a reputation in Merlyon, so she would find it difficult to find suitable help. It made sense, then, that she would head for the rugged city of Shakaran. If he was there first, he should be able to draw her to him and make it seem like pure chance. He would negotiate a price - after all, free help is often suspicious. But if she felt he believed there was something in it for him, she would take him in. Or rather, be taken in by him!

He would be a valuable, reliable ally, waiting until the time was right. If she did indeed hold the key to defeating this Niltsiar, his reward would be great when he delivered it into Master Drizdar's waiting hands.

Wealth, power, glory: this was adventure. It was his and it was sweet.

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The power that crackled around Niltsiar's royal hut lit up the night sky like an electrical storm of unparalleled magnitude. Onlookers compared it to the power of a thousand suns blazing in that one spot, blistering the skin of Majaos like an enormous boil. Everyone gave it a wide berth, cringing, fearful of Her Divine Excellency's wrath should they do anything to disturb her. No-one envied her personal guards, forced to stand like statues either side of her door.

Following the return of the dark elf Z'rcona, Niltsiar had not been at all pleased. In one sense, her servant had performed the task she had been set. She had retrieved the Great Key from the Ancient crypt of Spirit magic, but not before the *Du y Kharia* had unlocked its secrets and called forth its power. In so doing, she had not only gained command of the crypt's defences, but also set in motion a much more important chain reaction. In a moment, the *Du y Kharia* had undone one facet of Niltsiar's carefully laid plans. She had reinstated the magic of the Secret of Spirit - necromancy.

In her studies of the different forms of modern magic - the Life Secrets as they were called - she had determined that Spirit was the greatest potential threat. In truth, Niltsiar supposed, `threat` was overstating it, especially at this late stage in her plans. It would be more accurate to characterise Spirit magic as an `inconvenience`. The Tech Wars, engineered by her favoured agent, Akar-Sel, had proved to be the perfect device for weakening all forms of Life magic and more importantly served as a convenient scapegoat for the loss of necromancy. Necromancers being unpopular, the Council of Magic felt it had other, higher priorities. So, just as Niltsiar had planned, they pinned the blame firmly on the Tech Wars. In reality, this was altogether impossible. No war could account for the fact that not one baby was born with an affinity for the Secret of Spirit. Other Secrets had been devastated by the Tech Wars, losing archmages and expertise, but diminished power and total extinction were two entirely different things. Niltsiar had managed to get away with it, though, and it had proved most useful.

Now the dead were once again in a position to tell tales, which might prove to be...yes, inconvenient...if, of course, anyone still knew how to listen. After two centuries with this a lost art, she supposed it was unlikely to much matter.

What did matter was the Great Key, because through it, she would get one step closer to her goal. There was just one thing she hadn't anticipated - the Great Key was spelled! As soon as she opened her mind to the object, a powerful Mageworm spell crashed through her not inconsiderable defences and burrowed into her brain. If left unchecked, the Mageworm would ravage her mind, seeking specific information, which it would `eat`. Growing and self-replicating, it would continue its feast until every scrap of knowledge pertaining to whatever it was keyed to find was gone. Once its task was complete, it would always lay dormant in her mind, ready to gobble up any attempt to relearn the subject in question. Otherwise, the Mageworm might simply self-destruct doing massive, unpredictable and irreversible damage to her brain. Death would be the likely result...if she was lucky.

If it were left unchecked.

And so it was that she bent all of her vast powers into countering the Mageworm in a way that would cause it to gently melt away, break down and be reabsorbed as raw magic. This was the cause of the lightshow to which her camp bore witness. The worm was well constructed - resilient and slippery, constantly trying to rewrite itself to adapt to and avoid Niltsiar's efforts to destroy it. But Niltsiar was a patient huntress. Gradually, she was able to squeeze the worm, allowing it fewer and fewer options until no more evolution was possible. It wriggled and writhed inside its prison before it was squashed under her metaphorical boot heel. Its integrity gone, it was reduced to the raw magic that first spawned it.

Niltsiar slouched in her throne-like chair, gasping for breath, barely enough energy to wipe the sweat from her brow. Composing herself, she called out, "Z'rcona, get in here!"

A slender, dark-haired elf maid strode into Her Divine Excellency's presence, wearing an equally dark expression. Z'rcona of the House of the Fountain schooled that expression to avoid revealing her inner satisfaction. She had successfully carved her way into a position of power within Niltsiar's encampment. She was entrusted with quests and assignments that took her all over Mythallen and in return, her Mistress had given her magic. The kind of magic all her people once possessed. Soon the dark elves would be a force again - the dominant force in the entire world, but for now, Z'rcona had to admit, it felt good to be the only one with such power.

True enough, her last mission might be viewed as a slight blemish on her otherwise spotless record. She had been sent to retrieve the Great Key from an ancient temple in a forgotten corner of the continent. Unfortunately for her, the *Du y Kharia* had got there first - though how she'd ever found the place was a mystery to the dark elf. Things had seemed to be under control, but then she had received some...unexpected orders from Her Divine Excellency, forcing Z'rcona to improvise. Events deteriorated rapidly from that point. Undead creatures were everywhere and she'd only made it out in one piece thanks to the teleportation device she always carried. Still, she did retrieve the key, as ordered, so it was not a failure in the strictest sense. If the key was booby trapped, well, that was hardly her fault and even with her new magical skills, judging by the strain still evident on Niltsiar's face, there was nothing Z'rcona could have done about it. As for sacrificing her team, that was irrelevant.

So her self-confidence was still very much intact, if shrouded, as she bowed to Her Divine Excellency.

“Z'rcona,” came Niltsiar's greeting.

“I trust all is well, Great One,” she ventured.

“The Great Key was spelled. A minor inconvenience, although I must admit I underestimated the strength of the assault. Those who could achieve such a thing even in Ancient times were few in number. Now there are but two. I expected Merlyn would be the one to test me, but I realise now that was impossible. This trap was set while my father and I fought on worlds and planes beyond Majaos. This was the work of his apprentice.”

Niltsiar considered for a moment. The dark elves were definitely part of her long-term plans and this one had proven useful. It was time, she decided, to paint at least some of the larger picture.

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Long ago, in Ancient times, Merlyn crossed the dark expanse to bring human magic users from Earth to Majaos. Many ultimately co-operated to bring about Merlyn's Great Endeavour, but of all the assembled masses, he had but two firm allies - friends - two people he knew he could depend upon and entrust with his life. They were Ganieda and Artemis - his betrothed and his apprentice. To the people of Majaos, these three were the last of the Faerie.

When they arrived on Majaos, they found themselves on a continent they named Mythallen, from an old dialect, meaning `Land of Legend`. Given the richness of magic in this new world, though the Great Endeavour was finished, their work had only just begun. They had an entirely new civilisation to build, not only with each other, but also with the myriad of strange, wondrous and terrifying indigenous creatures. In addition, they needed to establish relations with the sentient beings of this world, to show that they came in peace as settlers, not as conquerors. Then there was the need for food. Although much of the plant life, indeed the whole ecosystem was similar to that which they had left behind, there were enough differences to make people cautious.

The task was great, but as is often the case in such matters, the hardship brought people together. By the time any of them had a chance to pause for breath, they realised their old enmities and the motivations behind them were as distant as their former home. None had any desire to return to that.

After a while, it was only natural that people would begin to pair off. In this, Merlyn and Ganieda led the way, giving birth to the first baby born on Majaos from Terran parents. Their daughter, Niltsiar, grew up in a golden age of magic and wonder. Great advances were being made, practically every day and for short-lived humans, specialisation was a natural response to there being too many possibilities for one to explore in a single lifetime. These were formalised as nine distinct colleges of magic. Other races adopted the system, too, if in a slightly more fluid way.

Niltsiar was not an obedient child. She was wilful and prideful and considered herself better than everyone else. She could never understand why her parents - and even that ridiculous Artemis - did not assert their authority over the whole world.

They had set up the Council of Magic. They discussed magic and laid down rules and restrictions and penalties regarding its use, all of which Niltsiar hated. To her, magic was a wild, ferocious beast that could not be tamed. The constant analysis and discussion stifled progress, in Niltsiar's view. Since she had never lived on Earth, she was blind to the advances that had been made. With all his ability, even Merlyn - especially Merlyn - was constantly wary of the full extent of the power they were tapping into. Niltsiar was

not at all wary - she embraced the power. Her parents warned of the danger; the danger thrilled Niltsiar. The others sought to exist in gentle harmony with the magic; Niltsiar violently fought the magic, treating it like a feral force that had to be subdued to her will.

Then, just when Niltsiar thought her opinion of her father and his Council couldn't sink any lower, they took a decision that would change the whole world forever and set Niltsiar on a collision course with them and their ideals.

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Z'rcona listened carefully, never interrupting - she didn't dare - while Niltsiar continued her history lesson, which linked in with some of the practicalities of Ancient magic that Her Divine Excellency had already begun to share.

At last, Niltsiar came to the climax of the story.

There had been a final standoff between Merlyn and Niltsiar, father and daughter. Merlyn had caught her by surprise, grabbing her and transporting both of them away from Majaos. In this way, Merlyn could use his full power against her and if necessary kill her, without harming the world he loved. They fought long and hard, they fought in realms where Time had no meaning, but then Niltsiar used a burst of her power at the moment of a transfer, forcing them apart. They each found themselves in a different place. Different worlds, different planes, different times, Niltsiar did not know, nor did she care. She was drained, but she knew her father would be, too. They both were stranded until such time as they could find a way home. A very, very long time.

However, Merlyn's apprentice, Artemis, wasted not a moment. When it became clear that he could not gain the support of the full Council, even as Ganieda tried to hold them together, he acted alone and without authorisation. He knew Niltsiar would one day return and so he set traps in key locations. The idea that one of these key locations should be literally a location with a key, appealed to his sense of humour. The magic of some of his other traps had eroded with time but this one had not. There was no getting around his traps. For her to achieve her ambition, Niltsiar would need to take a number of deep magical readings from objects like the Great Spirit Key. Until then, the spells would remain dormant. In that state, they were bound to the object in question and could not be dispelled without destroying the object. So in order to safely destroy the trap, she would be forced to activate it first. Of course, no trap he could set would destroy Niltsiar - he did not have that power and did not delude himself otherwise. But he could slow her down, frustrate her at every turn, giving the luxury of time to the one that prophecy said would come. The one named *Du y Kharia*. He could only hope it would be time enough.

“So,” Z'rcona mused, “Merlyn is still stranded off world, but Artemis is around here somewhere...”

“Meddling in things he does not understand, yes.”

“Artemis,” Z'rcona growled. “The Ancient enemy who stole the magic from the dark elves. He must pay for his crimes against my people!”

“Oh, he will, I assure you.” Niltsiar affirmed. “In a way,” she considered, “he has already been paying for some time. I have seen him, Z'rcona. Still the annoying trickster he always was, like a buzzing insect - and just as difficult to catch. He's not quite himself, however.”

“What do you mean?”

“From what I have seen,” she said, “I believe that his attack on your people was more than he could handle. It is a wonder he found the power to do it at all. It would not be an easy task even for me. His mind has snapped under the strain and now he seems to go by the nickname I gave him oh so long ago.”

“A nickname?” Z'rcona wondered.

“Yes. Artemis suffered from a seemingly endless variety of allergies from the instant he set foot on this world, but refused any attempt to cure him. He used to say it was `a minor inconvenience and a part of the person he was`, whatever that means.”

“Celebrating his imperfections?” Z'rcona sneered. “It makes him sound almost human.” She spat the word with obvious distaste.

“I always thought so,” Niltsiar agreed. “I suppose it's only fitting that he should end up as a crazy old man, sneezing all over the place, adopting that ridiculous name. You see, as a parody of Artemis, I called him...”

“Artisho.”

Chapter 1

Eilidh, Toli and Granite were once again in the presence of the Wise One. Eilidh had decided that they should stick with just the three of them. After all, if the prince was to be believed, only they had been `invited` and they didn't have time to travel all that way, only to be unable to find the Wise One's hut because they were trying to bring along uninvited guests.

Of her assembled friends, only Rochelle was particularly disappointed, but she cheered up when Eilidh commended her on her extraordinary literary find. Given a second source of information, it made sense to take advantage of both simultaneously, and there was no doubt that Rochelle possessed a mind that could cut through the extraneous knowledge and discover answers to some of the important academic and philosophical questions posed by this situation.

The Knights were preparing for action - not that they were ever unprepared - but Eilidh wanted to give Hannah as much time as possible to recover from her injuries and trauma. The Paladin insisted she was `fine` but she would probably say that if the roof of Shakaran Castle fell on her head. Dark Knight Officer Sir Quentin Marr had placed himself in charge of overseeing her healing, cracking the metaphorical whip at the first perceived sign of anything less than perfect efficiency on the part of the royal healing staff. Bernice Ardra - Bunny - seemed to have developed quite a bond with Tanya, the easy-going Knight of Balance, and had attached herself to the Knightly trio; an interesting match, to be sure.

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The sumorityl had proved instrumental in Hannah's healing. Some of the chaos creatures apparently secreted some kind of anti-coagulant and the Clerics were unable to permanently stop the bleeding. They would staunch the flow for a while, but the wounds would always open up again.

Out of the blue, Bunny said, "I can do it. I can stop the bleeding. It won't be pretty, but I can do it. I was created from a vampire, remember?" she explained, when the others asked, "and I've got some of their abilities. One of them is the ability to control blood clotting. Vampires can prevent clotting while they're drinking and rapidly close a wound when they want to save a snack for later." She paused, noting some of the horrified looks.

"OK, maybe that was too much information," she considered. "Let's just say it's a little trick that comes into play during vampiric conversion."

When that drew more horrified gasps, Bunny just rolled her eyes. "Oh, for pity's sake! Look, I'm not going to turn her into a vampire!"

The others seemed unconvinced.

"Fine, forget it!" She pushed angrily through the others, intending to storm off, but halfway to the door, she rounded on them, employing all of her self-control to keep her vampiric form from surfacing in instinctive response to her rage. "Y'know, it's really charming!" she complained. "Here I am offering, as a valuable member of our team, to do something decidedly unpleasant to save our friend's life, and all you lot can do is stand there pulling faces! I saved a bunch of children from a burning building, just like Loric. Only he's a heroic dragon and I'm a vampire with ulterior motives! I rescued Phaer from the dark elves - after he went blabbing about Niltsiar. I'll bet he'd be welcomed if he came back, but all I get is suspicion. I faced down a basilisk, put my life in considerable danger and I came back here to fill you in on what you've been

missing, but you still don't trust me! I could have gone anywhere, but I chose to come back here because I believed - believe - I can help! But you still! Don't! Trust! Me! Why?"

She let her accusation hang in the air for a moment before continuing, "OK, so this is almost certainly the safest place in all Mythalen right now, and I'll admit saving my own skin is pretty high on my list of priorities. Is that so wrong? What have I done to deserve this treatment?" She asked.

Nobody answered.

"Tell me!" She demanded, her scream reverberating around the high-ceilinged chamber.

The others just looked at one another, shifting uncomfortably.

"Doesn't anybody around here trust me?" Bunny persisted

"I do," volunteered Tanya Nightingale.

The others stared at her in disbelief.

The Knight spread her arms in an elaborate shrug. "Well, I do!" she insisted.

"Apart from her," Bunny dismissed with a smile.

Tanya giggled - not a sound one would ever expect to hear from a typical Knight, but Lady Tanya Nightingale was anything but a typical Knight.

Calming down, Bernice tried again. "I believe I can close Hannah's wounds. You can let me try, or you can put your faith in the Clerics to suddenly come up with a cure at the last minute."

"It seems to me," Eilidh said, trying to smooth things over. "That this is Hannah's choice. You know what she's like for following the rules of her Order, although I doubt there's anything specific about allowing a sumorityl vampire to heal a Knight of Paladina."

So they proposed it to Hannah who, once she was assured it did not involve magic, agreed to the unorthodox treatment.

"Just one thing," Bunny told Tanya and Quentin, taking them to one side. "This is going to involve me drinking some of Hannah's blood. Not much," she assured them when Quentin got that look again. "Just enough to activate the necessary glands. I don't make a habit of it - at least, not anymore - because I can start to lose myself and get a little...`excited`. Pure blood - pure human like all you Knights, pure elf, whatever - is particularly intoxicating. So, if I seem to be acting strange and drinking more than necessary, you'll need to pull me off, because in Hannah's current condition that would most likely be fatal. If it does happen, I won't come quietly, but I'd really appreciate it if you didn't kill me or break any bones when you knock me out."

"Thou art serious?" Sir Quentin wondered.

"Deadly serious."

Tanya raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry," Bunny apologised with a sheepish grin. "Bad choice of words."

Bernice prepared herself, mentally, and all visitors left Hannah's bedchamber except the other two Knights.

She began to drink what was necessary, bracing herself for the jolt, the horrific pleasure of this vile act. When it came, she knew she had to resist like never before. This was important - to Hannah and to Bunny herself. She wanted to prove that her vampiric abilities and sumorityl nature could be put to a positive, constructive use. This was her chance and it was vital she did not succumb to her base, predatory instincts that would soon kick in... Any moment...n--

As it turned out, however, the `now` never happened. The very absence of a shock was a shock in of itself. It was a bit like someone bracing themselves to dive into a lake or pool that they were convinced would be freezing cold, but when they hit the water, it was actually very pleasant and not at all like they expected. So Bunny was able to keep enough control to do the job without the need for violence.

It was puzzling. Her self-control wasn't even all that stretched. Had she really come so far? It was a dangerous assumption and one she was reluctant to believe. Like a man who becomes addicted to certain intoxicating herbs, the greatest danger of relapse was in that moment when he considered himself cured. In truth, there could be no cure for Bernice Ardra. She was what she was and that would never change, but she could - and did - aspire to higher things. Redemption she had once called it. As good a word as any, she supposed, but in truth what she wanted was nothing more or less than a place in civilisation. She was different, certainly. Unique, perhaps. But was she not also equal? So she was created in a laboratory, not a mother's womb. Did that negate her right to exist? To live her life? Did the life of Lady Hannah Collins - pure blood human and Knight of Paladina - automatically have a higher value than that of a force grown human-vampire mongrel like herself? Way back in her father's cage - a lifetime ago from Bunny's perspective - she chose to believe that was not true. Should people - and she chose to believe she was a person, not an animal - be judged by what they are or by what they do? She believed the latter.

Her right to life and freedom was as valid as any elf's, but she knew full well that however far she thought she had come, she still had a long way to go before she could earn her place in civilisation...assuming there was a civilisation left after Niltsiar and her pet monsters had finished with it. Still, for today she had achieved what she set out to do: Hannah's wounds bled no more and Bernice was in control of herself.

Tanya moved over to Bernice to check she was alright, shattering her introspection. "Adds new meaning to the phrase, `licking your wounds`," the Knight remarked.

Bernice grinned, although doing so in vampire mode with blood around her mouth didn't quite have the desired effect.

* * * * *

As for Jayne, she was training alone, somewhere. She wasn't exactly life and soul, even by Eilidh's standards. One might even say antisocial. But she was loyal and dependable with an uncanny knack of being there whenever she was needed.

So that left the three of them sitting in the Wise One's home: Eilidh, Granite and Toli, gradually coming to terms with that contradictory feeling of a cramped little hut and limitless dimensions. Eilidh ignored that particular conundrum, however, to focus on the task at hand. She wanted some answers from this wise old sage.

“Ah, welcome!” the Wise One intoned. “Your quest was a success, I trust?”

“Actually, there's some debate over that,” Eilidh replied.

“Start from the beginning. Tell me everything.”

The Wise One listened intently to Eilidh's story. Sometimes, Granite or Toli would fill in a detail that Eilidh might have skipped over, and the sage occasionally stopped her to ask a question or clarify some obscure point. The young woman also included an account of Rochelle's fruitful trip as well as, with Prince Garald's permission, news of the state of the empire, particularly the destruction of Merlyon. The Wise One was clearly distressed and saddened by this news, but Eilidh pressed him nonetheless. There would be time for grieving later, if they survived.

“So, which key was it?” Eilidh demanded. “Was that whole crypt thing meaningless? Were we really out there risking life and limb just to get you some tea while the world turns to ashes around us? Or was there actually some purpose to the whole `Great Key` thing? Which is the truth?”

“Sometimes truth is difficult to recognise. Perhaps both are true,” suggested the Wise One, “or maybe neither. Maybe the key to stopping Niltsiar lies in some other aspect of that quest. Did you ever consider that?”

Eilidh rolled her eyes. “Riddles,” she groaned. “I come here for answers and you give me riddles. If something is important enough, why not just come out and say it?”

“Some things are too important to be left in plain sight,” the sage countered. Then, catching Eilidh's expression, he added, “alright, you want plain speech? I'll give you plain speech. You want a simple answer to your question? How can you stop Niltsiar? Simple answer, four words: I do not know.”

“WHAT?” All three companions demanded, simultaneously.

“But-- but--” Toli spluttered, not knowing how to begin.

“Some Wise One ye turned out to be!” Granite mocked. Standing up, he headed straight for the door. “I have nae the patience fer this and if ye've any sense, the pair of ye'll leave with me right now!”

With that, the dwarf stormed out.

“Go keep an eye on him, please, Toli,” Eilidh asked her friend. “I'll be out shortly.”

“Alright, Eilidh,” the hobbit agreed, reluctantly. “I--” she began, but seemed to think better of it and simply left.

“Poor Toli,” Eilidh sighed, shaking her head. “Time was when you couldn't shut her up. Now she barely says two words. She lived in Merlyon a long time. She lost a lot of friends thanks to Niltsiar's temper tantrum!”

One last time, she appealed to the Wise One, “Is there really nothing you can do?”

“I don't have the patience for this,” he said.

“Charming!” Eilidh gasped, furious. “Well if that's your attitude, I won't bother you any further!” She threw her bag of Kij vine cuttings on the table. “Enjoy your tea.”

She turned to leave.

“Eh? Oh, no, wait!” the Wise One stopped her. “I didn't mean that! I was just thinking out loud about what your dwarf friend said. `I don't have the patience for this`.”

Eilidh narrowed her eyes, catching something in the sage's voice. “What about it?” she asked, half returning to her seat.

The sage waved it aside. “Oh nothing really. I was just thinking that...”

“Yes?” Eilidh moved a step closer.

“Well, it seems to me that patience is a great key, too, is it not?”

Eilidh sat down again. “Alright, you've got me alone and you've got my attention. So let's get on with this, shall we? Now that you've got what you wanted.”

The Wise One smiled a crooked smile. “Is that what I wanted?”

Eilidh folded her arms, defensively. “Oh no, I'm not playing that game. You're trying to teach me something. That much I get. I'm listening and ready to learn.”

“Ready, are you? Ah, not quite, young lady. Not quite.” He wagged his finger, sternly. “You came in here twice burdened. Two bags you had in your possession; one you have given to me, the other you cling to still. What I have to teach can be learned only with both hands free.”

“But I'm not carrying anything else,” protested the confused Catalyst.

“In one hand you carried the bag of kij vines - thank you, by the way - and in the other you carried something considerably weightier: Preconception. With a heavy dose of expectation, too, I'd say. Be honest with yourself, Eilidh. What did you think I was going to tell you? How to forge a great sword imbued with Ancient magic? Or perhaps I'd produce a magic ring from beneath my hat and tell you to drop it into a volcano? Maybe I know the location of a powerful ancient object - a cup, a chalice that could set everything right with a single drop of its contents?”

Eilidh blushed. The Wise One was right. She did have a lot of preconceptions and expectations.

“Do not blame me because I have not fulfilled an image that only ever existed in your mind. I have no obligation to live up to your expectations. `Wise One` is a preconception in itself. It is others who have given me that appellation. For myself, I am simply `me`. I recognise the threat of Niltsiar for what it is and what knowledge I possess I am willing to use to defend this world, because in doing so I protect my own life and the things that I value.”

“Enlightened self-interest,” Eilidh agreed. “The cornerstone of reason. Your life is the most precious thing you own and therefore it is rational to protect it. You are but one man with an impressive but ultimately finite knowledge. To listen and learn from you makes sense; to expect you to snap your fingers and produce a nice, tidy solution is unrealistic and irrational. I understand. When I first came here, I was seeking

knowledge. Then I grew impatient and started expecting answers instead. Consider my preconceptions dropped. What knowledge do you possess that might help us?"

"There is no ring of power, no grail cup, no object in this world - or any other as far as I know - that can defeat Niltsiar," the Wise One told her. "There is no magic wand, no enchanted staff and no spell that will stop her."

"Are you saying it's hopeless?" Eilidh asked.

"There you go again," the Wise One tutted. "Preconceptions and expectations. Why should the world work according to what you hope? Reality is reality. Hoping that there are only three enemy soldiers over the next hill will not help you if, in reality, there are three thousand. Wishing you had a magic sword with a pretty name that could cleave Niltsiar in two, will not make one appear in your hand. If you are to stand any chance of finding a way to stop Niltsiar, you must let go of your futile hopes, your wishes, your expectations. You must start with what exists and go from there. Hope is not a strategy."

"Hopes are merely wishes and reality does not change because one might wish it were different," Eilidh agreed. "Another central tenet of reason that I have lived by all my life. Strange that I should forget it now."

"Never mind, my girl," the Wise One soothed. "It is a stressful situation, after all."

"But that's when reason becomes the most essential and valuable tool. It's the thing that guides our actions. It requires us to use our heads, to think. To accept what our senses and our minds tell us, and ignore unfounded beliefs and fantasies. The application of clear, rational thought is the greatest and most important weapon we can ever possess. I won't forget again, I promise."

"Good, because in this one respect, you and Niltsiar are both operating on a level playing field." He held up a finger for emphasis. "No matter how powerful she is, she must deal with the same reality that you do. Nothing can change that. She cannot do the impossible."

"Now, you tell me something," continued the Wise One, changing tack. "You said in your account that you invoked the name of the *Du y Kharia* on more than one occasion. Do you really believe that's you?"

Eilidh raised her eyebrows. "Now who's got the preconceptions and expectations? If you're looking for some grand leap of faith that I'm the legendary *Du y Kharia*, come to save the world at the time foretold in prophecy, I'm afraid you're going to be disappointed."

"So you think you're not the *Du y Kharia*. And yet you claimed you were."

"So I lied and how can I possibly live with myself?" Eilidh finished, sarcastically. She shrugged. "If telling a lie will save the world, I'll tell it and sleep very well, thank you. But no, I'm neither dismissing nor embracing the title. It's just a title; an appellation like `Wise One`. My belief or otherwise does not change reality. If invoking that title will open doors for me, then it's a tool like any other and I will use it as I choose. My life is not governed by some title handed to me by fate; there is no such thing as prophecy; I am nobody's Chosen One. I am the one who chooses my path. My future is my choice, no-one else's!"

"Choice: that's another great key, I suppose," she considered. "A key to what, though? OK, so we don't have an object or spell that can stop her. We don't have a ship than can take us to the moon, either. Listing things we don't have isn't very helpful. So what will be helpful? Where do I go from here?"

“Good points, rational questions, all of them,” the Wise One approved with just a hint of pride. “Very well. There is one final quest for you to undertake, Eilidh, should you `choose` to accept it.” Eilidh ignored the friendly jibe. “If you are willing to take on the mantle of *Du y Kharia*, then perhaps you should choose to do what the legend says: determine the location of the Well of Life - the source of all magic on Majaos. Find it and travel there.”

“And do what?”

“I have no idea,” The Wise One admitted. “Perhaps you will be inspired. As you have said: you must choose your own future. I have advised you as best I can, but I have no right to tell you what to do. I merely offer a suggestion.”

Eilidh knew this was a silly question, but she asked it anyway. “I don't suppose you know where it is, the Well of Life?”

“It is not a physical location. It is a place of pure magic. You will get there by means of an Inter-Realm Gateway.”

“What's that?”

The Wise One gave a wry smile. “No idea; I just made it up. I wanted something better than `magic door`.”

“Well whatever you want to call it, do you know where that is?”

“It's at the central convergence of all magical nodes.”

“Did you make that up, too?”

“Certainly not!”

“So what does it mean?”

“I'm sorry, my dear, but I've told you: I don't have all the answers. I cannot lead you from A to B to C. Your friend - Rochelle is it? - has some Ancient magical texts. Perhaps you will be able to figure it out from those references.”

“Research. The quest for knowledge,” Eilidh accepted. Getting up out of her seat, she said, “Well, if there's nothing more, I'd better go. I've got a lot of studying to do.”

“Actually, there is one small detail you should probably be aware of...”

“Go on.”

“Niltsiar will be seeking it, too. The Well of Life is the object of her obsession.”

Eilidh gasped. She could scarcely believe she had almost left such a fundamental question unasked. “What does she want, Wise One?”

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