

# TISIPHONE'S QUEST

**SAMPLE**

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*For Dave\*.*

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Samantha stood in the doorway and studied the library's wreckage. The air reeked of fire retardant and burned plastic.

A junior member of the force approached and said, "Detective? The wizard is here."

"Who'd they send?" she asked, still concentrating on the scene before her. A spray of organic matter on the antique desk marked where the body had been found. Around the periphery, crime scene techs worked with steady purpose, recording the scene and deploying sniffer robots to search for evidence.

"Dunno, just saw the car land."

Sam frowned at him, shoved her hands into her jacket pockets, and walked down the hall. A solemn young woman guarded the front door and gave Sam a nod. A broad lawn stretched away, bright green under the morning drizzle. Sam headed toward the far edge of the grass and the flashy civilian car that had landed there, much smaller than the police vehicle nearby. Someone in blue and silver robes climbed out and walked toward her, carrying a staff and a leather satchel. The figure was non-human, bipedal, and furry. It had large, tufted ears and was too tall to be a Langen,

so Sam spoke with some confidence.

"Magister Cloud, isn't it?" As far as she knew, Cloud was the only Chterrian on the planet.

"Indeed it is." Cloud's voice was higher than expected, her speech accented but clear without relying on a translator. Her facial markings reminded Sam of a snow leopard, though her features were narrower and sharper than those of the Earth animal. She gave Sam a bow and said, "Delighted to meet you...?"

"I'm Detective Sarafian. This way, if you would. Did they brief you?" She glanced back at the house, with its fantastical neo-Victorian architecture and its dead owner.

"Yes." Her whiskers twitched. "Professor St. Cyr has been killed, and the university hopes that I will be able to assist the authorities."

Sam studied Cloud's features and found them unreadable. "Did you know him?"

"Not well. We met at some functions. He will be very much missed, naturally. I do hope I will be able to help."

"I hope so, too." She set off across the lawn at her usual quick pace. Cloud was taller than Sam, and kept up easily as she spoke. "It happened about four hours ago, near three AM. He lived alone. Had some human staff—it was the cook who found him this morning and called us. No one else would normally have been there at that hour. We're canvassing the neighborhood, but the place is pretty well isolated, and it wouldn't be surprising if no one noticed anything."

"No doubt he had a security system?"

"Top-line, and it's been thoroughly fucked with. Not an amateur job. Working theory is that it was a theft. He got a shipment of artifacts yesterday and was still cataloging it. Doesn't look

like any other parts of the house were touched. Anything you can get us on the state of the room when it happened would be more than we have right now."

Even though Sam had never left her sight, the officer at the front door checked their IDs before letting them through. They passed down the long, mirrored hall to the library. Merciless light spilled through the library doorway and made Sam squint after the gloom outside. A technician came to meet them.

"We're almost done in here," he said. "Starting to sweep the rest of the place." He looked at Cloud. "You going to need us for anything?"

"Where was the main interface?" the wizard asked.

"The desk. Nothing usable left there. Whole system fried."

"May I use it without disturbing your work?"

"It's been sealed. Go ahead."

Sam looked at the surface in question and felt anger stir. Murder was rare on Gnosis. This was no puzzle or training exercise; someone had broken into this house and burned an old man's brains out. Her analytical mind noted the emotion and welcomed it as fuel for the work ahead.

Cloud thanked the tech and began a circuit of the room as the robots and their masters filed out. Tidy cases of artifacts, books, and fragments of jewelry lined three of the walls; the fourth held windows and a set of doors opening onto the lawn. Crates lay scattered around the floor, some of them open, their contents on the floor.

"The new shipment, I presume?" she asked.

Sam nodded. "We're checking the manifest against what's here, to see whether anything was taken."

Cloud ended her survey at the desk. Sam put her anger away

again and watched as she pulled items from her bag: dried leaves, vials labeled in alien script, a tiny bronze censer. Even on Gnosis, one seldom had a chance to watch a top-flight wizard at work. Every so often Sam caught a glimpse of a ringed tail, trailing just below the hem of her robe.

When all had been arranged to her satisfaction, Cloud looked up at Sam and said, "If you could remain where you are for a few moments? This should not take very long."

Sam nodded. Cloud lit the censer. She crushed the leaves and strewed them in a circle on the desk. They gave off a summery smell that contrasted with the bitter tang of the incense. She picked up her staff and began to recite the spell, her voice quiet but firm. The language was from Earth and had been ancient a thousand years before spaceflight.

Cloud added the vials' contents to the smoldering mixture in the censer. Aromatic smoke filled the room. Most of it dissipated quickly, but some of it stuck in places, highlighting lines in the air, on the desk, on the walls.

Sam stifled a cough and asked, "What is all that?"

"Dusting for traces." Cloud gave what she thought was a smile, arching her whiskers. "I suspect they used canned spells to interfere with the computers." She waved at the revealed marks. "I should be able to overcome those now. The physical damage will remain, but your odds should be much improved."

"Great. How long?"

"Depending on how many spells they employed, perhaps an hour."

Sam bit back frustration and said, "All right. Let me know when you're done." Guessing that her hovering would distract the wizard, she went back outside to where the big car waited.

She could track the technicians' progress from there, and the reports of the officers elsewhere in the neighborhood. *Good morning, title-indicating-respect, I am with the Forrest City police department. Sorry to disturb you, but did you notice anything unusual in the early morning today?* It was a time-honored ritual, and she suspected that it wasn't going to do them any good. She punched up Cloud's CV and was only halfway through it—top of her class, assorted post-doctoral honors, a list of publications as long as her arm—when one of the others called in.

"Sarafian speaking, what's up?"

"Dublin here. We've been checking the traffic cameras. Found a couple of possibles if you want to check those out."

"Good work. Thanks." That sort of project was just what Sam enjoyed. Two hours passed, and she was deep in the work when her communications link chimed.

"I believe we have it," Cloud announced.

"Be right there." She all but ran back to the library and found the head tech there as well as Cloud. The dark lines that had crossed the room were gone. "What did you find?"

"I was able to disperse the spells," Cloud said. She sat on one of the packing crates, her voice hoarse. "Eventually. I agree that those responsible are indeed not amateurs."

"The recording's a mess, but we've got a few seconds of it back," the tech said. "The brains at HQ spit back this possible match. It's a long shot, but I figured you'd want to see it."

"Let's do it, then."

He fiddled with the display settings on his portable console and brought an image up for her. It had been taken from somewhere near the floor, probably by a cleaning robot. Sam could identify St. Cyr, surrounded by figures in black. They were gloved, and

their faces were covered, but the computers had done their job. A second picture appeared, a daylight image taken at a distance. Their target had appeared in the background. Human, no arrest record, nothing much in the history, but a single word that held Sam's attention.

"Those bastards again."

"What do you see?" Cloud asked, getting up to look over her shoulder.

"Orobouros."

Eleven hours later Sam sat in her office with her feet propped on the desk, ignoring the dubious looks from her boss. If he said, "Are you sure about this" one more time, she might throw something.

"If you would hold off for a couple of days, we can *buy* a ship," Graves said. He sat in one of the two chairs across from her desk, the way he always did when he was thinking, hands behind his head. His own office had a better view, but it also had a ceaseless flow of interruptions.

Sam shook her head and said, "We've been over this. They're off-planet already, and this could be a long chase. I need something fast, and I need it now." Finding and crewing a vessel through normal police channels would take days at least. Getting help from the planetary government would take weeks, if it happened at all. "Cloud volunteered her services. The University is footing half the materials bill, they love an excuse to do this stuff. We'll come out ahead." If it works, she added to herself.

"I'd rather send somebody else."

"Me, too; know anyone? Neither do I." No one knew their enemy like Sam did. She looked around with a premonitory

pang of homesickness. Her office was cluttered with hard-copy from cases in progress, a profusion of potted plants, requests, commendations, and the occasional complaint from elsewhere in the department, and invitations to public events (all turned down). On the windowsill three long, sleek native animals shared a glass tank. Their turquoise scales flashed as they chased one another.

Someone knocked at the door and said, "Sterling showed up. They're all here."

"Thanks," Sam said. "Be right there." She glanced over the latest report a final time, tucked a strand of graying red hair back into place, and straightened her jacket—also gray—as she got up. "Shall we, sir?"

Graves sighed. "I don't know about this, Sammy."

"You want to let them get away? Again?"

"No."

"There you go. Besides, what's the worst that can happen? Other than both of us getting fired and this thing turning out to be a weapon." She never had been good at jokes.

Graves snorted and stood. Sam could see where the lines around his mouth had deepened over the past few decades, how thin his hair was, though still stubbornly black. They locked eyes for a moment before Graves nodded.

"After you," he said with a gesture toward the door.

Sam knew that nod; he would back her one hundred percent. She put aside her own doubts. The case was what mattered. To handle the case, she had to get through this meeting. They reached the conference room door just as Sterling and her escorting officer arrived. Last chance to back out, to apologize for the mistake, to change the course ahead of her.

"Ms. Sterling, good morning," Sam said, stepping forward to greet her. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. I'm Detective Sarafian. This is Director Graves."

"Pleased to meet you both." Gillian Sterling didn't smile as they shook hands. She was six inches taller than Sam. She looked young, but almost everyone did, these days; in Gillian's case, it was true. She wore close-fitting dark green pants and a white shirt that showed off her olive skin. Her only jewelry was a tiny gold cross pendant and a bracelet of many small disks on her left wrist, probably concealing a network link. Her black hair had been pulled into a heavy tail, and her handshake was firm. "I got your message. I'm happy to assist, of course, but I'm afraid I don't understand what this is about."

"I'll explain that in just a moment. If you would?" They went in to find the other two people Sam expected waiting. "Magister Cloud, on loan from Forrest University," Sam introduced her. "Ms. Gillian Sterling."

The wizard stood and bowed. "Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Likewise." Gillian returned the gesture without hesitation, unfazed by the alien's presence or appearance.

"And this is Paul Gardner, here in a capacity related to your own." Sam nodded to the room's other human occupant. He left off staring at the window long enough to give the new arrival a wary nod. The Forrest City Police Headquarters main conference room looked out over the square. On the far side, City Hall's golden dome gleamed dully below the overcast. Thunder growled as yet another storm approached, blocking out the sunset. The square was full of hurrying figures and hastily deployed umbrella fields.

It was a small audience, but Sam's throat tightened; she cleared it and said, "If you'll bear with me a moment, we'll get started. Perhaps some coffee?"

On cue, a small refreshment station floated over the table, occupying the others while Sam finished setting up. The smell did odd things to her empty stomach. Everyone but Graves settled around one end of the table; the director leaned against the window. Sam cleared her throat again, and all four of them turned toward her.

"Everything you are about to learn should be held in confidence." She looked around the table and received their nods. "You are here thanks to an ongoing investigation into an event that occurred last night. This is rather graphic, and I apologize for that, but it will save some explaining." She started the playback.

In the center of the table, a view of the library appeared, rotating slowly to give everyone a look. Even after all Cloud and the technicians could do, the image was of poor quality, badly blurred in places, jumping between perspectives, losing seconds now and again. There was no sound. They could see the row of packing crates near the door, and an elderly man busily opening them.

"Thadwick St. Cyr, a retired professor of linguistics here at Forrest University. He collects—collected—antiquities, oddities, magical and pseudomagical knickknacks. Yesterday he received a new lot he had purchased at a blind auction from an estate sale on Proketsch."

Sam had reviewed the rescued footage a dozen times already, so she watched the rest of them now. Gillian sat upright and attentive, fingertips poised near her cup without quite touching it, all but radiating curiosity. Her lips were pursed into a slight

frown, her hazel eyes intent. The holos had not done her justice.

The video St. Cyr opened another crate and extracted an object from a nest of padding. It was round, about a foot in diameter, covered with stubby spikes of varying length. Instead of setting this aside with the other items, he took it to the desk.

Paul maintained the indifferent air he had worn since his arrival at the station. He slouched in the chair with his arms folded and blond hair falling into his eyes, but he was watching. He wore faded black with lots of pockets, the loose, comfortable sort of attire common among long-term spacers. Sam judged him as medium height, medium build, and someone who took decent care of himself. Good-looking if you liked the type. His ID said he was twenty-five, which might be the only accurate statement it contained. The station scan had shown no mechanical augmentations, and if he'd had any bio-work done, it was subtle enough not to register. She thought that he was doing a good job of looking relaxed without actually being so.

"We've checked up on the shipment, and the estate it came from," Sam said. "The item is identified solely as 'alien relic, unknown provenance.' It's been in a basement for ten years, ever since the last owner died. Before that it was on a shelf in his library, and before that gathering dust in a local museum he curated. The assumption is that he took it as a souvenir when he retired. There's no record of it having been stolen, but he might easily have 'borrowed' it and fudged the records." The image fast-forwarded through a few hours during which St. Cyr puttered about in increasing excitement over whatever it was.

Cloud sat upright and very still; if her tail twitched, it was out of sight. Her temporary police ID had been attached to the shoulder of her professional robes, sitting oddly with the blue

silks and their embroidery of arcane symbols. Her clasped hands rested on the table before her and were long and fine, their backs covered in short, velvety fur. A green jade ring adorned one finger, and her tufted ears were pierced with two gold hoops apiece. The leather bag sat next to her chair; a wizard was never far from their kit. Though Sam knew that *feline* was not technically correct, any more than the Langen were ursine or Ia'zk'k insects, the word came irresistibly to mind. Blame the whiskers, and the teeth, for that matter.

Cloud's bright green eyes met Sam's suddenly, answering her covert study with a frank one. She managed not to look away and wondered what the wizard was thinking. If her public bio could be trusted, she had lived for years as the only one of her kind among aliens; it would make her difficult to read. How much of her manner could be taken at face value? How much was intended to put humans at ease? Sam was staking an awful lot on Cloud being right about these people, and the words Thurston Effect kept nagging at her; the alternative was to admit defeat before she had started. She had made her choice.

On the recording, St. Cyr left the room.

"Right here." Sam advanced it through the silent hours of the early morning, then returned to normal play. "They shut off the alarms from outside the house." One of the French doors to the lawn opened. A series of fist-sized objects flew through the opening and shattered on the library floor, the "canned" spells they had used to foul the recorders. Four figures entered, dressed in close-fitting black. All of them were human, one a tall woman, the other three male. They began a rapid, thorough search of the packing crates, ignoring the artifacts elsewhere in the room.

The door to the interior hallway opened, and St. Cyr stepped

through, in nightclothes and carrying a mug. He gaped a moment on seeing the intruders. One of them brought the old man down with a flying tackle before he could run. After a brief struggle, they trussed St. Cyr and hauled him over to the desk. The black-clad woman held an inaudible conversation with the bound man, who shook his head a lot, while the other three continued their search. The spiky round object was discovered and placed in a bag. The intruders spent a moment in argument among themselves before the one of them pulled out an energy pistol.

Sam froze the playback before the shot. She looked at the others, cataloging their reactions: Paul not entirely maintaining his indifferent facade, Gillian frowning, Cloud unreadable. Graves left the window and sat down next to Sam. Distant lightning flickered outside.

"Disturbing," Gillian said, after a glance around the table showed no one else inclined to speak. "But I'm afraid I don't see what this has to do with me. A murder is entirely police business, I should think."

"Absolutely," Sam replied. "The situation is a trifle more complicated than usual." She looked at her boss.

Graves helped himself to coffee and turned his cup three times widdershins to cool it. He seemed to be thinking. Eventually he said, "Have either of you ever heard of the Orobouros?" Gillian shook her head.

"Sure," Paul ventured with a shrug when no one spoke. "Ancient fraternal society dedicated to funding libraries, secret handshakes, and looking ridiculous in hats."

Graves nodded. "That is their public face." He looked at Sam.

"Quite," she said. "Anyone who cares to spend a couple of minutes looking can easily find that the Ancient and Honor-

able Society of the Orobouros has an official charter to further the sciences and the spread of peaceable knowledge among all sentients. They have offices on several dozen worlds and a membership numbering in the thousands. They have a weekly newsletter, which likes to talk about libraries and archaeological expeditions. Pure as the driven fucking snow, right?" She shook her head. "Eighteen years ago, an Ioki expedition went out to Parakk 7. Don't bother looking that up, it's way the hell out and dead for three thousand years. They did their two years poking around the cluster, digging up bones and whatever, and then they headed back to civilization. Except being Ioki, they shaved it too close and got stranded on the way back. They were picked up by the *Thranator*, one of those big settlement ships the Langen like so much."

"They rescued an Ioki ship?" Paul sat back in his chair and looked skeptical.

"It happens. Not long after the pickup, the *Thranator* and her salvage were attacked. Not a single survivor, and both ships picked clean."

"And how were the Orobouros involved?" Gillian asked.

"I'm getting to that." She took a deep breath. "Two years after that, fake Parakkish artifacts started showing up on Gnosis. We get a lot of that here. I was working Fraud back then. This stuff was brilliantly faked, so we were trying to see where it came from. We traced it as far as Shadowside Station. To make a long story short, we found out it was one of the pirate gangs putting it out. And we found communications between them and someone giving them orders, including the attack order on the *Thranator*."

Graves rescued the room from silence. "The Orobouros don't

usually operate on Gnosis, but whatever that thing is that St. Cyr had, they wanted it badly enough to make a move this open, to throw considerable resources into retrieving it. That makes it a very high priority for us, even if St. Cyr hadn't been killed for it. If that thing is a viable magical artifact, or some kind of weapon, we need to get it out of their hands. Whatever it is, we have a rare chance to get at an organization that has been directly responsible for a great many deaths.

"We traced those four from the recording as far as the outer port and lost the trail there," he continued. "They were almost certainly off-planet before the body was found. That makes this an unusual situation, and potentially a tricky one, legally speaking, depending on where they go from here. They have a good head start, and they won't make themselves easy to find. That is where you two come in—if you're willing, of course. Cloud?"

The Cherrian nodded. "Earlier today I performed a divination regarding the best way to proceed to achieve our goal. I shall provide this endeavor with a ship of my own making. That ship will, of course, require a crew."

Graves picked up the reins again. "Detective Sarafian will be in command. Ms. Sterling, we would like you to handle ship defenses, and provide Sam with backup as needed, both on the ground and in dealings with whatever other authorities may be involved. You've done a lot of freelance security work, you know the ins and outs in a lot of systems. The final approach will have to depend on where they are, and whether or not Gnosis law can be applied, but I would not expect them to come quietly; there, too, your expertise may be of use. Hard to say how long it will take, but our best projection is a couple of weeks. We'll pay your usual rate."

Gillian didn't have to think about it long before she nodded. "There's nothing on my schedule right now. Count me in." She looked at Paul. "You're a pilot, then?"

"That's what they tell me. I'm already in." He looked at Sam with a false angel's smile.

Sam did not doubt that he was good at the job. He would still not have been her first, second, or third choice. Cloud had been firm, however, and if she was going to ask a wizard's advice, she had better take all of it. There was no time for long arguments or subtle manipulation; the man was flying on fake papers, and that was all the leverage they needed.

"Then we're all set," Sam said.

"Just us?" Gillian looked surprised. "That's a small crew, if you're expecting a fight."

"I will also be accompanying the mission," Cloud said. "They have access to magical resources, after all. The ship will handle maintenance and repair, and provide you with mechanized backup in case of conflict."

"That will help. All right, then."

Sam looked around the table and saw no further immediate issues. "Thank you all for your assistance," she said. "May as well get ready." Magic ships? She must be nuts.

An hour later, Sam had scabbled together what she might need from her office, sent orders to her house about packing, and composed a message for her parents on the far side of the planet, though she had yet to send it. Racking her mind for forgotten items, the elevator's ping at roof level surprised her. She swore and jammed the hold button to keep the door from opening until she had smoothed her hair and straightened

her jacket. Then she walked out onto the roof, toward the brightly lit landing area.

Wet, storm-charged air swirled around her. The other three waited by the car, along with Graves. He walked over to meet her halfway.

"I just got done talking to the University," he said. "They'll be all set by the time you get there."

"Thanks."

He opened his mouth, closed it again as if he had thought better of saying something, and settled for, "Good luck, Sammy."

"We'll get them this time." She wondered if he was going to try to hug her, but he thrust out his hand for an awkward shake instead. "You take care of yourself, all right?" she said. "I'd rather deal with the Orobouros than the budget department anyway."

"I'll be fine. You, too." He stepped back and waved her on.

Sam tried on a smile as she approached and wondered if she looked as nervous as she felt. "Everyone all set? Then let's get going."

The four of them climbed into the roomy vehicle. Sam noted the cautious way they all arranged to have maximum space between them. Perhaps that was to be expected before spending the next two weeks or more in close company. Paul looked out the window. Gillian watched Paul. Cloud's eyes were half-closed, glittering green. Sam's own eyes ached from exhaustion, and she shut them as they lifted off.

She opened them again a moment later. She never got tired of the view, even in the dark and the rain, and this time she felt a pang of anxiety at leaving it. Forrest City was deliberately archaic in design, and small, and she loved the ribbons of light that outlined the city's squares and the winding canals. Those were

soon out of sight. The car turned north and sped across two hundred kilometers of forestland, out of the storm.

Gnosis University stood at the crest of a rise, overlooking green lowland to one side and a bleak moor on the other. Sam often wondered if the landscape had been made to order. The university was Gnosis' heart: resolutely neutral, serenely unassailable, for half a millennium home ground for the study of magic as science.

The campus was small. A handful of slim towers stood at a careful distance from one another, their stone faces fraught with gargoyles and glyphs. The police car gave the towers a wide berth and landed near the stadium, a prosaic-looking building compared to the others, set some distance apart.

A junior wizard came to meet them and said, "Everything is almost ready. This way, if you please."

They passed through a chandelier-hung lobby, a maze of dull passages, and out into the open. Empty seats and moonlight looked down on an oval of turf big enough for a soccer match. Sam stopped, taken aback by the quantity of material assembled: towers of packing crates, blocks of metal and stone, stacked lumber.

Gillian said, "I thought that 'provide a ship' meant that you already had one. I also thought time was of the essence? How long is this going to take?"

"Not long, as these things go," Cloud said. "And the benefits of this approach are considerable. If you would wait here?" She moved off to inspect the mountain. A phalanx of robots hovered nearby, and occasionally she sent one of them to adjust part of the stack. When that was done to her satisfaction, she took an obsidian knife from her satchel and began to construct the ritual diagram.

Sam looked at the other two. "Either of you been on one of these before?" Few M-ships existed, not more than a hundred in all of human space.

"Only once," Gillian said. "I was a passenger, not crew. How about you?" She glanced at Paul.

"No." He didn't look up.

So much for small talk.

Cloud returned and said, "I will need certain things from each of you before we begin. My hope is that the vessel will be dedicated to this mission. To that purpose, it must know each of us. I will need the date and place of your birth, as precisely as possible."

Gillian said, "I don't know either of those. Is that a problem?"

Cloud flicked an ear. "Not necessarily. An honest unknown is better than untruth." She made a note. "Detective?"

Sam said, "Farview Hospital, Farview, Gnosis. You need the coordinates?" When Cloud shook her head, she rattled off her birth-date and time. Sixty-two fun-filled years. She could look forward to two hundred or so more, though a hundred of those might be spent on traffic duty if this mission went sour.

Paul hesitated before he answered, and spoke to Cloud too quietly for Sam to hear. She felt the familiar itch of curiosity; who was he really, what was he hiding, and why? She would try to find out later, if only to keep in practice.

The wizard's next requirement was a few drops of blood and a few strands of hair. She used one of her claws to draw a rune on Sam's palm, answering her question as to whether they were vestigial or functional. She flexed her stinging hand afterward and wondered if antiseptics would interfere with the magic.

"If you will each assume one of the marked positions," Cloud said. "And then do not move any more than you must, and above

all do not touch the lines. This will take some time."

They scattered to the circle's cardinal points. Sam took her spot where a circle had been cut into the turf, within the boundary of the much larger container for the entire working. She couldn't see the other three, her view obstructed by the materials.

Sam heard Cloud say, "I hope you are all taking notes," her voice suddenly amplified. Observers had filtered into the stands despite the late hour. The back of Sam's neck warmed self-consciously.

Cloud began speaking again, this time using ancient Greek. Her words rolled smoothly through the amphitheater. Their cadence was strong, their pitch low for the most part, rising now and again like punctuation. Sam blinked and resisted the urge to rub her eyes. She felt a curious sensation, as if a thread had been passed through her midsection and very gently tugged on. She wondered what would happen if the wizard got a word wrong, if checking the time would be more movement than she ought to perform, and where the Oroboros were. Storm clouds reached across the sky and thickened; the system had followed them.

Sam blinked again, squinted, and realized that it was not exhaustion blurring her vision. Gauzy light filled the dome like silver pollen. It settled over the stacks of material with a sleety sound. She jumped when the enormous pile quivered, softened, and flowed inward upon itself. It reformed into a silvery lozenge like a snake's egg, one large enough to occupy half the field. Scattered applause came from the stands.

Cloud said, "Thank you all. You may move about now as you like. It will incubate some little while, and then we shall see if the results are suitable."

There was always that danger. Every spell had the potential

for an unpredictable consequence, the Thurston Effect, no matter how many times it had been performed. Usually it was a small matter, but it was the reason people still used ships, not spells, for travel; sometimes a small matter *mattered*.

"How long will it take?" Sam asked as the three of them rejoined the wizard.

"Several hours at least."

She stared at the egg and willed it to move. It didn't. "Well, I suppose there's things we can do while we wait." She could work on Plan B, among other things.

Gillian looked at Paul. "Want to get something to eat?"

He hesitated but said, "I guess so."

Sam frowned as they walked off. "Hope they come back."

"I wouldn't worry about it," Cloud said. "The ship will call him, and Ms. Sterling appears intrigued by our mission." She looked up at the featureless ovoid.

"Will call him?" Sam stared at Cloud, not sure whether she had heard correctly.

Cloud nodded. "I believe I mentioned that the ship will need a human contact among its crew."

"I knew that, but I thought it was just for legal stuff." M-ships weren't alive—magic could not create life—but they tended to act like it, and occupied a grey area on Gnosis. No other polities were even getting around to considering whether they ought to be treated like independent sentients. In the meantime, the ships needed someone to act as interlocutor.

Cloud made a sound that might have been a chuckle. "Complicated though the law may be, I'd say the truth is a bit more complicated than that."

Another thing to add to her research list. "Have you made a

ship before this?" she asked.

"Five of them. One was flawed, but the others are worthy vessels. I hear from them once in a while."

"Flawed? How so?"

"It exploded on emergence."

"Oh." She managed not to step back, little good though it would have done.

"There is a containment field in place," Cloud assured her. "Though of course it is rare for any specific Thurston Effect to repeat itself."

"Glad to hear it. You said this one would be 'dedicated to the mission'—I take it that isn't always the case, then?"

"No. The others were simpler commissions." She invited Sam's company with a tilt of her head and began to walk around the ship-to-be. "For this one, I feel that something more is required."

"This is all based on a hunch?"

"It is. We will need every advantage." Her ears moved back, and her tail twitched. "There is more to wizardry than formulas, incantations, and ingredients, as you know—just as there is more to police work, I warrant, than catalogs of evidence. Else we should leave it to the computers. When I have a feeling, I heed it. As you do?"

"Sometimes." There was always the unpredictable human element, the ability not just to see the pattern but to fill in its missing pieces, to make the intuitive leap.

"You are staking a great deal on this mission, I gather."

Sam shrugged. "It's not just me. Public image to the contrary, these people don't fool around."

"As St. Cyr learned too well, it seems." Cloud shook her head. "He will be missed here. I was a student when he retired, but

his work is still considered important.”

That would make Cloud about her own age—if she was telling the truth. Wizards were professionally mysterious, changed their names and appearances often, and nearly always obfuscated their personal records. If the mission ended up taking longer than expected, it might make an interesting puzzle to find out more about her.

Sam looked up at the impassive egg. “Guess we have something of a wait.”

“Indeed. I should be about my preparation.” She inclined her head and moved off, pausing to talk with some of the students who had gathered.

Sam found a seat in the stands and rooted around in her bag for the computer. It had assumed its usual compact shape, about the size of her palm. She hunted for a stylus next, and finally remembered that it was in her jacket pocket. The machine painted the air around her with a holographic version of her office. The portable version looked just like the real thing, right down to the lizards—if anything, it was slightly more cluttered, and she soon began adding to the piles. As long as they were on Gnosis, she had access to the best information net in the human worlds. She already had requests out for St. Cyr and any other events that might be traced to the Orobouros. To those she added M-ships, Chterra, Cloud personally, and the other two—she was going to have to work to think of them as “her crew.” Local answers came back almost immediately. The communication drones and deep-space nodes that linked the inhabited planets would plumb distant resources over the days to come.

When that was done, she said, “Solitaire.” The command ran every piece of security she had, including some she had

written herself. “Package all of that up and query the Simurgh, priority one. Ping me if anything turns up before we lift off.”

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