

STORM RISING

Book Two of *The Mage Storms*



MERCEDES LACKEY



The lure of dark magic ...

In a strange way, Firesong actually admired Falcons-bane—or rather, he admired the level of craftsmanship of which Falconsbane was capable in his rare moments of sanity.

And as for Ma'ar's secret of immortality—in its way, that was the most elegant of all his magic.

He *should* be thinking—if he thought about Falcons-bane at all—about those fugitive memories of Ma'ar's, and the “solution” that the Dark Adept had contrived to keep his own land safe from the mage-storms that were going to occur when Urtho died. That was where, if it was anywhere, the germ of their own solution would lie.

But his slippery thoughts kept coming back to that elegant little pattern of stronghold—possession—stronghold. It was just so very clever!

All his adult life he had cherished a secret longing, born when he had learned about his ancestor Vanyel and the love and lifebonding that had lasted through time and across the ages with his beloved Tylendel-Stefen. As foolishly romantic as it was, *he* had longed to find someone, a lifebonded, a soul mate.

Lifebonds were incredibly rare. The chances of ever finding one's lifemate were remote, no matter how much one looked.

But what if you lived for several lifetimes?

What if you had a way to return, over and over, fully as yourself?

What if you managed to find that ethical way to return the way Falconsbane had? You could search as long as you needed to in order to find your lifebonded. And then?

Then, perhaps you could find a way to stay together forever. Vanyel and Stefen had.

And wasn't *that* a fascinating thought?

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STORM RISING

Book Two of The Mage Storms

MERCEDES LACKEY

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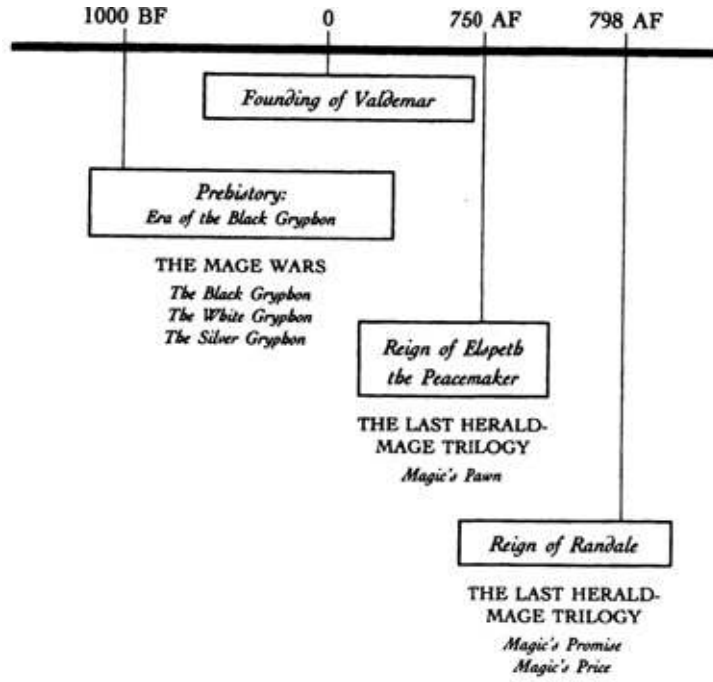
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Dedicated to Teresa and Dejah

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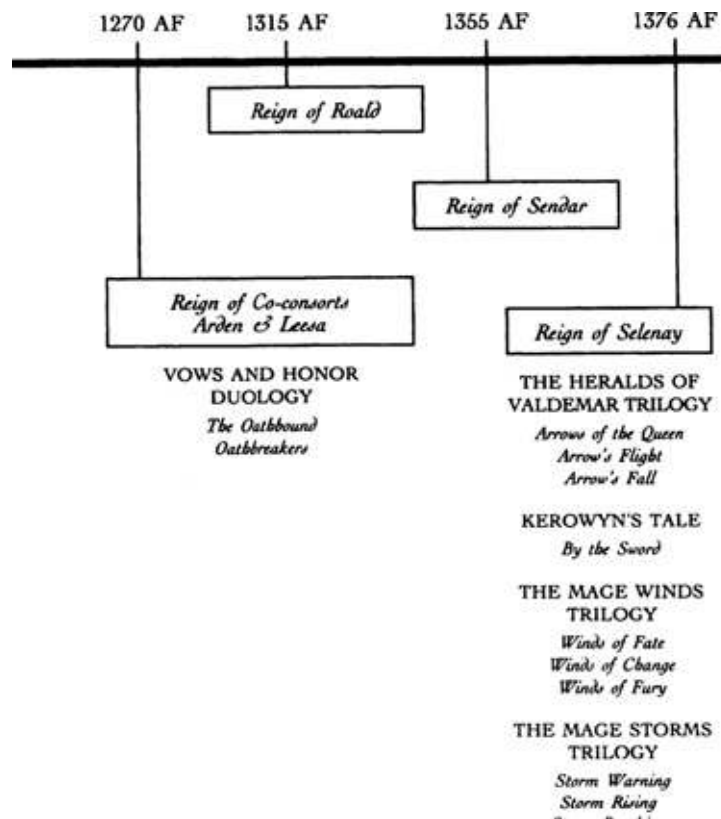
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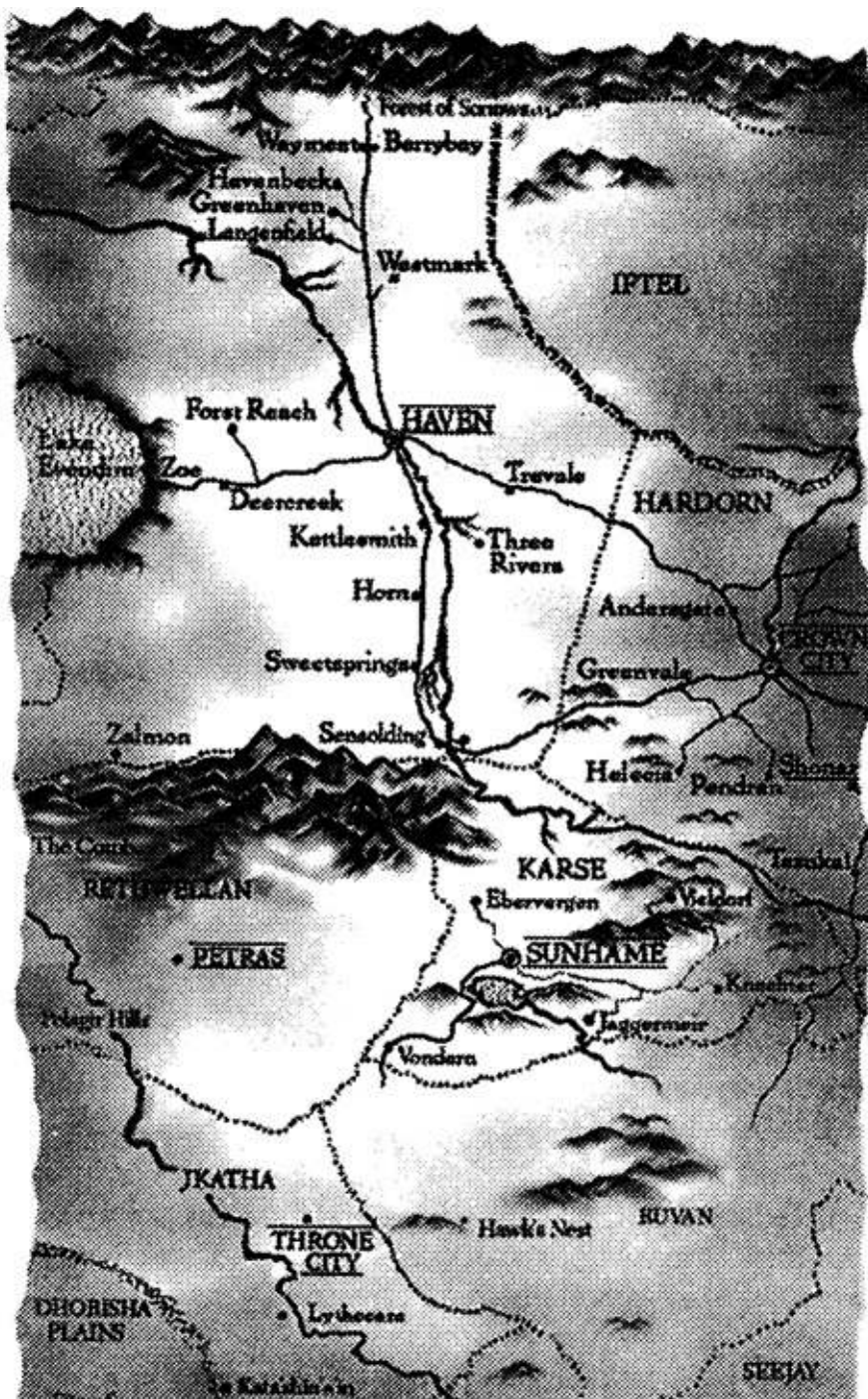


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One

Grand Duke Tremane shivered as a cold draft wisped past the shutters behind him and drifted down the back of his neck. This was a far cry from Emperor Charliss' Crag Castle—which, though outwardly austere, was nevertheless replete with hidden comforts. Even his own ducal manor, while primitive by the standards of Crag Castle, was free of drafts in the worst of weather. Tremane closed his eyes for a moment in longing for his own home as yet another breath of ice insinuated itself past his collar. It felt less like a trickle of cold water and more like the edge of a knife blade laid along his spine.

More like at my throat. That cold breath of air was the merest harbinger of worse, much worse, to come. That was why he had gathered every officer, every mage, and every scholar in his ranks here together, all of them crammed into the largest room his confiscated headquarters afforded.

Who did they say had built this place? A Hardornen Grand Duke at least, as I recall. His own manor boasted many rooms grander than this, and better suited to gathering large groups of men for a serious discussion. The tall windows, though glazed, were as leaky as so many sieves, and he'd been forced to block out the thin gray light of another bleak autumn day by having the shutters fastened down across them; and although fires roared in the fireplaces at either end of the room, the heat went straight up into the rafters two stories above his head, where it was hardly doing anyone any good. In happier times, this wood-paneled, vaulted hall with its floor of chill stone had likely played host to any number of glittering balls and entertainments. The rest of the time it had probably been shut up, given that it was a drafty old barn and impossible to keep at a reasonable temperature. Tremane glanced up at the exposed beams and rafters above him; they were lost in the shadows despite the presence of so many candles and lanterns on the tables that the air trembled and shimmered just above the flickering flames.

The massed candles must be putting out almost as much heat as the fireplaces; too bad none of that heat was reaching him.

Dozens of anxious faces peered up at him. He was seated on a massive chair behind a ridiculously tiny secretary's desk up on the platform where musicians had probably performed. It was uncomfortably like a dais, and he was well aware that such a comparison would not be lost on the Imperial spies in his ranks. Right now, though, that was the least of his concerns. The primary issue here was a simpler one: survival.

He stood up, and the murmur of incidental conversation below him died into silence without the need to clear his throat.

"Forgive me, gentlemen, if I bore you by stating the obvious," he began, concealing his discomfort at addressing so many people at once. He had never been particularly adept at public speaking; it was the one lack he suffered as a commander. No stirring battlefield speeches out of him—he was more apt to clear his throat uneasily, then bark something trite about honor and loyalty, and retire in confusion. "Some of you have been involved in other projects at my request, and I want you all to know our current situation as clearly as possible, so that nothing has to be explained twice."

He winced inwardly at the awkwardness of his own words, but there were some nods out in his audience, and no one looked bored yet, so he carried on. Officers formed the bulk of his audience, massed at three long tables in front of him, dark and foreboding in their field uniforms of a dark

reddish brown—the color of dried blood. Some wag had once made the claim that the reason the field uniforms were that color was to avoid the expense of removing stains after a battle. As a sample of wit, it had fallen rather flat; taken at face value, it might just have been the truth.

To his right and left, respectively, were his tame scholars and the Imperial mages; the latter in a variation on the field uniforms, looser and more comfortable for middle-aged and spreading bodies. The former, as civilians, wore whatever they wished to, and were the sole spots of brightness here. He addressed his first summation to mages and scholars both, rather than to the officers. “Although the Imperial forces have not met with any active opposition since we pulled in our line and took a fortified position here, we are still in hostile territory. Everything to the west of us was completely unsecured when we broke off all engagements, and I would not vouch for Hardornen land to the south and north of our original wedge. Hostilities could break out at any moment, and we must keep that in mind when making plans.”

Grimaces from the scholars and mages, grim agreement from his officers. The Imperial wedge meant to divide the country of Hardorn into two roughly equal parts, to be divided still further and conquered, was now an Imperial arrowhead, broken off from the shaft and lodged somewhere in the middle of Hardorn. And at the moment, he only hoped it was lodged in such a way that it could be ignored by the populace at large.

“We have been cut off completely from Imperial contact ever since the mage-storms worsened,” he continued, giving them the most unpleasant news first. “We have not been able to reestablish that contact. I must reluctantly conclude that we are on our own.”

There were not many in his ranks who knew that particular fact, and widened eyes and shocked glances told where and how the news hit home. They took it rather well, though; he was proud of them. They were all good men—even the Imperial spies among them.

Are any of them still in contact with their overseers in the Empire? I’d give a great deal for the answer to that little question. There was no way of knowing, of course, since anyone who was an agent for Emperor Charliss would be a better mage than he himself was. Charliss was too canny an old wolf not to cover that contingency.

Another draft of cold licked at his neck, and he turned the fur-lined collar of his wool half-cape up in a futile attempt to keep more such drafts away. It was the same dulled red as the uniforms of his men; he wore what they wore. He had a distaste for making a show of himself. Besides, a man in a dress uniform covered with decorations made far too prime a target.

“The mage-corps,” he continued, turning to nod at the variously-garbed men seated at the table nearest him, “tell me there is no doubt but that the magestorms are worsening rather than weakening. As you have probably noticed, they are having an effect on the weather itself, and they will continue to do so. That means more *physical* storms, and worse ones—” He turned a questioning glance at his mages.

Their spokesman stood up. This was not their chief, Gordun, a thickset and homely man who remained in his seat with his hands locked firmly together on the table in front of him, but rather a withered old specimen who had been Tremane’s own mentor, the oldest mage—perhaps the oldest man—in the entire entourage. Sejanus was nobody’s fool, and perhaps the mages all felt Tremane would be less likely to vent his wrath upon someone he had studied under. In this, his mages were incorrect. He would never vent his wrath on anyone telling him a harsh truth—only on someone caught in a lie.

Sejanus knew that, and looked up at his former pupil with serenity intact. “You may have noticed what seems to us of the Empire to be *unseasonable* cold, and wondered if we are simply seeing weather that is normal to this clime,” the old man said, his reedy voice carrying quite well over the

assemblage. “I assure you all, it is not. I have spoken with the local farmers and studied what records are available, and this is possibly the worst season this part of the country has ever encountered. Fall struck hard and early, the autumn storms have been more frequent and harsher, and the frosts deeper. We have made measurements, and we can only conclude that the situation is going to worsen. This is the effect of the mage-storms upon an area that was already unstable, thanks to the depredations of that fool, Ancar. The mage-storms themselves are growing worse as well. Put those things together—and I’d just as soon not have to think about what this winter is going to be like.”

Sejanes sat down again, and Gordun stood up; about them, looks of shock were modulating into other emotions. There was remarkably little panic, but also no sign whatsoever of optimism. That, in Tremane’s opinion, was just as well. The worse they thought the situation was, the better they would plan.

“We’ve flat given up on restoring mage-link communications with the Empire,” he said bluntly. “There isn’t a prayer of matching with them when both of us are drifting—it would be like trying to join the ends of two ribbons in a gale without being able to tie a knot in them.” His face was set in an expression of resignation. “Sirs, the honest truth is that your mages are the most useless part of your army right now. We can’t do *anything* that will hold through a storm.”

“Just what does that mean, exactly?” someone asked from the back of the room.

Sejanes shrugged. “From now on, you might as well act as if we don’t exist. You won’t have mage fires for heat or light now or in the dead of winter, we can’t transport so much as a bag of grain nor build a Portal that’ll stay up through a single storm. In short, sirs, whatever depends on magic is undependable, and we can’t see a time coming when you’ll be able to depend on it again.”

He sat down abruptly, and before the others could erupt with questions, Tremane took control of the situation again.

“The latest mage-storm passed three days ago,” he said. “I have been taking reports since then.” He leafed through the papers he had read so often that the words danced before his mind’s eye. *Give them some good news.* “The last of the stragglers from that engagement outside Spangera trickled in right before it passed. Every man’s been accounted for, one way or another. The preliminary palisades were finished just as the storm hit, so we are now all behind *some* kind of wall or other.” He let them digest that bit of good news for a moment, as a palliative to all the unpleasant information they’d had until now. The shutters behind him rattled in a sudden gust of wind, and the candles flickered as another draft swept the room. This time it was a puff of warm air that touched him, scented with wax and lamp oil.

Shonar Manor, the locals called this place; he’d chosen well when he’d chosen to make it the place where the Imperial Army would dig in and settle down. This fortified manor he had taken as his own had no one to claim it, or so he had been told; Ancar had seen to that. Whether he’d slaughtered the family, root and branch, or simply seen to it that they were all sent into the front lines of his war with Valdemar, Tremane did not know. Nor did it matter, in truth, except that there would be no inconvenient claimants with backers from the town to show up and cause him trouble. The walled city of Shonar itself could hardly hold a fraction of his men, of course, even if he’d displaced the citizens which he had no intention of doing. They were much more useful right where they were, forming a fine lot of hostages against the good behavior of their fellows—and in the meantime, providing his men with the amenities of any good-sized town. In fact, they were being treated precisely as if they were Imperial citizens themselves, so long as they made no trouble. For their part, after their first alarms settled, they seemed satisfied enough with their lot. Imperial silver and copper spent as well as any other.

From the reports Tremane had gotten since the last mage-storm cleared, it was a good thing for

everyone that he *did* get all his men together before it broke.

“The scouts are reporting a fair amount of damage in the countryside this time,” he said, turning over another page without really reading what was written there. “This time it’s not just the circles of strange land appearing everywhere. Though we’ve a fair number of those, and they’re bigger, there are fewer of them emerging—but we have something entirely new on our hands.” He regarded them all with a grave expression; they looked up at him expectantly. “I’m certain that at one time or another each of you has seen mage-made creatures; perhaps some of the attempts to recreate the war-beasts of the past like gryphons or makaar. It appears that the mage-storms are having a similar *changing* effect on animals and plants, but with none of the control that there would be with a guiding mind behind the magic.”

“*Monsters*,” he heard someone murmur, and he nodded to confirm that unpleasant speculation.

“Monstrous creatures indeed,” he acknowledged. “Some of them quite horrifying. *So far* none of them have posed any sort of threat that a well-trained and well-armed squad could not handle, but let me remind you that this last storm hit us by day. What is relatively simple for men to deal with by day may become a much more serious threat in the dark of night.”

What if the animal trapped had been something larger than a bull, or smarter than a sheep? What if it had been an entire herd of something? He sighed, and ran his hand through his thinning hair. “This,” he pointed out fairly, “is going to do nothing for morale which, as most of you have reported to me, is at the lowest point any of you have ever seen in an Imperial Army.”

He turned over another page. “According to *your* reports, gentlemen,” he continued, nodding in the direction of his officers, “this is also to be laid at the feet of the mage-storms. I have had reports of men being treated by the Healers for nothing more nor less than fear, so terrified that they cannot move or speak—and not all of them are green recruits either.” As the officers stirred, perhaps thinking of an attempt to protest or defend themselves, he gazed upon them with what he hoped was a mixture of candor and earnest reassurance. “There is no blame to be placed here, gentlemen. Your men are trained to deal with combat magic, but not with something like this—certainly not with something which is so random in the way it strikes and what it does. There is nothing *predictable* about these storms; we do not even know when they will wash over us. That is quite enough to make even the most hardened veteran ill-at-ease.”

Yes, the one question none of us will ask. What if the mage-storm changes not only beasts, but men?

He smiled a little, and his officers relaxed. “Now, as it happens, this is actually working in our favor. My operatives in unsecured areas tell me that the Hardornens are just as demoralized as our men. Perhaps more so; they are little used to seeing the effects of magic close at hand. And certainly they are not prepared for these misshapen monsters that spring up as a result of the storms. So, on the whole, they have a great deal more to worry about than we do—and that can only be good news for us.”

In point of fact, active resistance had evaporated; it had begun to fade even before the last mage-storm had struck. He watched his officers as they calculated for themselves how long it had been since a serious attack had come from the Hardornen “freedom fighters” and relaxed minutely as he saw *them* relaxing.

“Now—that is the situation as it stands,” he concluded, with relief that his speech was over. “Have any of you anything to add?”

Gordun stood. “Following your orders, Your Grace, we are concentrating all our efforts on getting the single Portal up and functioning. It will not remain functional after the next storm, but we believe we can have it for you within a few days, with all of us concentrating on that single task.”

May the Thousand Little Gods help us. Gordun by himself could have created and held a Portal

before these damned storms started. Will we find ourselves wearing skins and chipping flint arrowheads next?

He nodded, noting the faintly surprised and speculative looks his officers were trading. Did any of them have an inkling of what he was about?

Probably not. On the other hand, that is probably just as well.

Finally, at long last, it was the scholar's turn; he did not even recognize the timid man urged to his feet by the sharp whispers of his fellows, which argued for more bad news.

"W-we regret, Y-your G-grace," the fellow stammered nervously, "there is n-nothing in any r-records to g-give us a hint of a s-solution to the s-storms. W-we l-looked for hidden c-ciphers or othe k-keys as you asked, and there was n-nothing of the s-sort."

He didn't so much sit down as collapse into his seat. Tremane sighed ostentatiously, but he did not rebuke the poor fellow in any way. Even if he'd been tempted to—the man couldn't help it if there was nothing to find in the records, after all—he was afraid the poor man would faint dead away if the Grand Duke even looked at him with faint disapproval.

These scholars are hardly a robust lot. Or perhaps it is just that they are neither fish nor fowl—neither ranked with the mages nor bound to the army, and thus have the protections of neither.

Odd. That wasn't anything he would have taken much thought for, in the past. Perhaps because he knew they were on their own, he was taking no man for granted, not even a scholar with weak eyes and weaker muscles.

"Gentlemen," he said, even as those thoughts were running through his head, "now you know the worst. Winter is approaching, and much more swiftly than any of us thought possible." As if to underscore his words, the shutters that had been rattling were hit by a sudden fierce gust that sounded as if they'd been struck by a missile flung from a catapult. "I need your help in planning how we are meet it when it comes. We need shelter for the men, walls to protect us, not only from the Hardornen but from whatever the mage-storms may conjure up. We cannot rely on magic—only what our resources, skills, and strength can provide." He cast his eyes over all of them, looking for expressions that seemed out of place, but found nothing immediately obvious. "Your orders are as follows; the engineering corps are to create a plan for a defensive wall that can be constructed in the shortest possible time using army labor and local materials. The rest of you are to inventory the civilian skills of your men and pool those men whose skills can provide us shelter suitable for the worst winter you can imagine. Do not neglect the sanitation in this; we are going to need *permanent* facilities now, something suitable for a long stay, not just latrine trenches. Besides shelter, we will need some way to warm that shelter and to cook food—if we begin cutting trees for the usual fires, we'll have the forests down to stumps before the winter is half over." Was that enough for them to do? Probably, for now. "You scholars, search for efficient existing shelters, ones that hold heat well, and some fuel source beside wood. If you find anything that looks practical, bring it to my attention. Mages, you have your assignment. Gentlemen, you are dismissed for now."

The men had to wait to file out of the great double doors at the end of the hall, suffering the cold blasts penetrating the hall as one of the shutters broke loose and slapped against the wall. The Grand Duke was not so bound; his escape was right behind the dais, in the form of a smaller door at which his bodyguard waited, and he took it, grateful to be out of that place. The short half-cape did nothing to keep a man warm; he wanted a fire and a hot drink, in that order.

The guard fell in silently behind him as he headed for his own quarters, his thoughts preoccupied with all the things he had not—yet—told his men.

The mages probably guessed part of it. They were not simply cut off, they had been *abandoned*, left to fend for themselves, like unwanted dogs.

The Emperor, with all the power of all the most powerful mages in the world at his disposal, could (if he was truly determined) overcome the disruptions caused by the mage-storms to send *some* kind of message. Tremane had never heard of a commander being left so in the dark before; certainly it was the first time in his own life that *he* had no clue what Charliss wanted or did not want of him.

There could be several causes for this silence.

The most innocent was also, in some ways, the most ominous. It was entirely possible that the mage-storms wreaking such havoc here could be having an even worse effect within the Empire itself. The Empire had literally been built on magic; distribution of food depended upon it, and communications, and a hundred more of the things that underpinned and upheld the structure of the Empire itself. If that was the case—

They're in a worse panic than we are here. Civilians have no discipline; as things break down, they'll panic. He was enough of a student of history himself to have some inkling what panicking civilians could do. *Rioting, mass fighting, hysteria ... in a city, with all those folk packed in together, there would be nothing for it but to declare martial law. Even then, that wouldn't stop the fear or the panic. It would be like putting a cork on a bottle of wine that was still fermenting; sooner or later, something would explode.*

Tremane reached the warm solitude of his personal suite, waving to the bodyguard to remain outside. That was no hardship; the corridors provided more shelter from the cold drafts than half of the rooms did. Fortunately, *his* suite was tightly sealed and altogether cozy. He closed the door to his office with a sigh. No drafts here—he could remove his short winter cloak and finally, in the privacy of his quarters, warm numb fingers and frozen toes at a fire.

The second possibility that had occurred to him was basically a variation on what he, himself, had just ordered. The Emperor *could* have decreed that literally everything was to be secondary to finding a way for the mages to protect the Empire from these storms. There would be no mages free to try and reopen communications with this lost segment of the army. The Empire itself might be protected, but that might very well be all the mages could manage.

But the Empire would hardly spend such precious resources as Imperial mages on the protection of client-states. No, only the core of the Empire, those parts of it that were so firmly within the borders that only scholars recalled what names they had originally borne, would be given such protection.

Which means, he mused, feeling oddly detached from the entire scenario, that the client states are probably rearming and revolting against Charliss. If the Empire itself is under martial law, all available units of the army have been pulled back into the Empire to enforce it. They won't be spending much time worrying about us.

No, one segment of the Imperial Army, posted off beyond the borders of the farthest-flung Imperial Duchy, was not going to warrant any attention under conditions that drastic.

But no one born and raised in the Imperial Courts was ever going to stop with consideration of the most innocent explanations. Not when paranoia was a survival trait, and innocence its own punishment.

So, let us consider the most paranoid of scenarios. The one in which our enemy is the one person who might be assumed to be our benefactor. It was entirely possible that these mage-storms were nothing new to Emperor Charliss. He could have known all along that they were going to strike, and where, and when. In fact, it was possible that these storms were a weapon that Charliss was testing on *them*.

Tremane grew cold with a chill that the fire did nothing to warm.

This could be a new terror-weapon, he thought, following the idea to its logical conclusion, as his muscles grew stiff with suppressed tension. What better weapon than one that disrupts your enemy's

ability to work magic, and leaves land and people beaten down but relatively intact?

There was even a “positive” slant to that notion. Perhaps this was a new Imperial weapon that was meant only to act as an aid to them in their far-distant fight, and it simply had a wider field of effect than anyone ever imagined.

But far more likely was the idea that, since no one knew precisely what the weapon was going to do it was tested out here, in territory not yet pacified, so that any effect on Imperial holdings would be minimal. Tremane and his men were nothing more than convenient methods by which the effectiveness of the weapon could be judged—

Which would mean that they are watching us, scrying us, seeing how we react and what we do, and whether or not the locals have the wit to do the same. This lack of communication was a deliberate attempt to get them to react without orders, just to see what they would do.

If this happened to be the true case, it ran counter to every law and custom that made the Army the loyal weapon that it was. It would be a violation of everything that Imperial soldiers had a right to expect from their Emperor.

For that matter, being left to fend for themselves was almost as drastic a violation of that credo.

In either case, however, this would *not* be above what could be done to test a candidate for the Iron Throne. Other would-be heirs had been put through similar hardships before.

But not, his conscience whispered, their men with them.

That was what made him angry. He did not mind so much for himself; he had expected to be tested to the breaking point. It was that the Emperor had included his unwitting men in the testing.

There was no denying that, for whatever reason, Charliss had abandoned them. There had been time and more than time enough for him to have sent them orders via a physical messenger. This silence was *wrong*, and it meant that there was something more going on than appeared on the surface. It was the Emperor’s sworn duty to see to the welfare of his soldiers in times of crisis, as it was their sworn duty to protect him from his enemies. They had kept their side of the bargain; he had reneged on his.

It would not be long before the rest of the army knew it, too. In a situation like this, they all were aware they should have been recalled long ago. Since there was no way that a Portal could be brought up that was large enough to bring them all home, Charliss should have sent in more troops to provide a corridor of safety so that they could *march* home. And he should have done all this the moment the mage-storms began, when it became obvious that they were getting worse. Then they would not only have been safely inside the Empire by now, they would have been on hand to deal with internal turmoil. That meant a kind of double betrayal, for somewhere, someone was going shorthanded, lacking the troops he needed to keep the peace because the Emperor had decided to abandon *them* here.

Or rather, it was more likely that he had opted to abandon *Tremane* and, with him, his men. He had probably written Tremane off as the potential heir because he had not achieved a swift victory over Hardorn, and had chosen this as the most convenient way to be rid of him.

And if I cannot contrive a way to bring us all safely through the winter, they will suffer with me.

That was the whole point of his anger. He had been schooled and trained as an Imperial officer; he had been an officer before he ever became a Grand Duke. This callous abandonment was counter to both the spirit and the letter of the law, and it made Tremane’s blood boil. It represented a betrayal so profound and yet so unique to the Empire that he doubted anyone born outside the Empire would even understand it, or why it made his skin flush with rage.

The men would certainly understand it, though, when they finally deduced the truth for themselves and then worked through their natural impulse to assume that anything so *wrong* could not be *true*. And at that point—

At that point they will cease to be soldiers of the Empire. No, that's not true. They will be soldiers of the Empire, but they will cease to serve Charliss.

He sat down in the nearest chair, all in a heap, as the magnitude of that realization struck him. Revolt—it had not happened more than a handful of times in the entire history of the Empire, and only once had the revolt been against an Emperor.

Was *he* ready to contemplate revolt? Unless he did something drastically wrong, it was to him that the men would turn if they revolted against Charliss. Was he prepared to go along with that, to take command of them, not as a military leader, but as the leader of a revolt?

Not yet. Not ... yet. He was close, very close, but not yet prepared to take such drastic action.

He shook his head and ordered his thoughts. *I must keep my initial goals very clearly in mind. I must not let anything distract me from them until the men are secured to face this coming winter. That is my duty, and what the Emperor has or has not done has no bearing on it.* He set his chin stubbornly. *And to the deepest hells with anyone who happens to get in my way while I am seeing to that duty!*

He rose and went directly to his desk. The best way to ensure total cooperation among the men was to make things seem as normal as possible. So—to keep them from thinking too much about the silence from the Empire, he should keep up military discipline and structure the changes he planned to make to the military pattern.

He wrote his officers' orders quickly but carefully. He had already recruited a half-dozen literate subalterns to serve as scribes and secretaries since it was no longer possible to replicate written orders magically—and they would have to be able to read his handwriting in order to copy it. Now he was grateful for the “primitive” but effective and purely mechanical amenities of this manor. Nothing here had been affected by the storms. His lights still burned; his fires still heated. His cooked food arrived at the proper intervals from the kitchen. The jakes performed their function, and the sewage tunnels carried away the result without stinking up the manor. Somehow he was going to have to find men who could manage these same “primitive” solutions for an entire army.

We need men who don't need magic to get things done. Leather workers, blacksmiths—farmers, even—break all the work of running the camp down into what is and isn't done by magic, then scour the ranks for those who know how to do those jobs with ordinary labor. Now, how to see to it that these men were given the appropriate recognition so that they would volunteer their abilities ...? Well, that was a simple problem to solve. *Promote them to “specialist” rank, with the increase in pay grade.* There was nothing like an increase in pay to guarantee enthusiastic cooperation.

He put the cool, blunt end of his glass pen to his lips for a moment, and felt his lips taking on a wry twist. *Money. There isn't much in the coffers at the moment. Well, that makes the plan that much more important.* Money was the other constant in the Imperial Army, and had been, from time immemorial. *Small wonder, given that our history claims we began as a band of mercenaries.* Regular pay was the foundation of loyalty when it came to the individual Imperial fighter. Troops had been known to rise up and murder commanders who shorted their pay; an Emperor had been dethroned for failing to pay the army on time and another had been put in his place because he had made up pay and even bonuses for the men directly under his command out of his own pocket.

Of course, there had never been a situation like this one, with troops abandoned so far from home, and cut off from all supplies. Under circumstances like this one, his men *might* be understanding ... or they might not. It was best to be sure of them for now.

He sanded the inked orders and took them to the door of his quarters, where one of his bodyguards took them away to the corps of secretaries to be copied and distributed.

“I do not want to be disturbed under any circumstances,” he told the guard, who nodded and saluted, and when he went back into his room and closed the door, he also locked it. The guard would think

nothing amiss in this. Locking his door was nothing new; he often required privacy to think and plan. There was no one of higher rank here to question that “need” for absolute privacy.

This time, however, he needed privacy to act, not to think. And it was just as well that he had made a habit of privacy. No one would know what he did here, tonight.

Thanks to the Little God of Lust that my aunt was his devotee. If it had not been for his aunt, and his own need for secrecy.... He sat down at his traveling desk and reached beneath it, straining a little to touch the spot behind the drawer that held his pens, ink, and drying sand. The place he needed to reach lay just past the right-hand corner of that drawer....

He felt the tiny square of wood sink as he depressed it, and he quickly removed the pen drawer, taking it out of the desk and placing it on top, out of the way. His aunt had been a woman who was very protective of her secrets—and absolutely ruthless in that protection. If he had removed the drawer first, pressing the key-spot on the bottom of the desk would have resulted in a poisoned needle through the fingertip. Within an hour, he would have been dead. The poison on that needle was known to persist in potency for two hundred years, and as for the mechanism, he was certain it would outlive him. He reached into the cavity that had held the drawer and felt for a similar spot in the back of the cavity and on the right-hand side.

Another square of wood sank beneath his questing finger, and he moved his hand to the left side of the cavity. In this case, had he not removed his hand immediately but continued to press at the spot, it would have triggered a second mechanism, and the secret drawer he was trying to free would have locked into place. Unless you knew the way to reset it, nothing short of hacking the desk to pieces would allow one to reach that hidden drawer.

That second drawer, the secret one, half the height of the original, had slid a bare fraction out of the back of the cavity. He pried it completely out, touching *only* the top edge, and brought it out of its hiding place into the candlelight. It, too, was trapped; this time with a slow-acting contact poison that was a natural component of the wood forming the bottom. He was *very* careful not to touch the bottom, only the sides. The inside was lined with slate to insulate what it held from the poisonous wood.

All of this was quite necessary, for within this drawer was an object that meant death without trial if it was ever found in his possession. Or rather, it *had* meant a death sentence. Now, well—unless there was an Imperial spy in his army with the rank and authorization to carry such a sentence out, it was—

It is less likely. I will never say “unlikely” when it comes to the power of the Emperor.

More precious than gold, more magical than jewels, more potent than drugs. It was the pure, crystallized essence of power. He took it from its nest of silk with hands that were remarkably steady given the deadly danger it represented.

It was a completely accurate copy of the Imperial Seal, identical in every way, mundane and magical, with the original. It had been obtained at incredible risk—although the actual *cost* had been minimal, for he had made the copy himself. He could never have bought this; there was not enough money in the world to pay a mage to make this, and not enough to bribe an Imperial secretary to let it out of his keeping long enough to make that copy.

He set it carefully on the desktop, and the memory of the first time he had placed it on this very desk overlaid itself on the present.

To this day, it was the single most daring act he had ever accomplished. He was still not entirely certain what had possessed him to even contemplate such a mad action. Although he had not known it at the time, it was Emperor Charliss’ policy to assign each of the potential candidates for the Throne to a stint within the Imperial Secretariat, so that they would know what the duties of their underlings were—and where the opportunities for bribery and espionage among those underlings lay. During *his*

tour of duty, the Imperial Seal had come into his hands for two entire days, as he followed Charliss on a Royal Progress through newly conquered lands. Charliss had been preoccupied with the machinations of a local satrap and had immersed himself in dealing with his twisted and involved plots to defraud Emperor and Empire of their rightful portions and authority. He'd sensed possible treachery, and had entrusted the Seal to Tremane while he dealt—personally and magically—with the “problem.” He'd had no other thoughts on his mind, and it might have been that he had forgotten that Tremane was a mage.

But Tremane's skill, while not the equal of the Emperor's, was still sufficient to copy the Seal. By sheerest accident, he'd had the time, the materials, and the Seal itself, all at once, all readily at hand. The temptation had been too great; he'd bent to it and had made the Seal during one long, feverish night of work.

Once he had made it, however, he had almost destroyed it in panic. Only one thing had prevented him from doing just that: the existence of this desk.

He'd inherited it from an aunt with numerous lovers—many of them dangerous to know, all of them married to other women. She'd had the drawer built to conceal missives too hazardous to keep, but too precious—emotionally or with an eye to later blackmail—to burn. It was the only place remotely safe enough to hold something as risky as a copy of the Imperial Seal.

Since that time, the desk and its burdensome secret had always traveled with him. He had used it only once, just to be certain that it *was* identical in every way to the original, and then only to seal a document the Emperor had already approved and signed, one of an entire stack of similar documents that Charliss had signed and sealed without glancing more than once at each.

Now, however, Tremane was about to forge a document that the Emperor would definitely never approve of.

On the other hand, in order to reach him to bring him to justice, once the deception was discovered the Emperor was going to have to come to *him*. Or, at least, his minions were.

That was hardly going to be an easy proposition, all things considered. There was a great deal of disturbed and hostile territory between him and the Emperor.

It was also going to be some time before Tremane was found out, and during that time conditions were only going to worsen, which would further protect him from Imperial wrath.

Besides all that, there was no telling if Charliss could manage to track Tremane down in the first place, much less put through a Portal to haul him back for justice—or send troops across the unsettled countryside of Hardorn to accomplish the same goal.

In either case, he would prove he *could* reach them—and there would be questions about why he had not evacuated the troops if he could pursue Tremane to bring him to book for his actions. Charliss would have no excuse not to bring back the rest of the army as well as the errant Grand Duke.

If he does come after me, I would just as soon it were an overland trek. I have a notion that I could manage to escape from custody during a mage-storm if I put my mind to it. He shook his head again; he was allowing himself to be distracted by speculations. He must keep his mind on his immediate goals.

Especially since he was going to need intense concentration and a very steady hand for the next few hours.

He wrapped a scarf around his forehead to keep sweat out of his eyes; not that he was too warm, but he knew from past experience that he was going to be sweating from nervousness. He had to be able to see clearly, and he didn't want any drops falling on his pages either; Imperial scribes did not *sweat* over their work. Setting aside the secret drawer and the pen drawer, he selected a new glass pen and picked out one very special bottle of ink. While this bottle was not going to land him in any trouble,

might have caused some raised eyebrows if anyone had known that Grand Duke Tremane possessed a bottle of the special ink used for official Imperial documents, ink made with tiny, glittering flecks of silver and gold in it, to mark the letters as coming unmistakably from the hand of an Imperial scribe.

First, though, he took out a piece of paper and a silver-point pencil, and worked out the exact wording of the document he intended to forge.

It wasn't terribly elaborate—but it wasn't every day that someone came to an Imperial storage depot, authorized to empty it and the Imperial pay coffers of every scrap, bit of grain, and copper coin. The wording had to be such that it would cause no one to question it during the time he and his men were there.

This was the plan. He had one chance to ensure the survival of *all* of his men this winter—if the storage depot was fully stocked, as he expected it to be, there would be enough supplies there to see them all through, not only until spring, but possibly even well into summer. If the coffers were full, the men could be paid for long enough that he would have the time to win their personal loyalty. Even if there was no place for the soldiers to spend the money locally, their morale would be buttressed simply by having it to spend later. So now it was time.

This was the Portal he had targeted for reopening, the one leading to the storage depot lying nearest them. Fortunately, it was *in* his duchy, and he'd had to fight the temptation to use it to flee homeward, leaving his men to loot the depot and then fend for themselves. But his duty lay here; his duchy was in good hands, and there was no one there he had any real emotional ties to. And frankly, when his raid was complete, he would be much safer here than there. *Here* was a known quantity. The mage-storms may have left his home duchy a chaotic wreck, and holding a Portal open long enough to move more than just a raiding party through could be impossible.

This was a small Portal, able to take only a few men at a time, and the mages doubted that they would be able to hold it open for more than a few hours. He would not be able to use it to bring more than a scant fraction of the troops home—but he *could* use it to bring everything they needed back here.

He had a select group of experienced and trusted men from his personal guard ready to move the moment he alerted them. They were all huge; as his bodyguards, they towered over him. Before joining his guard, they had all worked as stevedores or in similar occupations. The Portal wasn't even large enough to admit anything bigger than a donkey; what they brought out would have to be moved with the help of those tiny beasts of burden and their own muscles.

Once he had the wording worked out, he dipped his pen carefully in the special ink, and began tracing the glittering letters on the snow-white vellum.

The very act of writing with such ink on such a surface brought back more memories—of overseeing the Imperial scribes, of writing such documents himself during a brief stint as an Imperial scribe, when he had been brought to court by his father at the age of sixteen.

All the discipline drilled into him at that time came back, steadying his hand, and sending his breathing into the calming patterns that enabled the scribes to work, bent over their desks, in a state of meditative concentration for hours at a time. This did not, however, keep him from making mistakes.

An Imperial document would be flawless. There would be *no* mistakes, no blots, no misspelled words. He could not permit the tiniest discrepancy between this document and the genuine ones that would have been presented ever since the depot opened.

He made and destroyed half a dozen copies before he had a perfect one. As he waited for the ink to dry, he threw the rest, and his faint original of the wording, into the fire. He watched them burn, making sure that they were all reduced to ashes before turning back to the next and most difficult part of his forgeries.

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