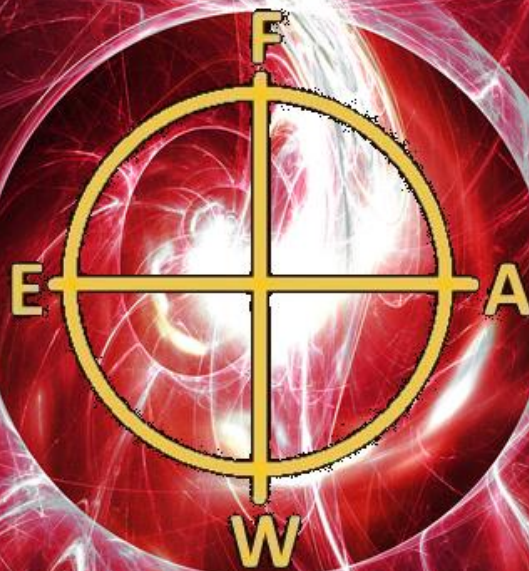


# Consequences

Book 2 of the Majaos Trilogy



Gary Stringer

# Consequences

## (Majaos Trilogy Book 2)

Eilidh's company of friends has splintered.

Rochelle is hunting for clues in the magical capital, Merlyon, assisted by the strange old man, Artisho. The war is outside the barrier, the politics are on the inside...and the danger is everywhere.

Phaer is returning to his people – the people who despise him. They'll execute him and he knows it...unless he's killed on the way.

The obsidian dragon Loric is seeking the mysteries of the Penta Drauka quest, while silver Callie embraces her true self, but in these days of Ancient magic, the world can be a dangerous place...even for dragons.

Meanwhile, Eilidh leads a band of four on a mission to a golden temple of the dead, at the behest of a sage known only as the Wise One. Will she find the answers she needs, the key to success...or just whole heap of trouble?

They may fail, they may succeed, but either way...there will be consequences.

## Prologue

Merlyn was the greatest mage in the world: a man of great wisdom and experience, but also one with a great responsibility, a great burden.

The magic was dying. It had ever been a weak, insubstantial force in this world and now it was nearly spent. For years now, while others had made futile attempts to preserve or revive the magic, he had been scrying for a new home across the cosmos. The relocation plan was ambitious. He called it his Great Endeavour. It was little short of madness - something he had been accused of more than once. Now he was about to attempt something scarcely less ridiculous: a meeting with other magic users from across the world.

Mages were a solitary, secretive people by circumstance if not by nature. They met rarely, if ever, and when they did it was not often a peaceful encounter. Merlyn believed that needed to change, especially now. Therefore he had sent a message out to wherever magic still clung to the world, seeking out magic users of all kinds. The message was cryptic, since he dared not risk revealing too much. It simply requested in the strongest possible terms, an audience on neutral ground that was sacred to them all: the Great Stone Circle. It was a prudent choice, since no mage would ever harm another within the Circle. Especially not at the time of the meeting: sunset - the time-between-times when it was neither day, nor night; neither dark nor light. It was imperative that this meeting pass peacefully.

So it was, then, that at that sacred time on the appointed day, in that most holy of places, mages came from distances great and small, gathering at the behest of the wizard Merlyn. Some came because they feared or respected Merlyn. Some came because they believed in the concept of sharing magical knowledge. Some came to voice grievances or outrage at being summoned thus. Others came because they dared not risk a rival gaining an advantage by attending while they stayed away in ignorance. Still others came because they were simply curious. Motives were many, but absences were few and that was what counted in Merlyn's eyes. In the outside world, some of these mages were rivals - even enemies - but here they met in peaceful tolerance.

Satisfied, and indeed gratified beyond all expectation, Merlyn strode into the crowd, coming to stand by the central standing stone as the last red and purple tendrils of the sun faded into black. Thus began the very first Council of Magic in history.

"I welcome thee, one and all," boomed Merlyn's deep, resonant baritone. He was dressed in a humble robe of coarse sackcloth dyed red in the blood of a sacrificial virgin lamb. It was by far the simplest garment of any worn by the assembled crowd. None would dare do otherwise. In all other walks of life in this world, status was symbolised by clothing. A rich noble wore expensive trappings to demonstrate his superiority over the simple farmer, who in turn wore greater finery than the hired stable hand, and so on down to the lowliest slave. In the world of magic, this worked in reverse. A novice would wear fancy attire, and gradually shed his earthly trappings as he grew in the magic. It also served a practical function - in many places, magic was reviled and those who practised it burned. The lack of earthly finery made it easier to move in the world unnoticed. They did not stand out in a crowd. Indeed, mostly they were paid little or no attention whatsoever. This suited the magic-users very well. Merlyn was the greatest wizard of his age and so he had shed all but the barest of earthly possessions.

“Prithee, I beg thine indulgence for not sparing greater detail in my missive, but rest assured that this is a historic meeting of the utmost importance to us all.”

“If it be thine intention to engender our fullest attention, Great One,” said a female voice, in a neutral tone, “then thou hast succeeded. What, pray tell, is this dire event of such universal consequence?”

“Truly, madam, events are dire indeed,” Merlyn agreed. “The erosion of magic is happening slowly and quietly, not suddenly and forcefully, but that doth make it all the more dangerous. However, universal it is not,” he argued, “as ye will see. Let me be plain: I hath called ye all here to discuss the future. Our future. The future of all magic.”

“It will be a short meeting, then,” said a derisive shaman from a land far to the South; a man with ebony skin, shaven head and a muscular upper body of which many a warrior would be envious. “For I see no future at all for us or for magic in this world.”

“Though thou knowest not, sir, thou hast squarely hit the mark. It is true that the magic of this world is dying and doth seek to take us with it, but perhaps it need not be so. That is what I hath asked thee here to discuss.”

That caused a stir. Could it be true? They wondered. Had the Great Merlyn found a solution to their plight? Was it even possible?

“Er...E-excuse me, er, s-sir?” It was a nervous young apprentice from the land of the Cymru. Artemis by name, Merlyn recalled. “W-what a-answer dost thou p-perceive?”

“An excellent question,” Merlyn smoothed, encouragingly. A true apprentice was a rare thing these days, since there appeared to be such a bleak future for magic. If only the lad could see true success in magic, it would do wonders for his self-confidence. In the meantime, a few simple words would have to suffice. “The answer is all around thee, or should I say, above thee. Look above; what seest thou?”

“Why, I see only the night sky,” said the beautiful, exotic, raven-haired sorceress he had always found so beguiling. She hailed from the Emerald Isle just across the sea. “The stars in the heavens, like the jewels of the gods, so they are, aloof from our mortal concerns. What dost thou seest?”

“I see as do you, Lady Ganieda. The stars in the heavens; but mere jewels they are not. I have discovered, as I long suspected, that each one is, in fact, a sun like ours, shining down upon worlds like ours. Like, yet unlike. Long have I gazed at the stars and probed for magic, for surely it must exist elsewhere. Alas, it would appear that magical worlds are rarer than I had hoped. Indeed, I was close to giving up when one day I was met.”

“Met? Met by whom?” The voice was lost in the crowd and Merlyn could not see the individual to whom it belonged.

He let out a long, slow breath as he considered his response. “’Tis not an easy thing to explain. Even now I know not what words will suffice. Let us simply call it a vision - no, a visitation; a visitation from...an angel of magic, perhaps.” He hid a private smile at his choice of imagery. “This `angel` didst guide my gaze unto a world of such magic as thou hast never felt before. A magic so

potent that every living thing doth pulsate unto its rhythm. In this world, magic users such as we wouldst be a minority group no longer, distrusted and hunted, burned at the stake by society's majority. We wouldst be the majority!"

"That sounds like a wondrous dream, aye that it does." Ganieda softened her scepticism with the smile that danced in her green eyes. "But how do we know that is not all it is? Can you show us this world so we might judge for ourselves?" Privately, she was inclined to accept Merlyn's word. He was nobody's fool and would not make such a wild claim if he could not back it up. He was ruggedly handsome, with short dark hair and a toned upper body. She often laughed to see the old man with long flowing white beard that was his favoured form in the world of ordinary mortals. They could not handle the truth that he was Emrys - Ageless. It was, according to legend, a consequence of the unique circumstances of his birth. His mother was of the long-lived Faerie race - as was Ganieda herself and young Artemis of the Cymru. Merlyn's father had been the late, great Taliesin, Penderwydd - Chief Bard, who had possessed the power to move heaven and earth with his voice. Indeed, legend had it that Merlyn had, in fact, been stillborn and that his father sang his own life essence into his baby son, knowing the cost would be that of his own life. Who could say what effect this unique convergence of magic could have on a new human life? In times past he had been known as the Great Myrddin Emrys; Merlinus Ambrosius to the Latin speakers. Among magical circles these days, he favoured the form, Merlyn.

Ganieda had met him long ago, in the forest near her father's home, when both were only barely out of adolescence. She smiled at the memory - he had not looked so regal then. He had just escaped from the *Bean Sidhe*; dirty, smelly and naked but for the skin of the wolf he had slain. Wolf Boy she had called him then, but she had been instantly fond of him. Years later, when her powers had grown beyond what she could hide from her people, Merlyn helped her fake her own death to end the witch-hunt. Perhaps if things had been different, the world more accepting, a romance might have been possible. Perhaps, if he was now suggesting what he seemed to be suggesting, there could yet be a chance. But she could not allow her feelings be known to others. There were those who would suspect collusion and refuse to listen on no further grounds than the fact that she was in favour. She had to at least give the appearance of scepticism, but still she could phrase it tactfully - play the diplomatic role. That was her best chance to help, she thought.

"Thou art quite right, my Lady," responded the great mage to her request. "In fact, I have prepared for thine eminently sensible point. Behold the world of Majaos!"

The wizard gave the assembled crowd the co-ordinates for their scrying magic. So, they all looked for themselves and felt the magic emanating from that blue-green bauble so far away. Some insisted on performing a myriad of magical tests and Merlyn allowed them time and space to satisfy themselves. In the end there was only one conclusion that could be reached: Majaos was real and it surpassed all their expectations. That agreement was a start, but far from an end.

"What hopest thou to gain from showing us this?" Someone demanded.

"What do I hope to gain? Why, I doth propose to make this world our own!" There. It was said. No going back now. The genie could not be put back into the bottle. Now all he could do was sit back and wait for the inevitable reactions.

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A stunned silence had descended upon the Great Stone Circle at Merlyn's revelation. Even for Ganieda, hearing the words had been profound. To leave this world and seek another, it was incredible, unbelievable! And not everyone approved. There were many objections. Some couldn't imagine that such an undertaking was possible. Merlyn insisted that while it was true that even with magic, one could not do the impossible, he was confident that a solution could be found if they worked together and did not waste their energies by focussing on the enormity of the problem.

Another group were against interfering with another world. "There are people there. People who are different from us - not human. How can we know what effect we will have on them and they on us?"

Of all the points, Merlyn had the greatest respect for this one. It was a valid objection, but he was convinced that in many ways these other races were not so different and strange as they first appeared. Merlyn and many others were excited and fascinated by the prospect of co-existing with these other races, sharing knowledge with them.

Inevitably, there were those who would be conquerors, seeking to take this world called Majaos by force and enslaving the `backward` indigenous species. Merlyn was quick to make it known that any such attempt would be faced with his wrath. He wasn't naive enough to expect that to be an end to it, though. It was a danger that would have to be faced and fought if and when the inter-world jump proved successful. One thing at a time. It was foolish to worry about tomorrow's meal when today's predator was at the door.

Some refused to believe that magic was dying at all. "Everything goes in cycles," said a spokesman for that faction. "As the moon doth wax and wane, so the magic is surely waning only to wax again unto its full glory."

"How long would you have us wait, you great lummo?" Ganieda demanded. "A decade? A century? Until the beginning of the New Age? And all that time we act like the ostrich, hiding our heads in the sand, saying `All our troubles will go away by themselves, so they will`! Aye, and pigs might fly!"

Of course, there would always be those who advocated the status quo. "We should take no action that might interfere with forces that we do not understand."

Merlyn had heard enough and called for order. "This is a momentous decision," he declared, choosing to drop the archaic speech in favour of a more modern but still formal mode of address, "and ye all have thy points of view. I cannot force ye all to act if it is not thy will. But I am determined to seize this chance of a future for magic. It is my hope that those who think in a likewise manner shall remain here that we might pool our knowledge and experience of magic, to find a way to reach our new home. There is a time limit, for I fear the magic shall not survive here for much longer. If the magic falls below the level required for this spell, and we are still here, then we will have missed the boat. We will die here in a world devoid of that which we all hold most dear. I will not allow that to happen! I say that I and those with me, shall make the attempt ere the sands of time run out. We will succeed and embrace a new life, or we will die with honour, sure in the knowledge we did all we could. Those who wish to join me know this: I intend to depart this world with the fires of Beltaine next year. Those who wish to stay in this world, ye all are free to leave with the dawn, but ye shall have no part in our journey, successful or no. Decide and decide quickly: Work with me, take a chance with me, or leave and refuse to try, always wondering what might have been. Choose now."



As it turned out, it was not quite as simple as that. Merlyn, true to his nature, consented to allow those who were undecided three days and three nights to make up their minds, during which he and his followers did all they could to persuade them to this noble cause. In the end, of those mages who had attended the meeting, close to three-quarters chose to stay and work together. Taking into account those who were absent, Merlyn reckoned on a support of over two thirds of all magic users. The first session of the Council of Magic had begun with promise. Now all that remained was to make it a success.

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The days lengthened and the wind warmed. The moon moved through its phases until one evening, as it rose full in the time-between-times, they made their final preparations. As dawn approached, they observed the rite, which marked the year reborn: the kindling of the Beltaine fire.

On that day, all other fires were extinguished so that the Beltaine flame, pure and perfect, might be the mother of all flames throughout the year to come. Each year, in days gone by, this fire burned without cease, and anyone needing fire was given live embers from the Beltaine bed so that each settlement received warmth and light from the same pure source. These days, only the Learned observed the Beltaine ceremony.

Those mages who had stayed to work on the Great Endeavour, gathered at the Great Stone Circle, watching with baited breath, waiting to see Merlyn light the Beltaine fire. They prayed it would light first time, providing a good omen for their flight to a New World. Merlyn's sackcloth garments were gone, replaced by robes of fiery red, covered in silver runes, golden pentagram medallion glittering along with the golden torc of a king that he wore, as they caught the light of the full moon. Omens good or ill, and they would still make the attempt, for it was their one last hope of a future. "Better to die trying," Merlyn had said, "than wither away here."

Accordingly, by the silvery light of the moon, they gathered the Nawglan, the nine sacred woods whose unique properties produced such wonderful benefit when brought together. They obtained a goodly quantity, which they bundled with strips of rawhide. In the centre of the Circle, they placed the bundled wood on a lamb's white fleece.

Before dawn, the company assembled in prayer to the gods, lifting their voices to properly present the Nine Sacred Woods as the Nawglan offering:

"Alder of the marshes we bring, Foremost in Lineage, for assurance."

"Hazel of the Rocks we bring, Seed of Wisdom, for understanding."

"Willow of the Streams we bring, Moon Goddess, for fertility."

"Birch of the Waterfalls we bring, Lofty Dreamer, for high-mindedness."

"Ash of the Shadows we bring, Stout-hearted, for honesty."

"Yew of the Plain we bring, Bringer of Death, for rebirth."

"Elm of the Grove we bring, Great Giver, for generosity."

“Rowan of the Mountains we bring, Mountain Lord, for Justice.”

“Oak of the Sun we bring, Mighty Monarch, for Benevolence.”

They could not use magic to light the Beltaine fire - that would be to cheat the omens portended by the ceremony. Would the Beltaine fire be lit first time? In silence, then, there in the time-between-times they kindled the flame. Gripping the greenwood bow, Ganieda drew the gut line, spinning the length of rounded yew in the deep-cut notch of an oaken bole. At the first glow from the wood, Merlyn applied the dried plant called *tan coeth*, which caused the infant flame to burst bright and blush crimson - as if drawing life from the very air.

Merlyn had done this countless times before. But this time, as he touched the *tan coeth* to the wood, the spark glimmered brightly for a moment, and then died in a wisp of smoke. Ganieda saw the flame fail and drew her breath in sharply; the bow fell from her fingers and her face turned white. Merlyn's heart lurched in his chest.

He glanced to the east, towards the rising sun, even as his hands fumbled to retrieve the bow and yew. The first rays of the sun touched the horizon and there was no flame to greet the day. Beltaine had dawned black.

But there was a sharp, collective gasp from the crowd then as, before Merlyn could move to make another attempt, a small flame reappeared. Then the fire suddenly leaped up high and held. The Beltaine fire was lit, but what of the omens? What events did this portend? What warning did it hold - if warning it was? No-one knew - such a thing had never happened before in all the years since Beltaine had been observed.

The celebrations were subdued, the mages nervous. How could they celebrate when everything was held in the balance? If they made it to Majaos and this New World was all they hoped for, then they would rejoice. But their thoughts were consumed by fear of the strange Beltaine fire. Was the world angry with them for abandoning it? Many felt as if they were attending the wake of their own funerals. Were these fears justified? Were they real? Or were they simply last minute nerves? No-one was prepared to say.

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It was the second night of the Beltaine festival and time seemed to crawl as they fixed their gaze on the eastern horizon, awaiting the first rays of the Sun. At last someone cried out, pointing towards the horizon. At first the others could see nothing and the even sorceress who had spoken was beginning to doubt herself, but then there came another flicker of light. This time everyone saw it. A deep hush fell upon the assembled masses as the sky became streaked with red and purple. Everyone who saw it, even the most cynical among them, swore it was the most beautiful sunrise they had ever seen. Could a dawn on Majaos ever match this? They all wondered.

Many wept openly at the sight; there was no shame in their tears. Merlyn wiped away his own and declared. “Tis time. The moment we hath worked so hard for hath arrived. We must all harden our hearts and prepare to cast the last great feat of magic this world will ever know!”

There were many preparations to make before they could begin the final spells, preparations that proceeded all through the day, beyond dusk and into night. Finally, at midnight, a full moon high in the sky, all was in readiness. Every mage had his or her own part to play in weaving the complex



magic. Merlyn, taking a leading role, was to reach across the vastness of space to Majaos, tapping into its potent magic. This part had been the greatest challenge to the entire project: They had quickly realised that the magic of Earth was insufficient to the task. In order to reach Majaos, they needed the magic of that world. But if they could not reach Majaos, how could they tap into its magic, make the power flow to Earth? It was Artemis, the nervous apprentice, who pointed out that since they could detect the magic of Majaos, that meant the power was already flowing to Earth. All they needed to do was increase that flow. Turn a trickle into a river. All mages knew that magic was much easier when one had something to work with - enhancement magic required less effort than creation magic.

Even so, turning this theory into practice was easier said than done. At last, though, they calculated how to bring their power to bear upon this `stream`, widening it first at their end and working their way back through the flow to its source at Majaos. Once this was accomplished, it would be left to Merlyn to give the Majaos magic the final push, creating a tunnel of time, space and magical energy. If all went well, they would then have the power to travel `up river` through this corridor of magic. It required precision timing and a great deal of effort by each mage involved. Their numbers were so few! If just one faltered or failed to pull their own weight, the attempt would fail and there would be no Terran magic left with which to make a second attempt. It was all or nothing.

Clouds, dark and brooding formed above the Great Stone Circle, yet the moon was still shining brightly as the elements created a ring of their own - a roughly circular gap, almost like a corridor to their cosmic partner. But the corridor was not leading to the moon, nor from it, but through it and from beyond it. Indeed, it was merely coincidence that the moon happened to be in that unique conjunction in the sky.

Coincidence or providence? Merlyn wondered.

Certainly this was a time for great omens, both strange and frightening. As if to prove his thoughts, the magic had the unexpected effect of enhancing the lunar light until it took on a brilliance that could have outshone the sun.

The other mages had done well. Their Terran power had almost touched Majaos and it was Merlyn's place to make the breakthrough. Taking slow, deep breaths he brought his power to bear, channelling it upstream to this strange, New World. He could almost see the Majaos terrain, smell the air, hear nature working in concert with magic. It was all he could do to force himself not to stop and stare. Time enough for that later, if they were successful and that was up to him. He flew on the astral plane to the place the visiting `angel` had revealed to him. Here was the source of all magic on Majaos. Perfect. Inexhaustible. Eternal. Its location was to be a closely guarded secret - the angel had been adamant on that point. Only Merlyn must know and he could never share that knowledge with anyone. The Well of Life it was called and Merlyn vowed to keep it secret, sacred and secure until the coming of the *Du y Kharia*.

Calling upon his vast resources of gift and experience, he tapped into the Well of Life, drawing from it a stream of magic, flowing towards the corridor through time and space.

“It will be curious about you,” the angel had warned. “It will whisper seductive promises to you.”

“Ye make it sound as though it were alive,” said Merlyn, curiously.

The angel considered that. “In a manner of speaking, yes, I suppose it is. *Majaos y Natus*,” he replied, cryptically. “At any rate, you must resist its pull, for no-one can tame it, nor should anyone try.”

“Very well,” Merlyn vowed, “I shall heed your warning.”

Merlyn had had no idea what he was promising then, but he did now. The energy of this Well of Life was so pure, so enticing...almost irresistible. A term came unbidden to his mind: Life Infinity - a state of magical being beyond any he had ever even imagined. But no, Merlyn was not greedy. As it was, the possibilities of magic on Majaos would far outstrip anything he had ever experienced on Earth. He would be content with that - more than content. So he resisted the call and completed the spell. His consciousness rode the wave of magic through the Corridor back to Earth. Lightning flashed - blue lightning and green and red, the clouds swirled, the air electrified by this inrush of energy. The connection was complete, the path to Majaos lay before them - now all that remained was to walk that path - literally walk. The mind boggled at the apparent simplicity of it; there was nothing simple about the magic involved.

The mages lined up and entered the mouth of the Corridor. Merlyn was impressed by the orderly nature of the exodus, no rushing or pushing. Mind you, after performing such a feat of magic he doubted any of them had the energy for rushing or pushing - he himself certainly didn't. Ganiada and Artemis remained until the last moment, and then they, too, were gone.

For a moment, there were tears in his eyes once more, as Merlyn took a long last look at the world he knew. He breathed deeply one final breath of Terran air and then faced the Corridor with a new sense of steely determination. He was Merlyn; the greatest mage in the world and his Great Endeavour was a success.

“The future,” he said to himself, “is this way.”

## Chapter 1

“Excuse me, sir,” Eilidh objected, “but as fascinating as this is, I didn't ask for a potted history of Merlyn. I asked about Niltsiar.”

Eilidh was thrilled to meet this man of knowledge, and another time she would gladly spend every coin she possessed to sit there and learn from him. Right now, though, she had rather more pressing concerns.

“You're right, Eilidh,” Toli agreed. “I'll bet we could have asked our bard friend here to tell us the Merlyn story.”

“Aye, lass,” Granite replied. “And at a much lower rate, too! A thousand gold indeed!” He shook his head in wonder. “I reckon I'd sing the entire history of the world fer that!”

“Ah, the impatience of youth,” the sage intoned, shaking his head. He fixed his gaze on the Catalyst. “My dear young lady, I do not intend to waste your time. At my age, time is in short supply and one learns to use it wisely. But what you must realise is that the question you have asked cannot be answered simply. There are connections to be made and I--” his flow was interrupted by a sudden fit of coughing.

“Are you alright, sir?” Toli asked, concerned. “Oh dear, I'm afraid our healers have left the party for a while. Maybe there's someone we could fetch for you...I could run back to the Corridor, zip back to Shakaran Palace and have someone back here in a jiffy, whatever a jiffy might be. I've always wondered that...a jiffy...what exactly is it about that that's supposed to be symbolic of being quick? In fact, what's the point of a symbol if nobody knows what it means, or rather, well, I suppose we do know what it means symbolically, but we don't know what it means literally...but at any rate, jiffy or not, I could be there and back pretty fast, if you want me to...oh you seem to be better now.”

“Yes,” replied the Wise One. “Please do not concern yourselves. It comes and goes; it will pass. If you will excuse me for one moment, I shall fix myself a herbal tea. Boiled elven spring water and a few well-chosen leaves, that always settles me down.”

The sage rose from his ornate oaken chair and moved behind the red curtain into his private living area. While the golden-robed figure was gone, Eilidh reflected on how they came to be there.

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Toli and Princess Mystaya had both found riding on the back of a sea serpent to be quite exhilarating. They laughed and told stories - or rather Toli had told stories, often losing her thread within a few breaths, but the princess seemed delighted by the irrepressible hobbit. Granite meanwhile had, by contrast, grown increasingly dour and foul tempered. Dwarves loved to be close to rock and stone and soil, and were not fond of water. They hated sea travel. The way the water beneath them moved and changed constantly was offensive to their sense of the solid, the omnipresent, the permanent. It wasn't that dwarves disliked travelling altogether. On the contrary, it was said among the races of Majaos that dwarves were born in the saddle. Certainly, they were riding horses as soon as they could sit up and hold the reins and it was not uncommon for a dwarf to learn to ride before they learned to walk. Strictly speaking, the word `pony` would be more accurate than `horse` but dwarves disliked that term, seeing it as a prejudice against small stature.

In general, it was the elves who were always most associated with wild animals, but when it came to horses, the dwarves were undisputed masters. They explained this by saying that horses were flighty beasts by nature with constantly shifting passions. Elves tended to get caught up in this, while dwarves gently exerted their stabilising influence on the creatures. They never sought mastery and control, but partnership and co-operation.

The two main dwarven belief systems both linked strongly to horses. One denomination said that when a dwarf died, his spirit would be united with a horse in the spirit world - a world of unchanging rocky mountains and grassy plains - free to roam with the wind for eternity. The other believed that horses contained the reincarnated souls of dwarves. A dwarf would have nothing whatsoever to do with donkeys, which they thought of as a `horse gone wrong` and quite possibly the dishonoured dead, damned to this shameful existence as punishment for their misdeeds in their dwarven lives.

It was a common sight, then, to see dwarves riding around Mythalen on their ponies, exploring far and wide. Granite Longbeard was a typical dwarf on that score, but riding a sea serpent was disturbingly different. With horse riding, one could feel the solid ground beneath the horse's hooves, so the dwarven rider was still connected to rock, stone and soil. Sea travel was so...unnatural. Besides, dwarven bodies had no buoyancy and invariably they would sink like a stone.

Eilidh cared little one way or the other for the mode of transport. It had simply been the fastest way to get back to Shakaran and the sooner they got there the better. The prince had promised to lead her to a source of information to help her in her quest and she needed that information because, quite frankly, she was at a loss as to where to go or what to do next.

As for the strange old man, Artisho, he had spent the entire trip asleep without ever appearing to be in any danger of falling off. How his battered old hat remained firmly on his head Eilidh had no idea, considering the terrific speeds they reached in open water.

At last they had slowed and come to rest in a river that ran through the borderlands to the North of Shakaran City. They all dismounted, except for Artisho who still had not woken up.

"Be careful out here," the sea serpent had warned. "There is a great deal of fighting going on in the area. It's still sporadic yet, but you'd better keep your wits about you."

Artisho had chosen that moment to wake himself up with a sudden violent sneeze, swiftly followed by two more that conspired to make his hat fall over his eyes. "I've been blinded by the gods!" He had whispered in awe. Princess Mystaya helpfully reached up and took away the offending article. "It's a miracle!" The old man exclaimed. "Are you an angel?" he had asked, squinting at Mystaya.

"No," she replied, good-naturedly. "Just a princess, I'm afraid."

"Ah well," he said, holding up a finger for emphasis. "That's the next best thing, miss...er...I'm sorry, have we met before?"

"Sir," the serpent interrupted. "It's time to go before you really embarrass yourself." Then without another word it had turned its massive bulk and taken off back down river, Artisho clinging on for dear life. Soon, from the companions' perspectives, they had grown smaller and smaller as they

sped into the distance. Very faintly, they heard the old man's plaintive cry, "The angel...she's stolen my hat!..."

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During their short walk to the nearest Corridor entrance, the evidence of battle had been all around them: scraping steel from one direction, a flash of magic from another, the smell of burning from yet another. Fortune had shone upon them, however, and they made it to the Corridor without incident. Upon reaching Shakaran City itself, they had been stopped at the inner gates. The princess protested at first, but relented when the gatekeeper explained the situation.

"I am sorry, Your Highness, but since you've been gone, attacks by the chaos creatures have increased markedly. The numbers are nothing we can't handle for the moment, but there are a few species that have some strange magical abilities. I can't rule out the possibility that you may be an enemy, posing as the Princess Mystaya in order to gain entry to the palace and strike at the Prince Regent. As the Shakaran guard, we are the ring of steel around the Prince and will fall to the last warrior before any harm threatens him. If you will wait here but a moment, I have sent a priority message for an Enforcer to verify your identity. Then, Your Highness and your guests will be permitted to pass with my apologies and great gratitude for your safety."

The princess indicated that she understood and commended him for his vigilance. The man just shrugged and said he was only doing his job.

The wait had afforded them a good look at the city. There had been some subtle changes since their last visit. On the face of it, people continued to go about their business. Hawkers still touted their wares in the market place and the blacksmiths' forges still burned and smoked; street musicians still played and artisans still painted. People walked by, apparently undaunted, but there was a greater sense of urgency about their stride, a slight hush in their tone and their eyes shot furtive glances around them. Their manner, however, was that of vigilance, not fear. One could not deny the impression that they were preparing for fight, not flight. Eilidh decided she liked Shakaran...despite the palace, raised without magic. That still gave her the chills. The people were sensible, practical. After all, Merlyon's magical shield aside, Shakaran was the most heavily defended city in all Mythallen, so where would they run to if they had the chance? If danger visited them here, there was nowhere safe. Anywhere else would just be more dangerous still. Better to stay and fight for the defence of their homes and families. Still, one had to admire their courage, Eilidh decided.

The thought that these people might admire Eilidh's own courage, if they only knew, never occurred to her.

At length, an Enforcer had appeared in their midst. The way the powerful mage had been enshrouded in the black robes of that order, it had been impossible to tell race or even gender of this individual. Height gave some clues, but had been insufficient evidence on which to base an opinion. The absence of any second colour on the cuffs, hood and trim, had told them that they were aligned with the dark side of magic. That this dark Enforcer should be in the Prince's service was no surprise, since His Highness was aligned with the balance. Doubtless this individual saw royal service as a means of building a personal power base and they wouldn't achieve that by harming the Prince or, through neglect of their duties, allowing others to strike at him. Eilidh could see the logic in that, as she and her companions stood at ease under the Enforcer's intense magical scrutiny. Then the black robe had bowed respectfully to the princess, apparently satisfied that she was who she appeared to be.

The Enforcer uttered not a single word in conversation, but instantly teleported them directly inside Shakaran Palace throne room; something that, Vorden's attack notwithstanding, was possible only for very few individuals who were privy to the shield's precise magical frequency. Even before the companions' eyes had adjusted to the change in light, the Enforcer had bowed once to the figure seated by the throne and stepped from the room.

The high-ceilinged throne room was exactly square in its dimensions and dominated by Imperial Purple - the furniture, the curtains; even the marble floor was purple and white in wide, concentric circles, each edged with gold. Great tapestries hung alongside stained glass windows, telling tales of great deeds from a glorious past - not that the present was any less glorious. Hanging from the ceiling to hover over the king's throne was a human-sized painted metalworking of the city crest: a lamb, an owl and a lion in a descending line, gold on a purple background, and silver lettering that read, CALIMNI MENTUS VOLENTE meaning peace, diplomacy and war. This reflected the Shakaran philosophy of first offering the hand of friendship and peace, then if that is rejected enter into negotiations to seek a diplomatic solution, but if all else failed, Shakaran was ready, willing and well able to wage war against its enemies.

The companions had instantly recognised Prince Garald sitting in the chair to what would be the king's right if he were present. Even though the king was too ill to hold court and the prince was fulfilling those duties admirably, still he was only the Prince Regent and would therefore not presume to occupy the king's throne.

He was deep in the study of very important papers and without looking up, he said, "I am told this is important, so please say whatever it is you have come to say. I regret my lack of hospitality but I'm afraid I have much to do."

"Father," came the voice of Mystaya. A single word, spoken softly, but filled with such love, respect, happiness, relief, concern and a hundred other emotions, that it seemed as if surely the whole world must have heard it.

Upon seeing his daughter, he looked at her strangely, as if not fully believing his eyes. "Mystaya?"

"Father, it's me," she coaxed, gently. Still she did not raise her voice, despite the power of her feelings.

Joy filled the prince's face as he shot from his seat. Those documents that had seemed so vital a moment ago scattered over the floor and he cared not one bit. He ran down the steps from the podium upon which the throne stood and Mystaya, too, discarded all royal dignity as she raced to meet him. Tears flowed from both of them...and why not? The most precious thing in Prince Garald's world had been taken from him and was now returned, safe and well.

Safe? Eilidh wondered, ever the realist.

Was anyone truly safe these days? Perhaps they were relatively safe for the time being, she conceded. Let them have this moment, she decided. The gods knew they deserved it - they all did. Mystaya had borne her kidnap and captivity with righteous royal courage, and had been gracious to her rescuers. Now at last she could cry.

When at last she and her father broke their embrace, they approached Eilidh, and her two companions.

“My friends,” Prince Garald began, “I just can't thank you enough for bringing my daughter back safely. Since you've been gone, I've replayed my actions over and over in my head, and part of me is ashamed. Your Knight friend, Lady Hannah, was right: to blackmail you into helping me was not honourable. What you are doing is, I'm sure, far more important, from the world's perspective...ah, but my objectivity and my honour are uncertain where my daughter is concerned. Therefore, ashamed though I am, I can live with it.”

“I understand, Your Grace,” Eilidh replied with a bow.

“Aye,” Granite agreed. “In dwarf clans, there's nothin' more important than family.”

“No problem at all, Your Grace,” Toli echoed. “It was a really great adventure and Mystaya is a really nice girl and - sorry, I mean *Princess* Mystaya, I don't mean to be disrespectful, it's just with everything that's happened and the ride home on the sea serpent--”

“--Sea serpent?” Garald interrupted.

“Oh yes! It was terribly exciting, you see--”

“--Why don't you tell me the whole story, from the beginning?”

“Father,” Mystaya chided, gently, giving him a playful shove. “These people have come a long way and risked many dangers for us. The least we can do is offer them some comfort and refreshment. Come to that, I wouldn't mind some, myself; I look simply frightful and probably smell even worse.”

Garald smiled. “You're quite right, my dear--” he began, then seeing his daughter's arched eyebrows, amended quickly, “--that we should offer our friends every hospitality.” To the trio, he said, “Please forgive my enthusiasm. Just one question before I let you go,” he added as an afterthought. “I can't help noticing there's only the three of you...I trust nothing untoward has happened to the rest of your party?”

“Not at all, Your Grace,” Eilidh replied. “In fact our numbers grew significantly after we reached Avidon and I'm pleased to say there were no casualties.” As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she realised she was wrong. In fact, she was appalled that it could have slipped her memory even for a moment. “Ah, actually, Your Grace, I'm afraid that's not quite true.”

“Oh?”

“Yes, I'm sorry to say we did lose one companion. I don't know how to break this to you gently, I know he was kind of a friend of yours, so I hope you'll forgive me if I just say it: Your Grace, Kismet is dead.”

Garald laughed. “Kismet?” He dismissed it with a wave of his hand. “He's indestructible.”

“I told them as much myself,” his daughter agreed.



“With respect, Your Grace--”

“You don't know him like I do, so you'll just have to take my word for it.”

“But, Your Grace, we saw--”

“Whatever you think you saw, I'm sure there is another explanation. Now, not another word until you are refreshed.”

Moments later, palace servants were leading them away to bathe and change. Eilidh could only wonder at Prince Garald's refusal to accept the truth...if it was the truth.

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“...And so the serpent dropped us off at the river to the North, before speeding away again with Artisho clinging on for dear life,” Eilidh concluded, several hours later in a relaxed lounge room. “The rest you know,” she added with a shrug.

The furniture on which they sat had the ingenious feature that the individual could adjust their height off the ground. This was obviously designed for diplomatic reasons, so as not to offend the smaller races, whilst still being comfortable and relaxing for humans or even tall elves. Eilidh was a bit suspicious at first, but after some gentle magical probing, she discovered that her chair had at least been constructed with the aid of magic, even if it did not require magic to adjust it. That made her feel a little better about things.

“So, this Z'rcona was an agent,” the prince mused. “Well then, it seems there was a connection to your main quest after all. How interesting.”

“Father...” Mystaya spoke up.

She was now dressed in a silken gown of her favoured shade of blue, with slim corseted waist, full skirt and low-cut bodice in the modern style. Her raven black hair was done in tight curls and sported a delicate silver tiara, matching her necklace and the bracelets she wore over her long white silk gloves. Her face was lightly painted just to highlight and soften her striking features. She was every inch the regal princess - a far cry from the girl they had rescued. Indeed, it was hard to believe this was the same person - apart from one particular accessory. A sword hung in a scabbard at her hip, and if Eilidh wasn't mistaken, it was the one she'd 'borrowed' from Bunny in Marina Fells mine.

Bernice, of course, was looking out for Phaer and despite certain misgivings about the sumorityl, on balance Eilidh was glad he wasn't all alone out there. She hoped her half-elven friend was alright. Still, it was not in Eilidh's nature to worry about things she could not change, so she did her best to put those concerns to one side in favour of more practical ones.

“...I can't help thinking,” the princess continued, “that this is precisely the sort of story the people need to hear right now. A tale of modern-day heroism coupled with the return of their Lavender Rose.”

Lavender Rose was an affectionate title that the Shakaran people had bestowed upon their beloved young princess.

Prince Garald considered that for a moment. “You’re right, my dear,” he agreed. “It would inspire them to the courage they will need in the days ahead.”

It seemed to Eilidh that the Shakaran people's courage needed very little support.

“However,” the prince continued, “we must be careful not to jeopardise the secrecy of Eilidh's mission. Unless I am very much mistaken, it is vital to all of us that she and her followers are allowed to continue unhindered.”

Mystaya directed a dazzling smile at the dwarf sitting opposite her. “Why, I'm sure a bard of Mr Longbeard's distinction could compose a suitable ballad that would put over the essence of my rescue, whilst maintaining a certain discretion towards the parties involved.”

The dwarf knew he was being flattered into submission, but he laughed in spite of himself. “Aye, Yer Highness, I'll do that for yeh. I'll get onto it straight away...or at least as soon as I get paid for services already rendered.”

It was Garald's turn to laugh. “Subtlety notwithstanding,” he said, “I shall send for your gold forthwith and have training arranged for all of you, at a time that suits you.”

“All of us?” Toli wondered. “You mean me too? I mean you already sent me that book to help me with my magic, are you saying you'll train me to yet another grade? It's really incredibly generous of you, but I wouldn't want to think I was stretching our agreement or anything, because that wouldn't be fair at all.”

“One grade or two,” Garald shrugged. “Who's counting? I cannot possibly be generous enough to properly repay you for bringing Mystaya home to me.”

“Speaking of repayment, Your Grace,” Eilidh prompted. “You promised to give me information about someone who may have knowledge to help me?”

Shakaran Palace naturally had easy access to good Techmagic communications and a quick bit of research had confirmed enough of Gamaliel's story to be confident of the truth of the whole. Every citizen of Mythallen had been registered by law for centuries. Most of the details were, of course, confidential, but Eilidh didn't need any of that. Just names, places and dates, which were public record. Normally, information on citizens who lived under the rule of the Hand of Darkness in Avidon or other Libration Front controlled villages were an exception, but the fact that Gamaliel knew of two appearances of a Niltsiar in Avidon meant those records existed in Merlyon and so that took care of that.

Gamaliel had not told Eilidh specifically what he believed connected these Niltsiar women, so the Catalyst could examine the evidence with a critical eye. First appearance of the name was indeed a sixteen year old Spirit mage during the Tech Wars. After that, the name popped up just six more times up the present day. If Niltsiar was a name from legend, why did the name suddenly pop up only in the last two centuries without any such legend becoming popular? Gamaliel had been right to dismiss that theory, Eilidh accepted.

Furthermore, there was no birth or death record for a Niltsiar. They simply appeared, happened to have an exceptionally strong Life Gift, rose rapidly up one particular branch of magic and

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