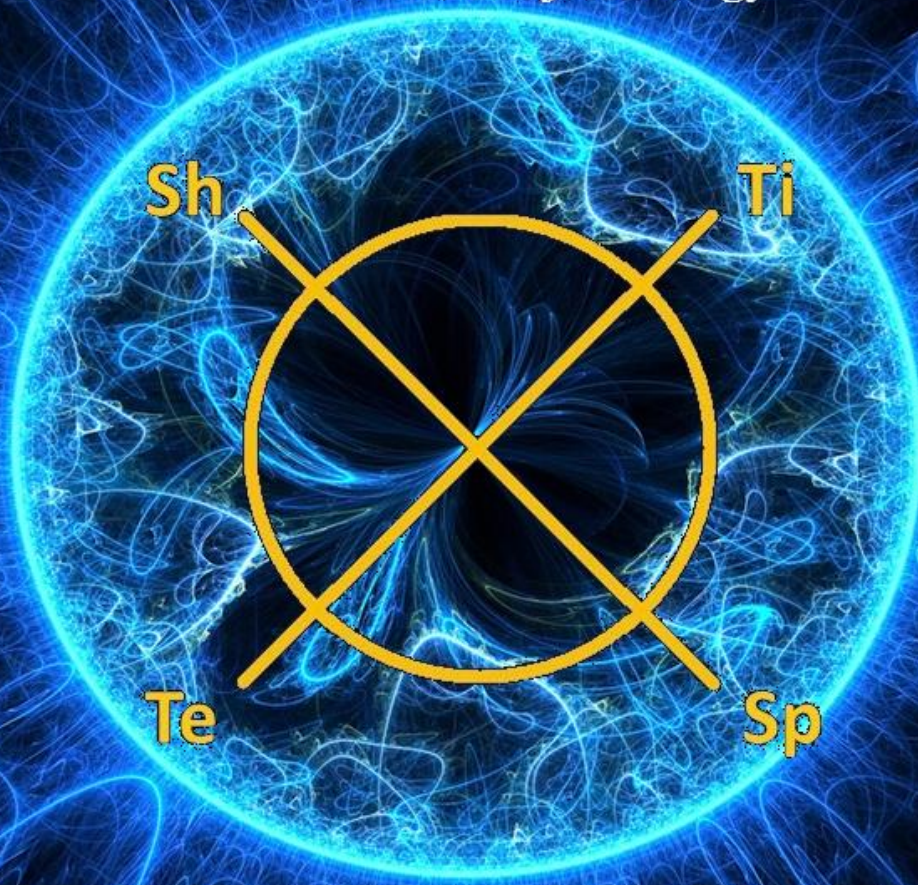


# Chosen

Book 1 of the Majaos Trilogy



Gary Stringer

## **Chosen**

(Majaos Trilogy Book 1)

Majaos is a world of magic. Magic is Life. It flows all around, infusing almost every living thing. Not that everyone is a professional mage. The people of Majaos – the elves and dwarves, hobbits and gnomes, orcs and humans – are diverse in their aptitude for magic as for anything else.

On the continent of Mythallen, Techmagic devices bring light and warmth, comfort and security to homes and businesses everywhere. But now the world is threatened by powerful new magic. Old magic. Magic that should be impossible.

An Ancient threat has returned. Hiding in plain sight for years, she has learned everything she needs while the world has forgotten its history. At last she has made her move and war has begun.

Eilidh is a bright, resourceful student of magic who believes in solving problems with her intelligence and just wants a quiet life. She hates Prophecy and has no real power of her own, yet she is Chosen to save the world. How can she possibly succeed?

Maybe she can begin by saving a single life.

## Prologue

The streets of Merlyon, the capital city of Mythallen, named after the Great Merlyn of legend, were arranged in a wheel-type pattern, the main streets forming concentric circles and eight straight radial lines like spokes. The first of these circles served as a boundary between Central Merlyon and the eight outer districts. Each of these districts was dedicated to one of the Nine Secrets of Magic. The Elemental Secrets - Earth, Fire, Air and Water - sat on the cardinal compass points, while the Ethereal Secrets - Shadow, Time, Spirit and Techmagic - occupied the ordinal points in between. Central Merlyon was mainly dedicated to the Ninth Secret, the Secret of Life, representing the way this Secret sat at the heart of all other magic.

A young woman, dressed in pristine white robes with red hood and cuffs, walked along one of the streets of Central Merlyon, reflecting on the day's events. Today had been Graduation Day, and so the city was filled with more than the usual activity. It was evening – the time when daytime businesses closed and night-time businesses opened. A time of change. A time of ordered chaos. The young woman stopped at her favourite market stall to buy a warm blueberry pie and as she waited in line, she glanced once more at her Graduation Scroll. It had taken them two goes, but they had finally got her name right. “It’s pronounced Ay-Lee, like Hayley without the ‘H’,” she had told them, “but it’s spelt E.I.L.I.D.H.” Her mother’s name had been similarly unusual, she knew. She liked her name, even though it was sometimes a pain to explain to others. It was different, unique, individual.

She paid for her pie and thanked the stall holder, and after savouring her first bite, she continued walking alone. She was always alone. Eilidh had never known family, and she couldn’t honestly claim to have any friends to speak of. She knew she wasn’t pretty or funny or any of the other things that made a person popular, and even before ‘the Incident’ as she liked to call it, Eilidh had never quite ‘got’ the social thing. She simply wasn’t the social type, preferring a good book to idle gossip. As for small talk, the entire point of non-relevant conversation escaped her. When Eilidh had something interesting to say, she would say it, but it seemed to her that the only purpose served by small talk was to fill silence with noise. Eilidh liked silence. She liked a peaceful, quiet life.

Since early childhood, she had been cloistered at Merlyon's Church of Life, learning to use her Life Gift as one born to the Secret of Life - a Catalyst. A mage of sorts. A mage with no real power of her own, but with the ability by birth and by training to convert magic from its dangerous raw state into the safe, usable form known as Life. Without a Catalyst to Grant Life to them, the mages of the other eight Secrets were extremely limited.

All Eilidh’s other classmates who had graduated today, were out together as a group. No doubt they were revelling in the wondrous adventures they would enjoy as personal Catalysts to up-and-coming archmages. Every single one of them would be convinced that they were destined to be the magical support to the greatest wizards, warlocks and sorcerers of their generation. Idiots! What made them think they were so special? She had even heard one fellow student make the outlandish claim that he was sure to be the legendary *Du y Kharia*.

The mythical Well of Life was said in religious terms, to be the gift of Natus, the God of Magic, to the people of this world called Majaos. In physical terms, it was the source of all magic. Prophecy held that someday a Catalyst adventurer would discover it, led there somehow by Natus himself. In the language known as Pre-Ancient Elven, that Catalyst was termed ‘*Du y Kharia*’, translated into modern language as the Chosen One.

Eilidh rejected the whole notion of the Chosen One. It was fallacy born of the delusion of prophecy. In centuries past there had been mages who called themselves Prophets, but that was just a pretentious term for Temporal mages who extrapolated possible future events from known facts with the aid of magic. Truly being Chosen by Destiny would be a violation of free will and there was nothing more important than that.

*Still, let them have their dreams of adventure if they want them,* Eilidh thought, as she made way for a noble elf lady who looked at her like she was something unpleasant she had almost stepped in. *Just as long they leave me out of it.*

The elf's reaction was nothing new to the young Catalyst. She got them all the time. It was, she supposed, the price of fame, if `fame` was the right word. It seemed not to matter how long ago the Incident occurred, it was still newsworthy and Eilidh's graduation had been the perfect excuse to drag it all out again. All she had done was tell the truth – a truth people did not want to hear. From a certain point of view, the response had been proportional: an inconvenient truth revealed in exchange.

She didn't care. She used to when she was younger, but no more. Not for a long time. She possessed the Life Gift and she knew the joy of working to maintain the delicate balance in magic. Eilidh had been delighted to be offered a research position at the church following her graduation. There, she could be left alone to study and learn about the detailed workings of magic with the minimum of contact with anybody else. In this way, she would further the cause of magical balance without the dramas of adventure.

Adventure never did anybody any good, so far as Eilidh could tell. Adventure wasn't fun and romantic; it was being terrified, in pain and not knowing from one moment to the next whether one was going to live or die. As far as she was concerned, her peers were welcome to their dreams and their adventures. She was planning on a quiet drink and an early night before returning to the church in the morning for quiet reflection at the start of her quiet working life.

Eilidh had barely finished her pie, when before she could act or even think, she was surrounded by a flurry of black robes. Then darkness claimed her...

\* \* \* \* \*

...When she regained consciousness, Eilidh lay on a sofa, in a dark, candle-lit chamber. The colour of the sofa was not exactly to her taste: a kind of green that made her feel somewhat queasy, especially when her head already felt as if her brain had imploded. 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 she tried to prop herself up by leaning against this cushion, she could have sworn the sofa let out a stifled cry, but she put this down to her aching head.

At that moment, a door appeared in the wall in front of her and opened, apparently by itself. A figure entered, wearing predominantly black robes that identified the individual as an Enforcer. The red hood and cuffs declared that he, like Eilidh, was aligned with the Balance. The door closed silently behind the figure - again, apparently by itself - and promptly disappeared again. As a Catalyst, Eilidh could see and sense the flow of Life in the room change as a result of a spell. The walls now glowed but it wasn't just illumination but a shield spell.

*Clearly, this Enforcer wants privacy,* the Catalyst deduced.

In an effort to slow her beating heart, she began breathing deeply, focussing her attention on the seal of the Council of Magic and the declaration beneath: *Majaos y Natus* – Magic is Life.

The flow of Life around the room changed again as a result of his use of magic, and the room lit up. There followed a deathly silence, during which she had the distinct impression he was studying her intently, although the Enforcer gave no visible sign of this. He just stood before her, motionless, his face completely shrouded in the darkness of his hood, hands clasped before him, as was proper for one of his order. The Enforcers were highly disciplined, trained to use silence to emphasise their complete control over themselves and everything around them. This, in combination with their black robes, helped to instil a sense of fear and respect in others. The archmage knew that he could learn in a few moments of silence, everything he needed to know about the young Catalyst sat before him, much more efficiently than hours, days of interrogation.

Eilidh had been sitting in silence for what seemed like hours, but was in fact, no more than a handful of minutes, before she realised the great disrespect she was showing by remaining seated in the archmage's presence. When she made to rise, however, mumbling something incoherent by way of apology or excuse for her behaviour, a slight hand movement from the Enforcer caused her to sit again and keep her mouth shut.

Suddenly, the Enforcer spoke to her, which was almost more nerve-wracking than the silence.

“Welcome Eilidh,” he said. The use of her name made her choke, but she stifled it instantly, as the Enforcer's forefinger twitched slightly. “I am Gamaliel,” he continued, “Chief Archmage of the Red Alignment of Balance, and I have something very important to discuss with you.”

At a gesture of his hand, Eilidh found herself seated on a business-like chair at an equally business-like desk. Gamaliel was sat opposite her, hands clasped before him once more. The sofa disappeared at a word, and when he spoke again, it was to her.

“What I am about to tell you, you will recount to no-one.” The use of the word “will” and not “must” did not surprise her.

“Of course, Master,” Eilidh replied, having found her voice again.

“You will undoubtedly be aware of the...” Gamaliel hesitated “...problems which the cities of Mythallen are facing, with the sudden invasion of...” he hesitated again “...so-called monsters of chaos.”

“Except Merlyon, Master,” Eilidh pointed out, enthusiastically, pleased to be talking about something she understood, and keen to show that she was far from ignorant in worldly magical matters, despite being little more than an apprentice. “Our capital's permanent magical shield protects us from invasion, even by things like that!” Eilidh said this with such a flourish of the hands that she nearly sent a bright orange paperweight - which she could have sworn hadn't been there a minute ago - flying across the room. Eilidh blushed, opened her mouth, and then shut it again, feeling very awkward once more. She wished she could learn to talk without moving her hands so much. This was not the first time it had got her into trouble.

“Indeed, you are correct,” continued the Enforcer, as if nothing had happened. “At least, you would be, under normal circumstances. However, if circumstances were normal, you would not be here now.” Then, seeing Eilidh flush even further, he said, “Let us dispense with formalities.” With

that, he pulled his hood from his head, so that his full features could be seen. The golden hair, the sharp, angular bone structure, and the pointed ears: it all marked him as an elf. But there was something else; something distinctly non-elven...and something in his aura of magic was off, too...

“Yes,” said Gamaliel, “you are intelligent and perceptive, Eilidh. I am, indeed, more than a typical elven mage.” Eilidh was unsure whether he had read her mind or just her face. “I am a half-elven cleric-mage,” he informed her.

There were no religious symbols embroidered on his robes, which was unusual. However, Eilidh knew that some Enforcer-clerics felt that such detail detracted from the effect of their plain black robes and made do with simply wearing their clerical symbol on a necklace chain.

With a hand gesture, Gamaliel caused a wine bottle and two crystal glasses to appear and hover above the table. It was nothing special - just simple household magic. It barely counted as a real use of Life. “Please, you will join me with a drink.” It was a statement, not a question, and without waiting for a response, Gamaliel glanced at the wine bottle, which obediently poured some of its contents into each of the glasses. The bottle continued to hover in position, while the glasses floated over to the mouths of their recipients. After sharing the drink in silence, the bottle and glasses disappeared again, much to the apparent annoyance of the paperweight.

Eilidh put that ridiculous observation down to drinking the wine too fast. She did feel better for it, though.

“As you say,” Gamaliel continued, as if there had been no interruption, “Merlyon's shield protects our capital from harm of any sort, usually. How long that will remain true, however, I would not care to say. The magic is failing, Eilidh. But that is not what I brought you here to discuss.” Seeing the multitude of questions and emotions on her face, he held up a hand to silence any she may have spoken, and said, ominously, “Let me start at the beginning...”

\* \* \* \* \*

“A little over two hundred years ago, before the end of the Tech Wars, a Favoured Servant of Mortress found a young human girl of about sixteen summers, who had wandered into one of Avidon City's Dark Temples. Her parents were never traced, so the Cleric adopted her. The girl's name was Niltsiar. Niltsiar was a Dark-aligned mage, born with the Life Gift in the Secret of Spirit; in fact, one of the last generation of necromancers to be born.”

One of the final blows of the Tech Wars, Eilidh knew, saw every single necromancer – indeed everyone with an affinity for Spirit magic – mysteriously died. Since then, inexplicably, no more necromancers had been born.

“After hurtling up the ranks of that obscure order, she disappeared, never to be seen again,” Gamaliel told her.

“About five years later,” he continued, “a young woman of about eighteen summers arrived in the city of Shakaran. No one knew where she came from, but there were no apparent suspicious circumstances, so at eighteen, if she wanted to keep her childhood a secret, it was entirely her own business and no investigation was ever conducted. This girl, curiously named Niltsiar, was a powerful White-aligned mage with the Life Gift in the Secret of Earth. She was very powerful, completing the conjuror and magician grades in a fraction of the normal time. She rose up the wizard ranks, with

equal efficiency. Everyone assumed that she would take her place among the most prominent and successful mages of Mythallen. Before she could do so, however, the wizardess disappeared, and was never found.

“Since then, four similar curious incidents have occurred and I now believe that they all are somehow connected. These Niltsiar women had, up to this point, appeared in each of Shakaran and Avidon once, Keothara, and Baltacha twice, but never in Merlyon. Each one possessed the Life Gift in one of six of the Nine Magical Secrets, omitting Techmagic, Life and Fire. There is nothing obviously connecting these girls, other than the name - after all, they have appeared over two centuries, with different Life Gifts and each of the three alignments has been observed. Indeed, most of the other mages of the Higher Council are not at all convinced that any connection exists. I say they are wrong. I think that it is precisely this ignorant disbelief that has allowed recent events to occur.”

“Forgive me, Master,” Eilidh ventured, “but what connection could there possibly be? Sometimes a remarkable coincidence is just that: a remarkable coincidence. Perhaps the name Niltsiar is known to some people in legend. It could merely be a case of a mother naming her powerfully Life Gifted daughter after an obscure mystical figure. At the same time, it is not uncommon for such highly Life Gifted mages to disappear on some quest and get themselves killed, leaving an orphan child behind. The Church of Life here in Merlyon has a memorial to Catalysts who were formerly trained there before being attached to such powerful mages - Catalysts who disappeared without trace. I would say, with the greatest of respect, that it is simply a hazard of adventure. It is a common mistake to see connections where none exist. A mistake that anyone can make - even great mages such as yourself.”

“True,” Gamaliel allowed, “but it is also a common mistake to assume there is no connection simply because one does not know what it is.”

“Then perhaps if you could tell me what has happened to make you believe in this connection, a fresh perspective might be useful. Sometimes one can be blinded by one's own superior knowledge.” Eilidh prayed that Gamaliel wouldn't think of that as arrogant presumption. That's how it sounded to her own ears, but she got the impression that Gamaliel appreciated straight talking.

Certainly, he didn't seem to mind, the way he brought his story up to date.

“A few years ago, a woman in her mid-twenties arrived in Merlyon, born with the Life Gift in the Secret of Fire. Yes, she had great power, but such a thing is not uncommon with Fire mages. Her name was Niltsiar, and she soon became a high-ranking White War Witch. It came as no surprise when she became leader, or `Guardienne` of the White Mages.”

Eilidh was well aware of the official titles for the leaders of the three divisions of magic: Guardian/Guardienne of the White Mages of Light, Master/Mistress of the Black Mages of the Dark and simply Chief Archmage of the Red Mages of Balance. She knew the names of all the top ranking mages, even with the recent wholesale changes, but she never planned to be important enough to be worthy of their notice. Why Gamaliel should be interested in her now, she could not imagine, but she dared not be so rude as to ask for an explanation. She was his guest until he decided otherwise. That fact didn't thrill her or scare her; it was merely a fact.

“Her In her advance,” he continued, “she overtook both Kylan, who had been expected to remain Guardian for a few years yet, and Merlana - a very distant, female descendant of the Great Merlyn - who we all thought would naturally succeed him.”

Eilidh tried not to show her derision at the bloodline claim. It wasn't her place to question the Prime Magus, but she had done a study on this very thing during her church training – it was the thing that had started all the trouble. Eilidh had produced a detailed thesis that, among other things, demonstrated that if every mage who claimed to have Merlyn blood in them really did have Merlyn blood, then Merlyn and each of his descendants must have had an average of approximately fifty children, at least half of which must have possessed the Life Gift.

To her, it had merely been an academic exercise. Somehow, it had transformed into a political and social weapon, with many proud families accusing others of faking bloodlines, of lying or buying their social standing. Feuds escalated into open hostility and Eilidh, already something of a social outsider at school, was shunned, bullied and even beaten. Even those who might have been sympathetic were afraid to be associated with her, lest they get the same treatment. In the end, someone hit on a way to calm things down in the capital: discredit the source. Suddenly, certain inconvenient truths about Eilidh's origins came to light and the news spread like wildfire.

The story took on a life of its own. Truth became tainted with half-truths, exaggerations and bare-faced lies and she was tainted along with them. Her inherited condition was now, apparently, the touch of death. Still, being ostracised had its advantages – at least they stopped hurting her. They didn't dare. They might catch something!

Until Graduation Day's news, things had calmed down a bit. There were even a number of fellow students with whom she could have a professional discussion, but that was as far as it went.

Thinking of professional discussions reminded Eilidh of where she was and she admonished herself to pay attention.

“It was no surprise when Niltsiar challenged my direct superior,” Gamaliel was saying, “for his position as Prime Magus of the Council of Mages. This is normal procedure, of course, but what happened during that challenge was far from normal.

“I was one of the three adjudicators; the highest ranking mage from each Alignment, after the two contenders. This was necessary because, as a White Mage, Niltsiar's challenge was to be fought under a magic suppression field, to avoid any real injuries or death.

“Niltsiar opted to gradually wear him down, simply blocking the best her opponent throw at her. There was no doubt that she would win, but it would take time. Frankly bored, I began to practise my clerical Anti-Magic shield, and I was very pleased with myself when it held and I could feel no magic penetrating it.”

Eilidh understood what he meant. A magic suppression field was used in many magical contests to make them non-lethal, but one could still sense the flow of Life. How else could one keep score? But a cleric's Anti-Magic shield would have blocked all trace of that Life flow.

Gamaliel continued, “My self-satisfaction was cut short with a blinding flash and before I knew what was happening, there were death cries all around me. Then my world went black...”



“...I remained unconscious for several days, with healers tending me constantly. When I finally awoke, I added my own clerical abilities, to speed the healing process. A couple of days later, when I had recovered my full strength, I received a visit from the Acting Master of Dark Magic, Drizdar.”

Eilidh had heard of him. Though he was an elf dedicated to dark magic, she'd heard he had a penchant for vaporising anyone who called him a `dark elf`.

“Drizdar had been the natural person to assume control of the Council during the crisis, being the highest ranking mage not to attend the contest. He commands a natural respect both on his own merits and through his reputation as the former apprentice of Akar-Sel.”

Akar-Sel had been a supremely powerful renegade Warlock, who was known to be the chief architect of the terrible atrocities of the Tech Wars. Techmages designed, created and controlled magical devices, rather than using magic directly. This set them apart among the Nine Secrets. Something that led to misunderstanding, distrust and ultimately war. Although Akar-Sel died two centuries before Eilidh's generation was even born, it was history that could never, must never be forgotten. Akar-Sel turned out to be a double agent, stirring up trouble between the Techmagi and mages of the other Secrets. If not for him and his followers, the war may never have happened. He was tried for his crimes after the war and sentenced to the torment of the Turning. This spell, known only to the Executioner, entrapped his living soul within dead stone. His soul would continue to live this living death for eternity. The Turning spell was irreversible and reserved as punishment for only the most powerful renegade mages who were so dangerous that even death could not be guaranteed to stop them. It had been employed no more than a handful of times in the entire history of Mythalen.

The horrific images in Eilidh's mind made her feel nauseous, but she fought it down to reply, “Yes, I know the history of Akar-Sel, Master.”

“Gamaliel.”

“Pardon?”

“Gamaliel,” repeated the Enforcer, with a slight smile but still a serious tone of voice. “I said we would dispense with formalities and that includes titles. Between you and me, I never much cared for titles: I think they create unnecessary problems. Alas, they tend to be an unfortunate consequence of prominent positions, but I would appreciate it if you could refrain from using them.”

“I am honoured, Master - sorry - Gamaliel,” she answered. “It's just hard to get used to.”

Eilidh had the strange impression of the paperweight giggling at this point, but she chose to ignore it.

Gamaliel's smile flickered for a moment and then disappeared, leaving the usual Enforcer impassive stare. He continued, “Drizdar had immediately sent for the best Chronomagi in Mythalen. With the aid of about a dozen Catalysts, they managed to create a Time Image of the disturbing events. Let me show you.” Gamaliel gestured to a large, rectangular screen on wall – a Techmagic device that could display moving images. With a wave of his hand, the device began replaying the attack, along with an analysis of the Life flow. Eilidh knew her Catalyst training should be more than sufficient to identify the spells used in any contest, and yet how Niltsiar managed to dispel the magic suppression field was a complete mystery. What came next made even less sense. Niltsiar cast an

Enforcer's Nullmagic on everyone else and finally, cast a witch's Raistlin's Revenge spell, apparently killing or stoning everyone else, before teleporting away. And all without the aid of a Catalyst.

"But that's impossible!" Eilidh gasped. "A witch can't use Nullmagic, and no mage can expend that much Life without a Catalyst to maintain their Life Store!"

"I know," Gamaliel agreed. "But the evidence is clear. The only reason I survived is thanks to my clerical shield. When it was hit by Niltsiar's power, my shield tried to absorb the energy, failed, collapsed and channelled the remainder into my body. Although the spell itself couldn't harm me, being hit by all that energy all but killed me, anyway. Fortunately."

"Fortunately?" Eilidh wondered.

"It apparently convinced Niltsiar that she had killed me. If she'd thought I was still alive, I wouldn't have been for long."

Eilidh nodded. "Of course, even Catalysts can't detect Cleric magic. It's too different. That's why it doesn't show up on the analysis."

"Precisely," Gamaliel concurred.

"This is incredible, Gamaliel. I knew there had been a lot of changes in Magical Government, recently, but I never imagined this was the reason."

"We've been trying to keep things under wraps to give ourselves time to plan, but now with the influx of these chaos creatures, we have no choice but to act. So far the gateways to their plane of reality have eluded us, so we must go to war. After some...`persuasion`...Drizdar has agreed that I should become Prime Magus, while he takes on the mantle of Supreme War Master and Merlana assumes Guardianship of White Mages of Light."

Merlana's part made sense, Eilidh thought. Since she had been only third ranked White mage before the attack, while her Black and Red counterparts were both second, she could not assume leadership. However, if Drizdar had studied under Akar-Sel, Eilidh found it hard to imagine how anyone could `persuade` him to do anything. It was all very interesting to Eilidh's analytical mind, but she still didn't understand what any of this had to do with her.

"You have listened patiently," Gamaliel commended Eilidh, when he turned off the screen. At some point during the display, the paperweight had disappeared and in its place stood a turquoise blue and ruby red lamp with a tangerine shade, which she only noticed because she nearly knocked it over.

"Patience is good and I commend you for it, but doubtless you are wondering what all this has to do with you, beyond playing your small part in the war effort."

"It would be a lie to deny it," Eilidh agreed, carefully.

"Very well, I will tell you. We are planning a great ceremony to mark my inauguration. Not for vanity, but for strategy. There will be many fine words of victory and glory, of honour and triumph, but they are all just so much window dressing. It is all supposed to focus Niltsiar's attentions on the war effort and, more specifically, on me. I want her to know that she did not kill me." His voice grew louder. "I want her to know that she has erred! I want her to worry about what that error is going

to cost her!” Reaching a climax, he roared, “In organising the forces of war, I will be making a lot of noise and attracting a great deal of attention! So much so,” his voice dropped suddenly, to little more than a whisper, “that Niltsiar will not notice a small party of adventurers, going quietly about a quest to secretly discover how to stop her.”

Eyes wide, Eilidh gasped in sudden understanding of the brilliance of the plan, “So in a way, this entire war is--”

--A massive deception, yes,” Gamaliel concluded. “Meanwhile, this small party will investigate the clues about Niltsiar, discover her weakness and strike while her attention is diverted.”

“That is truly fascinating, Master, but I’m sorry, I still don’t understand why this is any of my business.”

“This small party must have a leader,” Gamaliel explained. “That leader is to be you...”

## Chapter 1

*... That leader is to be you.*

Eilidh could still hear those words echo inside her mind, even though it had been several hours since Gamaliel had said them.

“So many people dream of being sent on a mysterious quest of vital importance to King and Country,” she grumbled to herself, “but not me. If he wanted to send a newly qualified Catalyst, why couldn't he have sent Peter or Si'lana?”

In fact, just about any of her peer group would have jumped at the chance. But instead, for reasons known only to Gamaliel himself, he had chosen Eilidh, “and that's the reality of it. That's what I have to deal with,” she reprimanded herself. “Reality is reality and no amount of wishing will change it...but it's just so...so...” Her head hurt so much, she couldn't even think of the right words.

“Pull yourself together,” she ordered herself. She often talked to herself – it wasn't as if anybody else was interested in talking to her. “Like it or not, I am the leader of a small party of adventurers that doesn't exist yet, that is supposed to go on a quest to find something or someone, I know not what or who. I have to search the entire realm, if necessary, maybe beyond Mythallen's shores, out over the ocean. But I've only ever left Merlyon once, and that was only to go on a day trip to Baltacha with the church when I was about five years old. My party of adventurers must follow me of their own free will, and yet I'm not supposed to tell them anything - not that I know much myself!

“Oh, this is all just too much,” she muttered to herself, irritably. “It's all very well, the Leader of the Council holding a window dressing ceremony and telling me that I should go home and get some sleep! How am I supposed to sleep, when my head feels worse than when I was abducted?”

Eilidh got up then, deciding to clean her novice quarters, pack everything that she might need, and tidy away all her possessions that she had to leave behind. The church would keep it all in safe storage for her until she returned. If she returned.

“People die in adventures,” she reminded herself.

She promptly told herself to shut up, and at that point she decided she was in real danger of taking this talking to herself business a bit too far. That was an interesting thought: maybe if she could plead insanity, Gamaliel would send someone else instead.

*Then again, she reflected, that might just make me eminently qualified for this madness!*

Pushing such thoughts aside, she threw herself into her work, focussing her mind on the simple tasks at hand and generally working herself into a state of complete exhaustion. With any luck, sleep would come naturally.

Eilidh attacked her cleaning with a vigour that bordered on vicious. In fact, she found she enjoyed the physical domestic labour, making the place look better than she could ever remember. Shame she wasn't going to be staying around long enough to enjoy it. She finished by washing all the crockery, cutlery, glassware...and that odd blue-green teapot with the purple handle, red spout and bright orange lid that always made her smile.

“Funny,” she said to herself, “this teapot reminds me of something...something about the colours...” but she was too shattered to think anymore, about anything.

At last, Eilidh lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. Her final conscious thought, before sleep overtook her, was the bizarre realisation:

*I don't own a teapot!*

\* \* \* \* \*

In the morning, Eilidh set out early, to go in search of anyone who would join her, thinking it unwise to leave Merlyon and walk into the unknown alone. The Catalyst had just stepped out of the church doorway, when she was approached by a small figure in the beige robes of a magician. Running through the crowd, the red hood of the robes slipped off its wearer's head, revealing a female hobbit, about Eilidh's own age.

“Excuse me,” she asked, “Eilidh Hagram?”

“Yes?” the Catalyst acknowledged.

“Oh,” she said, catching her breath, “thank goodness I caught you.” She giggled. “Master Gamaliel would not have been happy. I meant to come earlier but I overslept.” She gasped, “You won't tell, will you? Please promise you won't! I'd get into trouble and it doesn't happen very often, well, not too often anyway, I mean no more than most people after a tough day. Hey, have you got anything good to eat on you? I missed second breakfast this morning to make sure I caught you, which I nearly didn't. But leaving without anything in my tummy would be just terrible.” Another giggle. “I'd probably have passed out on the way here from lack of food. Lack of food makes me hungry; you ever find that? Mind you, humans don't seem to eat much from what I've seen - elves are worse though. At least dwarves know how to eat. My dad told me this funny story about the time a dwarf beat him in an eating contest. Can you believe that? The very idea of anybody able to eat a hobbit under the table! I think Dad must have been sick or something. I've never had an eating contest with a dwarf myself. I think it would be fun. Fun, fun, fun,” she giggled again. Then she blinked and asked, “What was I saying?”

“I have absolutely no idea!” Eilidh laughed good-naturedly. She couldn't remember the last time anybody said so many words to her in a whole day, never mind in one breath. It was something of a novelty. “Why don't you start from the beginning, slowly?”

The hobbit blushed. “Tolbrietta Hobbnobb.”

“Excuse me?”

“My name, Tolbrietta Hobbnobb – but you can call me Toli, all my friends do.”

“Well it's nice to meet you, Toli, but unfortunately I'm in a bit of a rush. I have to leave Merlyon,” Eilidh paused to deal with the bad taste in her mouth before adding, “on an adventure.”

“Adventure?” Toli clapped her hands and started jumping up and down. “How wonderful!”

*Oh please,* Eilidh groaned silently.

Toli snapped her fingers. “That's it! That's why I needed to see you. Sorry, I'd forget my stomach if wasn't properly weighed down with food!” She giggled. “Master Gamaliel sent me to give you these provisions, this bag of gold and this accompanying letter.”

Eilidh accepted these gifts, gratefully, putting the gold and food safely away, before examining the note:

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*Dear Eilidh,*

*There are a number of important things I would say to you, so please read carefully.*

*Firstly, I draw your attention to the provisions. You should take charge of them for now, until you can build up a party you can trust not to waste them. You will have to buy more as you go on, but carry only the bare minimum provisions. You should travel light so that you can move quickly. There's no telling what interesting things you will discover on your travels and you don't want to run out of space in your pack because of all the food although I suspect the hobbit messenger I am sending might not entirely agree. As a cleric myself, I am qualified to point out the value of clerical powers to create food and drink out of the ether. So, a cleric in your party could end any starvation worries, but even then, whenever another safe source of food presents itself, you should not hesitate to capitalise on your good fortune. Waste nothing: not food, not water, not energy and not magic.*

*Secondly, the bag contains 600 gold pieces. This large sum of money is my gift to you and you alone. It should be spent wisely. Some may be spent on magical training, but the majority is to be used to obtain the most valuable (and most costly) thing in all of Majaos: knowledge.*

*Thirdly, you should never have more than a dozen persons in your party at any one time, so as not to draw attention to yourself. Be careful whom you allow to join your party: people (as all things) are not always what they seem.*

*Finally, I wish you success, for all our sakes. I do not expect to see you again until you have completed your quest. Then I will welcome you and whatever party you assemble into my tower to receive the honour you deserve. Then we will meet not as Prime Magus of the Council and novice Catalyst, but as friends.*

*Yours in Magic,*

*Gamaliel.*

*Majaos y Natus*

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Seeing Eilidh look up from the note, Toli smiled and said, “I don't know exactly what your quest is, but it must be important if Master Gamaliel is involved. Could you use a magician? I'm only Life Calling, I'm afraid, but—”

“—But I could use a friend,” Eilidh put in, still half distracted by her own deep thoughts.

“I can be that, too,” Toli agreed, simply.

Eilidh was startled by that response, but fixed Toli with a penetrating stare as she laid out the facts.

“If you join me,” she said, “you will have to accept there are things I cannot tell you. My quest is connected with the sudden changes in Council Leadership and the chaos creatures. Beyond that, I can't tell you the details of my ultimate goal. As a matter of fact, I'm not altogether sure what my ultimate goal is. It will be dangerous, of that you can be certain.”

Toli shrugged. “It seems to me that everywhere is dangerous right now,” she pointed out, matching Eilidh's serious tone. “If I don't go with you, I will be fighting in the war. I'm only a grade one magician, so I don't think I can make much difference in that way. On an important quest with you, maybe I can be of more help. I understand the risks, Eilidh, and I appreciate the need for secrecy. I hope, in time, I will prove myself to you so you can tell me more. Until then, I'm content to follow you on faith. Please take me with you! At the very least I can be a friend to you and that can only be positive.”

Despite not being entirely comfortable with the faith part, something for which Eilidh had little time, it made sense to accept Toli's help. “When you put it like that, Toli, I would be honoured to consider you an ally and a friend.”

Eilidh and Toli had just shaken hands, when both were startled by the voice of a man from behind them. “I say, O Esteemed Leader,” said the very jolly sounding voice, “this is all ever so touching an' all, but would you mind turning the lights on, so to speak?”

They both whirled around, Eilidh held her dagger ready, while a spell began to take shape in Toli's mind, but they could see no-one.

“Egad!” came the voice again. “I do wish you wouldn't do that! I mean, I'm all for exciting rides, but you nearly blew my lid off!”

“Er, exactly where are you?” Eilidh asked, somewhat confused.

“And exactly what are you?” Toli added.

“Whaddya think this is?” demanded the irritated voice. “Quiz night at the Red Dragon Inn? `Is it animal, vegetable, mineral or magical`?” The voice continued, doing a very bad impression of the barkeep of that well-known tavern. Having apparently made its point, it suggested, “If you'll kindly take off your travel bag and take out that teapot you washed so lovingly last night, I'll be happy to tell you everything I know. Well, maybe not everything. Since I know everything it would take me a very long time to tell you all of it.”

Eilidh obediently did as she was asked, despite feeling a little silly talking to a teapot in a bag. Immediately after she put it on the ground, it disappeared and in its place, stood a tall, handsome man of indeterminate age. He was dressed in a white silk shirt, which billowed out of the sleeves of his red velvet jacket. A pair of blue-green, silk breeches and purple hose covered his legs. His clashing ensemble was finished off with a pair of black shoes and a brown hat, sitting on his own short brown hair. At a movement of his left hand, a similarly bright orange silk handkerchief fluttered down from

nowhere. He caught it and held it up to his face, which was now wearing an exaggeratedly distraught expression.

“Egad!” he exclaimed. “I thought I was going to suffocate in there! And then to be whizzed about like a spinning top! I would've thought you'd be satisfied with sitting on me and squashing me, and then nearly sending me flying off the desk, to the other side of the room. Even that lamp, which I would have thought was easy enough to see...sink me dear girl, you could have set fire to the place! I don't think The Chief Balanced One would've been so keen to `dispense with formalities` then. You're lucky he didn't send for his Dark and Silent Guards to lock you up as a danger to yourself and everyone around you.” With that, he promptly flopped onto a bright blue sofa that had just appeared, draped the orange silk over his face and sighed, “Egad!”

Unimpressed by this melodrama, Eilidh demanded, “If you've quite finished, I would appreciate it if you would tell me who you are.”

He peered at the Catalyst with one eye from behind the orange silk. “You mean you don't know?” he demanded, apparently quite put out. “I'm definitely going to have to talk to my PR people about this,” he grumbled. A notebook appeared out of thin air, along with a pen, which wrote in an entry all by itself. As this strange individual stood up, the diary, pen, orange silk and sofa all vanished. “Let me introduce myself,” he offered. “My name's Kismet,” he bowed, theatrically, “and I'm at your service...for a while, at least. I say, isn't that what the Lady Moriah said when she started her fifth affair? ...Or was it her sixth? ...No, it was definitely her fifth. Her sixth one was with that fat bloke...what was his name...Vash? ...Vora?” He snapped his fingers. “Oh I remember: Vorash - King Vorash, that was it. Anyway, I'm here to help from time to time.”

Eilidh wasn't sure she wanted to encourage this Kismet, with his scandalous repartee, but on the other hand, she decided he might just be daft enough to volunteer. So she asked if he would join her quest.

“Sorry dear girl, I'm afraid I'm far too busy for that,” he replied. His diary reappeared in front of his nose and the pages flicked over by themselves. “Hmmm, yes, that's what I thought,” he mused. “The diary's just too full.”

Tolbrietta jumped up and snatched the diary out of the air. “Full? It's blank!” She objected, flicking through the pages. “Every page is completely blank!”

“Well of course it's blank!” Kismet replied, indignantly. The diary vanished. “Do you really think I'd write down all my business in a diary for all to see? Imagine if it got stolen! If it's blank it doesn't matter. Nobody can use it to cause trouble.”

“But in that case, what's the point of carrying a diary?” asked the Catalyst.

“Oh, I'd be lost without my diary. Absolutely lost. I'm a busy man and I wouldn't have a clue where I'm supposed to be without my diary.”

A bewildered Eilidh decided to let it drop at that.

“But hey,” Kismet continued. “I've got a bit of free time right about now, and I did say I'd love to help, so help I shall.”



“Oh good,” Eilidh remarked, dryly, “I'm delighted.” Her sarcasm was lost on Kismet.

“I suppose you'd like my advice as to what to do next? I dare say you'd like me to,” he wiggled his fingers, “conjure up a merry band of people for you, as well.”

“Could you really do that?” Toli wondered.

“Sink me, dear girl. I was actually joking! Still, I suppose I could help a bit. First, I think it's worth pointing out, Eilidh, that your Oath of Secrecy doesn't apply to me. After all, I was there all the time and heard every word. Now, let's see...”

“Hold on just a minute, what do you mean you were there all the time? How could you possibly? ...Great Abyss!” she swore in sudden realisation. The Catalyst had a growing, nagging suspicion that if one could cut through all the ridiculous nonsense Kismet spouted, there was an important grain of truth to be learned. Even in the heart of the most profound chaos in the world, there was usually the seed of order. “The sofa, the paperweight, the lamp, all you?”

Kismet bowed. “And of course the teapot.”

“Shapeshifting magic? Kismet, don't you know how irresponsible that is? It's fine for dragons because they don't age they way us mortals do, but you can lose up to a year of your life every time you do it, don't you realise that?”

He spread his hands, helplessly. “Who wants to live forever?”

Eilidh rolled her eyes, but she wasn't going to be distracted. Her first thought was that it was some kind of elaborate illusion, but that wasn't it. As a Catalyst, Eilidh was by Gift and by training able to sense and identify every kind of magic on Majaos. She knew what illusion magic, magic of the Secret of Shadow, looked like. This was altogether different. No, this wasn't illusion magic, this was, well, it was unlike anything she had ever sensed before. This was something new...something old.

“But shapeshifting into inanimate objects is impossible and even if it wasn't,” Eilidh continued. “Even if a human could use magic to change into, say, a teapot, there's no way for a teapot to cast the spells necessary to change into a human. Inanimate objects are magically Dead and as soon as you changed into one, you should be magically Dead too. It is therefore impossible to change back.”

“Things are only impossible until they're not,” Kismet insisted. “Anyway, never mind me, what about this party of yours? I think it's high time you thought about who you want to join you.”

*Like I can just pick and choose!* Eilidh thought to herself. “And what would you suggest?” she asked aloud, trying hard to keep her flip tongue under control.

“Well,” Kismet scratched the back of his neck with his left forefinger, pondering the question. “You may even be better just grabbing a warrior for protection and going off to Shakaran. Their war preparations have been going on for a long time, if indeed they ever stopped – you know what they're like down there. Still,” he mused, mostly to himself, “I daresay a lot of people will be very grateful to the Shakaran people before this is over. It's a risk, but a reasonable one, I think. Once there, it should be easy enough to find people who are willing to go on a `mysterious quest of vital importance to King and Country`.”

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