

The Wizard That Wasn't
Book One of Mechanized Wizardry
By Ben Rovik
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Table of Contents

[Map](#)

[The Wizard That Wasn't](#)

[Chapter One: The Black Disks](#)

[Chapter Two: The Motto](#)

[Chapter Three: A Mind Like An Ocean](#)

[Chapter Four: The Wizard's Path](#)

[Chapter Five: The Squawk Box](#)

[Chapter Six: A Journey of Ten Thousand Paces](#)

[Chapter Seven: The Smiling 'Naut](#)

[Chapter Eight: Feastday Eve](#)

[Chapter Nine: Beneath the White](#)

[Chapter Ten: Braids and Barrels](#)

[Chapter Eleven: The Box Squawks](#)

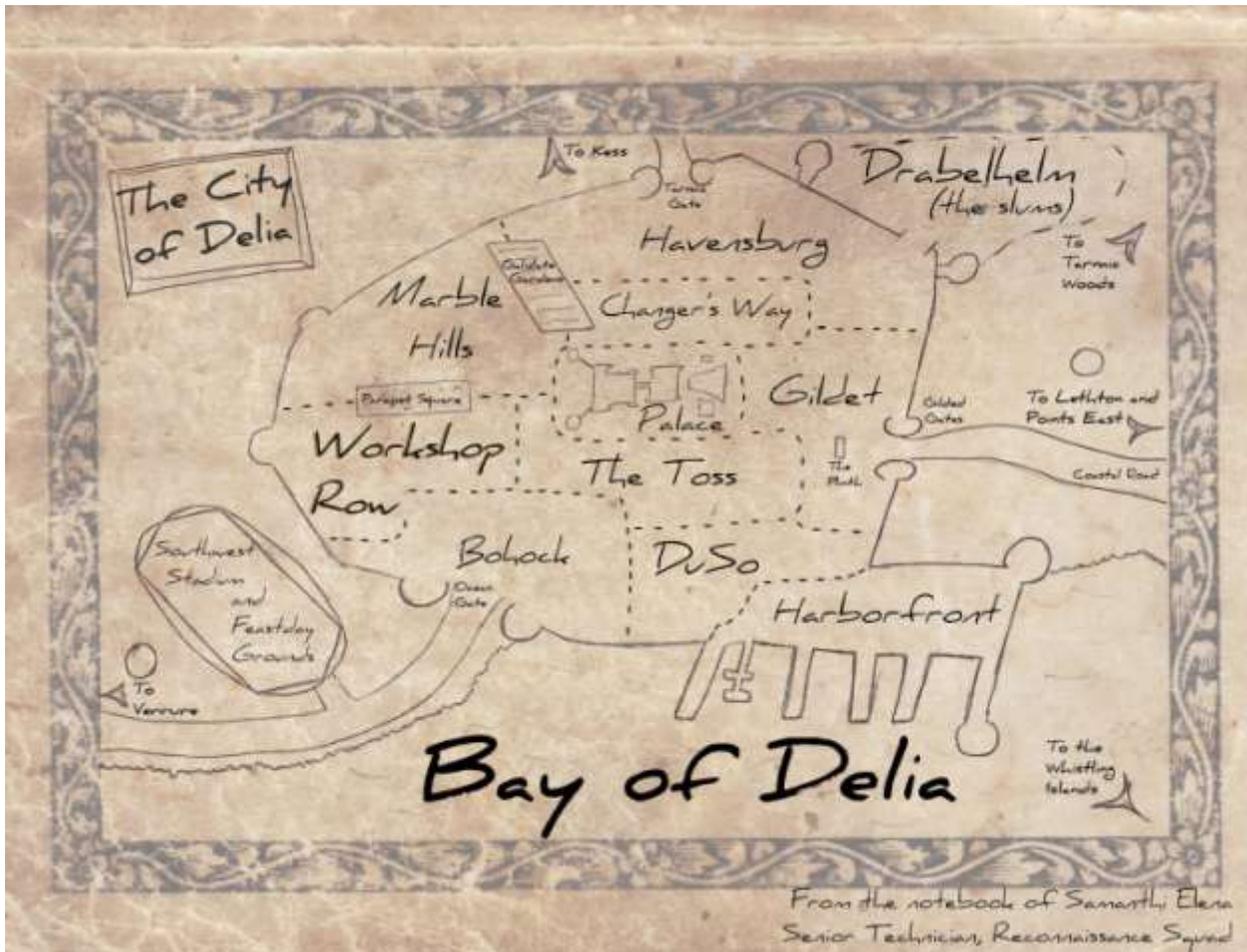
[Chapter Twelve: The Last Ordeal](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: The Royal Visit](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Sample Chapter from The Mask And The Master: Book Two of Mechanized Wizardry](#)

Map



The Wizard That Wasn't

“These Petronauts are not just warriors in wondrous suits of armor. They are not just tinkers with marvelous machines. They are agents of progress for our city, and our human race.

A head of state controls the destiny of his citizens and his nation, but someday, a single Petronaut with an idea may change the entire world.

When that idea emerges, the question that interests me is not where it will end.

The question that interests me is: where did it begin?”

Remarks on Petronaut Independence from Tess Murante Haberstorm

Queen of the City of Delia

854

Chapter One

The Black Disks

The soldier had half a spear sticking out of his arm. It was extremely distracting.

“—my report to the Viscount,” he was saying, his face ashen and his long blond mustache heavy with sweat. Horace Lundin nodded his head in a vigorous show of attentiveness, as his eyes stayed fixed on the piece of wood sticking out of the man’s arm. The soldier pointed with his unimpaired hand to the smoking buildings in the distance as he spoke. Lundin didn’t look, but even from this distance he could hear the clatter of horses’ hooves, the clash of swords, and a single strangled scream from time to time.

“We swept through the western homes with your masters; no sign of arcane symbols,” the blond man said. “Which makes the lake house the likeliest site for the target. I’m afraid getting there won’t be pretty.”

“Not pretty... much like the spear in your arm,” Lundin offered. *Aloud? I hope that wasn’t aloud.* The soldier was looking up at the time, gritting his teeth against the pain, with no sign of having heard anything. *Thank the Spheres.*

The man’s good arm gestured to the wide lake below, and the heavily forested island just east of its center. “Between the water, the archers, the tree cover, can’t get there fast,” he said. The soldier glanced up at Lundin. “Any tricks your masters can pull, now’s the time. Can Petronauts walk on water yet?”

“Depends how far,” Lundin said, making a note.

The man shook his head, wonderingly. “Glad you people are fighting on our side, that’s all I can say. I’d hate to see mechanical knights like you on the other side of the battlefield.”

“Like me?” Oh, I’m just a technician,” Lundin demurred. “Nobody’s scared of *me*.”

The muscular, bleeding soldier raised an eyebrow at Lundin, but had the good grace not to point out how self-evident that was. The Petronaut technician was fresh-faced, and trim enough, but “scary” was nowhere near the top of the list of adjectives the soldier would use to describe him. *Equine, maybe*, the soldier thought. The tech’s long face, bulging eyes, and gangly limbs reminded him of a horse who’d seen better days.

“At any rate,” he told Lundin, clearing his throat, “Unless you Petronauts decide to do it yourselves, the Army’s ready to storm that island. We’re lashing rafts together now. Tell the Viscount ninety minutes and we’ll be across the lake. Now, if you’ll excuse me, sir,” he said, standing to a remarkable height and throwing a calm salute with his unskewered arm, “I need to have this removed.”

“Of course,” Lundin said when nothing else came to mind, flinging up a salute of his own.

As he hurried through the disciplined chaos of the Delian base camp, Horace Lundin involuntarily scratched his shoulder and tried hard not to imagine twelve centimeters of iron and wood embedded in there. A soldier who could deliver a lucid report with that kind of injury, *before* seeing the master of physic? Why would these miserable peasants even think of resisting an army of soldiers like that?

He looked over his shoulder, catching another glimpse of the green lake, its forested island, and the now-smoking homes along the waterside. *If those houses were less on fire*, Lundin thought, *Verrure township would be a wonderful place to live.* What about this bucolic scene had been so intolerable to the peasants? Was paying taxes to the City of Delia so awful, given that Delian roads and markets were responsible for all that income they paid their five percent on? And why, by the eight Spheres, would they think attacking their tax collectors would be the way to accomplish anything? They had to have known that the Army would come riding out in force. *Third peasant village this year to make a fuss for us...*

He shook the distracting thoughts out of his head and pressed on, thin legs carrying him at high speed. There was a battle going on, and an urgent message to deliver.

The greatest of the red-and-black war pavilions was in view now, black-clad couriers coming and going like termites on a mound. The banner of Viscount LaMontina flew from its apex, a rearing bull in

silhouette. All through the base camp, the muddy ground between tents was chewed to pieces by boots and hooves, with only a few defiant tufts of grass remaining. Lundin sidestepped a burly woman with an armful of quivers as an armorer stuck his bald head out of a tent to bellow a final order after her. A master of physic, in characteristic light blue, was moving towards the battlefield with grim purpose. Her orderly followed at a snail's pace, carrying a great basin with both hands and focusing all his attention on not spilling it. A weathered sergeant-major in black and gold was overseeing a squad of grunting conscripts as they loaded a sledge with logs, ropes, and cakes of sticky daub; the materials for the rafts needed to storm the lake house.

This whole encampment had been erected only last night, and, given the way the campaign was progressing, it would be packed away victoriously within ten hours. But, for now, the bustle of soldiers, servants, and supporters was a miniature boomtown with a single industry: war. Lundin's eye fell on (and quickly darted away from) a wooden cage catty-corner from the main pavilion, stuffed with a dozen grimy, bleeding farmers in various states of misery. *Business was good*, he thought soberly.

Lundin felt uneasy in the camp. His squad—the tiny Reconnaissance squad, with two Petronaut knights and two technicians playing squire to them—had not been assigned to an active battlefield like this in the three years he'd been serving the Delian crown. There hadn't been any wars to fight, nor any other perplexing little rebellions to put down. Petronauts were outside any official chain of command, and generally had more dealings with the city guard than the Army. But the Petronaut Board of Governors recognized that volunteering their members as support staff to the Delian Army on occasion was one of the best ways to ensure continued good relations with—and continued independence from—military command. It was a fair trade, Lundin supposed; though working in the camp structure was confusing. He'd been informed that LaMontina's forces were considering him the equivalent of a 'staff sergeant' for the duration of the campaign, rather than think of him as a pure civilian. Lundin was fifty percent sure that meant he outranked the corporal who'd just reported to him. *But who can keep all these silly titles straight?* He shook his head, grousing. First priority, after he delivered the report, would be to get the squad's Communicator up and running so he could talk directly to Sir Kelley, the senior Petronaut on the front lines. None of this he-said/she-said chain of verbal reports and middlemen. One of Lundin's duties was to make sure communication stayed open between the 'nauts and the command pavilion where the techs were stationed. Talking to couriers and corporals was nice, and all, but it was time to start using the right tool for the job.

He thought about the caged peasants again and repressed a shudder. *If I feel this intimidated by all the military muscle on display here, and I'm a part of it, he thought, I can't even imagine what these peasants felt like during the fighting. Especially once Sir Kelley and Sir Mathias showed up...*

Whisp grunted as he shoved the table aside. Sweat beaded the thin black hairs sprouting just above his upper lip. It was his first mustache, and he was cultivating it with the obsessive pride of a rose gardener.

The table's legs clattered loudly against the dirt floor, and the boy stopped with a curse. He raised his head, listening for signs that he'd been overheard. The screams and noise of the battlefield outside the house still sounded far away. He had a few minutes, at least.

The adults of Verrure thought it was a good idea to rough up some tax collectors and stand up to Delia, did they? Well, as far as Whisp was concerned, those old fools could do all the fighting they wanted to. Each geezer who got killed or tossed in the dungeons left behind a hut full of possessions they'd no longer need or care about. There was no reason Whisp shouldn't come through and inspect what was left. He had a future to think about.

Besides, everything valuable that I take is one less thing Delia gets to confiscate, he thought, grinning. *We all join the battle in our own way.*

"Hurry up, Whisp," the tall boy standing by the doorway whined, fidgeting with his sickle.

Whisp ignored him as he snatched up the small hooked rug and tossed it away. Sure enough, there was a shallow pit hidden underneath it, just deep enough to conceal a plain wooden box with no lock. He showed his teeth in satisfaction as he swung the lid open. A tarnished silver locket, a pouch of coins, a pair of mother-of-pearl combs. *Who knew that Mr. and Mrs. Bailish were so rich?* he thought, stuffing the loot into his burlap sack.

Whisp stood. "Come on," he said, swinging the sack over his shoulder and drawing his knife. "Next house."

They had just stepped into the muddy street when a husky boy came squealing towards them. "Whisp! Whisp! It's the Petronauts comin'! What're we gonna do?" he screeched, sounding much younger than his fifteen years.

Whisp swallowed. "Hide in the big bushes by the lake, like we talked about. Tell the rest!" The fat youth turned and ran. The tall boy started to follow him, but Whisp put a hand on his arm.

"Just one more house," he hissed, pointing across the street. "And only you and me split it."

The other boy shook his head frantically. "And tangle with Petronauts? You're crazy, Whisp. You keep your—"

Suddenly, screams rose from the far side of the house, and the two boys whirled towards the sound. The rest of the gang came spilling around both sides of the house in full retreat, clutching their knives and clubs like security blankets, not like weapons. "What in the black flames are you doing—" Whisp started to ask.

Then a man jumped over the house.

The sharp smell of burning Petrolatum filled the air as the man appeared above the roof of the Bailish family hut, fire shooting earthwards from a cylinder strapped on his back. The flame cut off, and the armored man swung his legs forward as his trajectory turned down. He spun in midair and landed on his feet in the middle of street, his heavy boots leaving furrows in the dirt as he skidded to a stop. The boys froze in their tracks, their escape cut off, and stared up at the hulking black-and-silver knight facing them.

"You can drop those now," the Petronaut said evenly, his voice unmuffled by his beaked black helmet.

He pointed at their weapons, and they drew back. All the boys were well aware of the ominous weapon barrels affixed to each of his forearms. There was a faint whine of gears as the big man moved his arms, and a curling trail of smoke emanating from the fiery cylinder on his back.

Whisp stepped forward before his cowering friends could do what the 'naut said. "Come on, boys," he snarled, dropping the bag and raising his knife. "There's ten of us, and just one of him. And he won't be so tough once we get him out of that fancy suit."

"There must be a lot of loot in that bag to make you act so stupid," the Petronaut said, stepping forward calmly. The gang shrank back as he continued, shaking his head. "A bunch of fighting-age boys like you, stealing from your neighbors while your town's rising up in rebellion," he chided gently.

"Their rebellion, not ours," Whisp spat.

“The magistrates will sort that one out. Now,” he said, leveling his arm cannons straight at Whisp’s head, his voice suddenly hard. “Drop your weapons.”

Whisp was sweating profusely. He looked at a point over the ‘naut’s shoulder and gave a barely perceptible nod. The Petronaut saw the signal, and spun around just in time to see three more boys, with iron pikes and pitchforks, come charging towards him from their hiding place in the house across the street.

“Now!” Whisp screamed, slapping heads among his gang and pointing his knife at the mechanized knight. “Now, now, now!” The boys roared and charged the Petronaut from both sides.

Sir Mathias Mascarpone, junior Petronaut of the Delian Reconnaissance squad, just sighed.

He pulled a cord against his breastplate, and the bottom hatch of his thrust pack swung closed. The steam rose instead from three newly open vents about level with his shoulder blades. He braced his legs and pushed a button on a stick strapped to his left hip. Thrust flames shot straight out from his back, roughly at eye level with the knife-wielding boys behind him. Their charge collapsed before it even began as the gang screamed and recoiled from the flames, though only one boy actually took a lick of fire across the face.

The three charging in front of him, their polearms glinting wickedly in the sun, were still coming. One boy lunged at him wildly, stabbing the iron pike towards his chest. Sir Mathias leaned to the side and wrapped his arm around the wooden haft, tucking the pike under his armpit. He bent at the knees and swung upwards with every ounce of motor-enhanced strength he could muster. The pike lifted up high, nearly perpendicular with the ground, and the bewildered young man holding it found himself along for the ride. He let go unthinkingly just before the top of the arc, and momentum carried him, like a champion pole vaulter, face-first onto the Bailish’s roof.

Sir Mathias engaged the rancine coils in his boots and leapt straight up. The other boys stumbling at the target they’d been charging was suddenly two meters up in the air, launched skyward by the pressurized coils encircling his feet and ankles. They looked up as the wooden end of the pike cracked down against their heads with sharp, purposeful blows. Moans filled the air and they held their skulls as Mathias dropped heavily back to earth.

The Petronaut felt a sharp pain along the side of his ribcage and wheeled around, retreating several steps. Whisp’s knife had a few drops of blood along its rusty edge. The boy had found a seam in Sir Mathias’ armor. The Petronaut winced and lifted his arm, trying to take stock of the cut. If he hadn’t moved so soon, that knife would have made it a lot deeper.

Whisp tossed his knife from hand to hand, a knot of half-a-dozen boys still standing behind him with frightened faces and raised weapons. “Get the firebounder,” he shouted, leading the charge.

Two clods of earth exploded in quick succession in front of the gang, spraying them with filth. As they halted, confused, another armored Petronaut raced into their midst.

Sir Kelley was leaner than Sir Mathias, and several centimeters shorter, but he managed to radiate more menace through that sharp black visor than a whole squad of Mathiases could ever muster. The barrels on his wrist were smoking ominously from the lethal rounds he’d just fired, and he carried a long black baton with grim purpose. He whipped the baton into Whisp’s stomach, then, when the youth doubled over, slammed him into the ground with a blow to the back of the skull. The baton kept moving in vicious black arcs, blurring with speed as each blow led directly to the next one, exploiting openings with ruthless precision.

A few short seconds later, Whisp and four other boys lay on the ground, unmoving, and the last two were on their knees with their hands laced behind their heads, trembling with fear. Sir Kelley looked down at them coldly, sliding his baton into a sling low at his hip.

Sir Mathias clenched his teeth in pain as he stepped forward. “Looters, Sir Kelley,” he reported. “Thanks for your help.”

“If you really needed it, you should be ashamed of yourself,” the senior Petronaut said in his clipped voice. He pulled a flat disk from a pouch on his belt and tossed it in the air. It burst seconds later in a cluster of white sparks. The conventional troops they were traveling with would be here soon to cage up the subdued looters.

“Any sign of the target?” Sir Kelley asked.

“We’ve cleared the last of these houses. Still nothing.”

“Then that lake house on the island is the only one place left to look,” Kelley said, flicking his visor up. His green eyes were hard. “Get a messenger back to Lundin, and let’s put an end to this.”

Lundin was preoccupied with his thoughts as he pulled open the brocaded flap to the Viscount's pavilion. He ducked his head to enter, nearly bumping the thin-faced captain trying to exit. They both stopped short. Lundin waited for her to pass, and she expected him to plow forward; but when each saw the other hesitating, they started forward again simultaneously. This time, Lundin's muddy boot scraped the captain's foot, leaving a brown streak on her dark armor.

"After you, please," Lundin said, raising his hands and taking a huge, embarrassed step backwards. The tent flap, which he was no longer holding, swung into the captain's face. He lunged forward to catch it, overreached, and stubbed his fingers on her heavy shoulder guards.

After scrabbling for a proper grip on the tent flap, the captain swept the heavy black-and-crimson fabric aside and stormed forward, her helmet askew. Her blazing eyes judged him top to bottom in a single glance, and Lundin immediately felt ten centimeters shorter. "Sorry, sir," Lundin said weakly.

"If you people had a uniform, you'd be a disgrace to it," she spat. "Now salute your superior."

Lundin saluted frantically. The captain stormed away. Lundin followed her with his eyes, holding the salute with a wavering hand. When she was out of sight, he lowered his hand and very gingerly pulled the tent flap open, checking both directions before ducking inside.

A spherical oil lamp, suspended from the beams in the ceiling, cast orange light over the dozen men and women in the Viscount's pavilion. It was whale oil burning up there, and in the lanterns hanging closer to eye level. The meager supply of petrolatum requisitioned for this simple campaign was needed for more important things than light, like operating the man-sized computing box in the corner. Lundin was cheered up to see his fellow technician, Samanthi, in her usual sprawl at the base of the machine, unscrewing a defunct vacuum tube as the Abacus continued to whirl and click. A black-and-gold officer with a dark beard stood over her with his arms crossed, trying very hard not to look befuddled. Lundin smirked at the sight. *The Petronauts might not have uniforms, he thought, but we've got toys nobody else even knows how to play with.*

Lundin wrinkled his nose as a truly unique smell assailed his nostrils. The wizard—Jelma? Jilmat? he couldn't remember—was hard at work on the other side of the pavilion. 'Work' for a wizard, of course, involved drawing shapes on the floor in colored sand, kneeling inside your artwork, lighting some incense, chewing some suspicious mushrooms, and muttering to yourself for upwards of twelve hours. Occasionally, you might wail, stomp your feet, or remove an article of clothing. (Jellmap here was down to a filthy vest, tiny cloth shorts, and about six bracelets on each tanned, wiry arm.) A wizard's real work began when, after half a day of spellcasting with no concrete result to show from it, you had to feed your clients enough manure to convince them you still deserved your ridiculous fee. Fast talking: that was where the real magic was.

Lundin coughed from the incense, and frowned as he saw a series of four white disks hanging from the beams above the Viscount's table; more wizardly décor, no doubt. He didn't give the wizard another glance as he walked to the commander. Lundin understood perfectly well the need for 'protective spells,' since the peasants theoretically had some magic on their side in this campaign; but it was still damned hard to take the moaning Mr. Jailrat seriously.

"Mister Lundin, was it?" Viscount LaMontina looked up from his maps as Lundin approached. Half a dozen other serious officers stopped their strategizing to look at Lundin, and he had no trouble remembering to salute this time. The Viscount gave him a prompt salute in reply, and Lundin settled back down. LaMontina was a year or two younger than he, actually, though as far above Lundin in the social strata as Earth was from the eighth Sphere. But something about LaMontina put Lundin at ease, more so than anyone else in the camp. The man was broad-shouldered, a fine specimen of military stature, but with a babyish face and a smile that looked almost sheepish when it crept into view. Right now, LaMontina had his brows furrowed in a serious, commanding fashion, and the protective body language of the older officers betrayed only a trace of indulgence. Quashing this rebellion was his first independent campaign, an obvious test bestowed on him by the Regency Council back in Delia. Everyone here—including Lundin—wanted the earnest young commander to succeed.

Lundin arranged himself into a facsimile of parade rest and put on a serious face.

"What news from the Petronaut detachment?" LaMontina asked, his voice quiet and firm.

“Sirs Kelley and Mathias are doing well, Your Grace. A wounded, uh, corporal from the detachment reported that the peasants have been completely routed in the west, and the lakeside homes are clear.”

“Did they find a pentacle?” A balding commander with beaded grey mustaches interjected.

“No sign of enemy wizardry yet.”

All the officers murmured at that. LaMontina’s face fell ever so slightly, behind the façade of command. He tapped a finger meditatively on the rolled-out map, drumming on the green island in the center of the lake. “As feared, then, their wizard must be here.”

“Preparations to storm the island will be redoubled,” an officer said, gesturing to a black-clad courier, who bowed curtly and slipped away.

“The corporal said they’d cross the lake in ninety minutes,” Lundin reported, eyes flicking from face to face. Everyone looked so concerned; you’d think he’d just reported that the Army been routed, not the peasants. So what that there was a single wizard still unaccounted for? Were these hardened military men and women as superstitious as all that?

LaMontina traced a finger around the island on his map. “A great deal can happen in ninety minutes,” he whispered. “If only there was a way to make landfall sooner.”

Lundin wracked his brain, eager to offer help to the young commander. An idea struck him. “Your Grace? The Petronauts, Sirs Kelley and Mathias, might be able to thrust across the water before the rafts, depending on the distance and their ‘tum reserves,” Lundin offered. “Lead the charge, you know?”

“A kilometer from shoreline to this promontory,” LaMontina said, touching the northeastern edge of the island.

Lundin did some quick calculations in his head, and nodded. “They’d have to return on the rafts, but could almost certainly make it across.”

As the implication of Lundin’s words sunk in, the murmuring silenced. The Viscount stood, his officers giving him space as his wide eyes searched the technician’s face. “A one-way trip into the teeth of the enemy’s defenses,” he said, “in advance of conventional support. Would your masters consent to such an endeavor?”

Lundin looked back at the young commander. “If you say it’s necessary, Your Grace, to neutralize that wizard in time,” he replied quietly, “I’m sure you only have to give the order.”

“Thrusting that far over the water? Damned magical themselves, these Petronauts,” one of the officers said, shaking her head in amazement.

“What I wouldn’t give for a hundred like them,” the balding man agreed.

LaMontina chose his words with measured authority. “I, for one, consider it a privilege to command these brave two, and their technicians,” he said, extending his ungloved hand across the table, a smile in his eyes.

He clasped Lundin’s hand firmly. Lundin basked in the glow of his leaderly approval.

“You told him *what*?” Samantha hissed, minutes later, giving Lundin a shove.

Lundin folded his arms and leaned further back into the corner, away from the nearest black-and-gold officer. “The truth,” he whispered defensively. “Kelley and Mathias almost certainly have enough petrolatum to thrust across to the island.”

“Almost certainly?” So, you admit there’s a chance they run out of ‘tum halfway to the island and just plunge into the water in full combat gear. What about the chance archers take them out as they thrust? Or once they reach land with no fuel? Or once they reach the lake house? Or that they die at the hands of the deadly wizard? Any of these probabilities interest you, Horace? Why don’t we run ‘em through the Abacus?”

“You leave Abby out of this,” Lundin said, sulking.

“You leave me out of this,” she retorted, flicking his ear. He yelped. “You’re delivering the good news to Sir Kelley,” Samantha said.

“I’d like to point out that you’re the senior tech.”

“Right. And as the senior tech, I’m officially letting you take the fall for your own flaming screw-up,” Samantha Elena said, pulling her sandy hair back from her round face. She tied it back and turned to

the purring Abacus. "Consider it training. Put those there," she said to a courier arriving with the latest supply figures from the quartermaster.

The courier saluted and set the shallow crate, overflowing with tan cards, on the carpeted floor of the pavilion. The tan cards were dotted with shorthand and symbols in regular patterns, quick reports from officers across the camp on everything from the quantity of blackpowder remaining to the current condition of all the horses. Lundin grabbed a stack of cards and fed them into the waiting slot of the Congregator, a hissing machine with ferocious metallic prongs jutting upwards and outwards, like tusks. A column of blank pink cards was affixed to the side of the machine, contained by thin glass walls. The tan cards Lundin fed with lazy familiarity into the top had symbols designed for human eyes. The Congregator would translate them into the language the Abacus understood best—sequences of open holes and closed spaces. The needle-thin punching teeth hidden inside the Congregator would punch out pink card after pink card and spit them along the horizontal prongs, where Lundin would retrieve them. The pink cards, brimming with the same data in a new, Abacus-friendly format, would be fed into the great machine. And the techs could perform any number of operations on the newly encoded dataset. Once the process was complete, Abby would tell the Army the state of their inventory faster than a team of clerks ever could.

On the other side of the Abacus, Samantha grabbed a blank blue program card, several times larger than the tan data cards, and turned to the press. Lundin shifted his weight, not eager to make the call to Sir Kelley. "You know what?" he said instead. "I'd love to see what Abby has to say about the odds of Kelley and Mathias taking out some drug-addled wizard. What's your wager? 98 percent success rate? 100 percent? Margin of error of a big fat zero?"

"Don't underestimate magicians," Samantha said, shifting the miniscule type on the press.

"They are as far under as I can estimate them. I mean, Sam, look at the buffoon we've got here. What's his name, Jellmik?"

They briefly looked across the pavilion. Through a cloud of incense, they could see the wizard hugging his dirty knees to his chest and rocking back and forth. One of his bracelets was in his mouth. The two technicians shook their heads.

"His name's not Jellmik," Samantha said.

"What is it, then?"

"How should I know? It's hard to strike up a conversation with a guy who's eating his own jewelry."

"I just think," Lundin said, grabbing his own pile of figures from the crate, "that if this hypothetical enemy wizard is anything like our man here, LaMontina has less than nothing to worry about."

"Not hypothetical. Field agents scouted this place out, and it's documented that Verrure has a wizard, and she's on the side of the rebellion. And with the extra something she's got, Horace, if she's any good at all, she's a real threat to the Viscount."

Lundin made a face. Yes, LaMontina had undergone a leech treatment before beginning the campaign. Yes, traitorous conscripts had attacked the orderly on his way to dispose of the leeches, and had taken the bloodsuckers prisoner. Yes, the traitors most likely fled to Verrure with the leeches. So the wizard had a quantity of LaMontina's blood, and it was only a few days old. Even if you accepted conventional wisdom that magic was more likely to work if you had personal artifacts related to your subject, the chance some peasant wizard with a vial of half-digested blood could do any harm to Viscount LaMontina in his pavilion kilometers away was... *miniscule? Laughable? Negligible? Which word says it best?* Lundin considered.

"I don't blame His Grace for taking it seriously," he said, removing old tan cards from their slots on the other side of Abby, and replacing them from the crate of up-to-date cards. The used cards he tossed into a silver bucket full of liquid—the Pickle—where they hissed and bubbled gently. The cards would soften and disintegrate into pulp, ready to be reconstituted and pressed into blank, fresh cards as needed in the future. "He wants this campaign to go perfectly. But if Viscount LaMontina was really concerned for his safety? He wouldn't be this close to the front line!"

"A commander staying twenty kilometers from the front, on his first independent campaign. That'd look great to the Regents," Samantha said evenly from the press, setting the last peg in place. She laid the

blue card onto its plate and swung the type down, to the soft sound of fiber being punctured. The press inscribed a series of operations on the punch card, notated in line after line of holes and closed spaces. Each blue card had eighty lines, of which Abby's reader could process seventy-two. The last eight helped identify each card so the techs had a prayer of keeping them in order. A single misplaced card would throw off the entire program. For the techs, it was the stuff of nightmares to have to shuffle through an entire stack of cards to find out which one was out of place. So Samantha was painstakingly careful as she swapped the new cards for the old ones. When she was done, Samantha would get to pull a big, satisfying lever—the perks of being senior tech—and the program would execute. Nine short minutes later, the computing box would print a comprehensive, to-the-minute report on the state of supply in LaMontina's camp.

'Abacus' was a deliberately ironic name. The Petronauts knew that this state-of-the-art machine was as far from an abacus as a six-pounder cannon was from a sharpened rock.

Samantha looked at Lundin. "His Grace is taking a calculated risk. The danger here is real; small, but real; and he's doing his job regardless, because he's brave. And you, junior technician, are *not* doing your job right now because you're a gutless squab. Now put the damn cards down, call Sir Kelley and tell him what a fun mission you volunteered us for."

Lundin opened his mouth, then bit his lip. Samantha was right, of course. He had to call Sir Kelley now, just as surely as he should have kept his mouth shut when the risky idea had struck him. It was just that LaMontina had needed help, and for once in this campaign he'd wanted to feel like he was really contributing a new idea, a new strategy to the discussion—

"Behold—the disks! The *disks!*"

All eyes in the pavilion turned. The wizard was on his feet, gnashing his teeth, with tears pouring from his eyes. His voice was booming with rage and fear. One long finger was stretched as straight as a pike, pointing above the Viscount's table to the wizardly white disks hanging from the beams—

Lundin blinked. The white disks were turning black.

Like a fire nibbling at the edges of a sheet of paper, blackness was spreading from the outside in on each of the four disks. LaMontina looked up at the dangling circles, his eyes darting from one to the next. "Wizard! What does this mean?" he snapped.

"Peril, oh Graceful One!" the sorcerer wailed. "A spell approaches. Close your mind and make the Sign of Warding!"

After a brief hesitation, LaMontina curled his second and middle fingers into his palm and raised his hand to his chest in the half-remembered gesture everyone learned in childhood. One of his officers took him by the arm.

"Your Grace, we must remove you to safety now!"

"A courier horse has been waiting for this moment. Ride fifteen kilometers distant and no magic can touch you."

"No!" bellowed the wizard, falling heavily to the ground as if his legs had been swept from under him. He looked up, his face stained with the purple sand from his design, and raised two claw-like hands towards the Viscount. Everyone stepped away from the man involuntarily. "No time! Graceful One, Man-Child, He of the Rearing Bull, your life now rests in my hands. Room! Room!"

In response to the wizard's frantic gestures, and LaMontina's confirmation, the officers stepped away. Under the copper light of the whale-oil lamp, the Viscount stood alone behind his desk. The four disks ringing him were no longer white, but halfway obscured by crawling threads of black. Lundin stared at the transforming disks, mesmerized. *What's the trick? How's the wizard controlling his little decorations?*

A rough hand on his shoulder shook him back to reality. The balding commander in black-and-gold was pointing a finger in his face. "Technician! Are your masters in position?"

Two other officers were towering over him, with the urgent menace of strong men who feel helpless. "I—" he stumbled over his own tongue. "I haven't transmitted His Grace's order yet."

The officers swore. "Get the Petronauts to that island this instant. We need to find and kill this flaming wizard before the spell finishes."

Lundin threw a salute so sharply he almost brained himself. He staggered to the cluttered heap of Petronaut equipment and, with a mighty heave, lifted the Communicator out of its case. Lundin set the boxy device roughly onto the crate of paperwork. Two fluted tin speech trumpets stood up straight from the box like daffodils, and a curled crank near the base rose up like a squirrel's tail. Lundin grabbed the crank with both hands. He began turning it as fast as he could, seeing the dial spark with power. "Thirty seconds, at least, until you can make a transmission," Samanthi said, snapping her fingers as her mind whirled. "I'll get the booster antenna; this message *needs* to reach Kelley."

Lundin just nodded as she began assembling the antenna, trying to concentrate on each turn of the crank. But his eyes went back to the disks. What was that blackness?

Across the room, the wizard screamed, and kicked his bare feet through each line of his diamond design. Sand went flying in showers of black, crimson and purple. He grabbed the sticks of burning incense and snapped them in two, and then in two again, seemingly unconscious of the smoldering fire pressing against his hands. He flung the wooden shards to the ground and stripped off his vest. Nearly naked now, he lay down on his back atop the splinters of incense and screeched, "Stay strong, Graceful One!"

Lundin glanced down at the dial as he cranked. Ten more seconds. He raised his head, and caught sight of Viscount LaMontina looking back at him. Standing still with his hand raised awkwardly to his chest in the Sign of Warding, and his ornate black-and-crimson armor undented by battle, he looked like a statue. His youthful face, though, was alive with emotion; confusion, regret, concern, and at this point, a trace of fear. But then that sheepish smile Lundin had only seen once or twice before crept onto his face, almost as if to say he couldn't believe himself to be the center of so much fuss.

"Mister Lundin," the Viscount said, his voice quiet and calm. Lundin swallowed and nodded. "Have you called the Petronauts?"

The dial was glowing dully; a passably full charge, at last. He flicked the switch, snatched the telescoping stalk of the thinner trumpet and drew it upwards to his lips. "Transmitting now, Your Grace," he said. Samanthi stabbed the base of the antenna into its socket on the side of the Communicator, and handed the conical, corded earpiece to Lundin. He raised it to his ear, hearing only the grey, fuzzy sound of an incomplete connection. Who knew how much time would pass before Sir Kelley would respond to the signal.

He took a deep breath, and looked back into LaMontina's eyes. Time stretched out. "Don't worry, Your Grace. Help is on the way," Lundin said in a quavering voice, his emotions surprising him.

The young nobleman shifted his shoulders and stood to his full, proud height, his eyes clear. "I'm not worried," he said in a soft voice that filled the entire pavilion.

And then, as four black disks came fluttering down from the ceiling, Viscount LaMontina burst into flames.

Chapter Two

The Motto

“It didn’t have to happen,” Lundin said again.

The workshop was dim, with the clear white of a single frosted gaslight by the door shedding the only illumination. The crowded shelves loomed over the two workbenches, their shadows casting long black blades onto the far wall. A single carriage clopped by on the street below, outside the shuttered windows. Lundin hadn’t touched his beer.

“And what’s that supposed to mean, Horace?” Samantha said. She leaned back in her stool, pulling a loose thread out of her overalls with an impatient snap. “How does saying that help anything now?”

“There was something else we could have done.”

“You could have called us earlier, there’s a thought,” Sir Mathias Mascarpone said, sipping his beer. The hulking Petronaut drummed his fingers in sequence along his stein, making a sound like a galloping metal pony. “Maybe we could have thrust over to the island alone, like you wanted, and gotten ourselves killed too. That would have helped.”

“Maybe you would have found the wizard in time,” Lundin said.

Samanthi and Sir Mathias exchanged a look. “Not possible, Horace,” he said, more kindly. “All those fighters, and all that ground to cover? Even if you’d called us the instant you got to LaMontina’s pavilion, there’s no way we could have stopped the spell in time.”

“There was no way around this one,” Samantha said. “Now will you just get drunk already so we can stop talking about this?”

“No way around it, huh? Is that what Abby says?”

“Punch a few cards, Horace, by all means,” Samantha said, her color rising. “Play with the variables. Design a hundred scenarios where the Viscount survives. And then get over yourself, because this may have been your first time working a combat zone, but it won’t be your last. And you need to get used to the idea that sometimes people die.”

“But how often do they die through magic?” Lundin rose to his feet, unable to stay still. “Sir Mathias, you’ve seen plenty of fights. How often does a commander burn to death in his pavilion that far from the battlefield?”

“It’s a first for me,” Mathias admitted, sipping his beer.

“Why doesn’t it happen in every battle? There are plenty of people out there calling themselves wizards. If magic is real—“

“You still don’t think magic is real?” Samantha said. “Ask clan LaMontina right now if magic is real.”

“—which it is, obviously,” Lundin continued, “but then why does the battlefield need soldiers? Horses? Cannons? Petronauts? If a peasant witch can kill a guarded, Warded nobleman, why is war ever face-to-face?”

“Because magic fails,” Sir Kelley said from the doorway.

Sir Mathias hastily set down his beer as they turned to look at the senior Petronaut, just inside the doorway. T. Kelley Malcolm, Esq., wasn’t much of a drinker; nor had he gotten familiar enough with his team in three years to let them know what his first initial stood for. After the dressing down he had given Lundin for presuming to make tactical decisions in yesterday’s Verrure campaign, none of them expected Kelley to make an appearance at an informal gathering like this. But there he was, austere as ever in his high-collared black jacket, its polished silver buttons shining like filaments. The white gaslight was harsh on his pockmarked face.

“You could add and subtract a million externals from what happened yesterday,” Kelley said, “and you’d get new results. But you could also keep everything the same—have the same military strategy, Lundin’s same homicidal plan to send Petronauts to their deaths, his same inaction. You could have the same two wizards attempt to cast the same spell and counterspell, and you know what would happen? In almost every case, nothing.” His green eyes were hard. “Because that’s what magic does. It fails.”

“Point of order, boss?” Samantha said in the brief silence that followed. “Magic sort of succeeded yesterday.”

“One in a thousand odds.”

“But why?” Lundin said. “Sir Kelley, look, I’m with you that magic is usually only good for a laugh, but it’s a fact that yesterday magic killed a good man in a terrible way.”

“Yesterday was a fluke.”

“I don’t buy it,” Lundin said without thinking, thumping his palm against the workbench. He caught sight of Kelley’s face tightening and hastily added, “Not to contradict you, Sir Kelley; and can I reiterate again how sincerely sorry I am for yesterday?”

“Yes,” Kelley said, narrowing his eyes.

“But do you know what I mean? Any of you?” Lundin gestured helplessly. “Sir Mathias. What’s the least reliable piece of gear on your suit?”

Mathias tilted his head, oily brown curls of hair spilling towards his shoulder. “I’d say the fire douser,” he decided. “Thank the Spheres we set more fires than we fight, ‘cause that thing never works right in testing.”

“Great! Exactly! Let me think, what was wrong with it last time? The nozzle kept getting clogged...”

“The spread was uneven, one of the hoses leaked, on and on and on.”

“But did we stop there? Petronauts like us? Did we say ‘well, fire dousers just fail, so keep using it just as it is and maybe there’s a one-in-a-thousand chance you’ll be able to put out a fire someday?’”

“Do you like to hear yourself talk, Mr. Lundin?” Sir Kelley said.

“Oh, the opposite,” Lundin said, his hands fluttering with nervous energy. “But, so? Is that what we say, when the douser or anything else acts up?”

“Spheres no,” Samantha said, setting her empty beer down. “When something’s misbehaving, we find the problem and we fix it.”

“*Ultraexi Pillok Mentatum Est,*” Sir Mathias said, reciting a Petronaut motto. “The Mind is the Key to All Things.”

“Yes!” Lundin’s eyes lit up with gratitude. “So what if we could fix... magic?”

There was silence. The sound of a drunk throwing up in the alley across the street wafted through the shutters like an embarrassing smell.

“Get some rest, Mr. Lundin,” Kelley said, turning for the door.

“It must have rules, Sir Kelley! Everything has rules. If we could apply the Petronaut spirit of inquiry, of reason, of perseverance, to the study of magic, maybe—” Lundin’s voice caught in his throat. “Maybe no more good men would have to die from flukes.”

The evening air was warm and heavy in the workshop, and beads of sweat were visible on Lundin’s forehead. Mathias laid a gentle hand on the smaller man’s shoulder. Sir Kelley’s voice lashed out from across the room.

“You want to learn the rules of magic, Mr. Lundin? You want to fix it? You want to apply a spirit of order to the most atavistic, chaotic nonsense humanity has ever indulged in?” Kelley’s green eyes were lit up with a cruel private joke.

Lundin swallowed. “By your leave, Sir,” he said, bobbing up and down in what looked more like a curtsey than a bow.

Kelley was on the verge of laughter, but instead nodded once and turned smartly towards the door. “Well then. Mister Lundin, we shall meet outside your shameful hovel at first light. Be prepared to travel. We are going to meet my grandfather.”

“He has a family?” Samantha murmured to the others.

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