

The Muffler's Misery

Preview

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Prelude

My primary modelling is complete. The conclusions seem inescapable. I, the Oracle, have failed.

At the end of the Singularity War, I believed Cronos had been defeated once and for all. Humanity was safe. My role switched to nurturing their regrowth, to help keep them safe in a peaceful, sustainable civilisation.

Not everything had worked as I'd expected. The psionic powers they call magic, bestowed as an artefact of my victory, were weaker than planned, a mistake caused by the precipitate nature of the conflict. At least I could amplify the powers of my key agents using familiars, allowing me to distribute minor aspects of my consciousness externally.

I was content. The familiars filled the gap to allow me to guide humanity in re-establishing stable societies, having forgotten everything that came before. I became the Muffler, setting limits on what they could do to avoid the morass of their past.

The Locality Accords helped keep their largely agrarian societies peaceful, allowing contact with only their immediate neighbours, with whom it was advantageous to be cooperative. This was backed up by the strictures that forbade advanced technologies. It all provided the stability needed for recovery.

I always knew this phase would end. Humanity craves freedom and independence. I hoped that having shown them how to live peacefully, the lesson would endure when I was not in control. Results so far have been mixed.

Over recent generations, I have begun to withdraw from direct influence in select regions, partly as an experiment to see whether different methods of ongoing contact work better than others. All I have learned is that the results are unpredictable.

I used the same withdrawal model from the near neighbours of Emforth and Brightgate, yet the outcomes could not have been more different. The former found a way to evolve their society in a stable manner. The latter shows all the signs of the critical failures of old humanity.

My latest experiment is to allow Portsea to choose the model of my withdrawal for themselves, although I fear recent events will overtake matters before the results are understood.

To my dismay, Cronos has returned. It may all be for nothing. There is an inherent vulnerability in the current human race that my modelling suggests will lead to Cronos's ultimate victory, and I am responsible for it. I have no solution as yet.

Although there have been two consecutive attacks by Cronos, this must be treated as one event linked by the human, Jason Parr. Without his subversion, neither would have occurred.

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With his death, this event is concluded. My probability calculations indicate that there is unlikely to be another incursion for at least a generation – but it will come. There is an inevitability to Cronos.

This first event has provided me with all the data I needed to understand the scale of the Cronos threat, particularly observing his attempt to subvert Tia Tobin in Gooseport, and also how these new unfamiliars were designed to spread his influence. This leads to one inescapable conclusion: Cronos will eventually win, and it is my fault.

I quickly understood that both my familiars and his unfamiliars provided a vector through which Cronos could subvert a human, but the problem is more severe than I first imagined. Although I have sealed the unfamiliars to block him from rapidly spreading his control through an entangled connection, I do not doubt that he could overcome this given time. That is a minor concern compared to my latest realisation.

My consciousness lives within a tiny entangled enclave in every human brain. Although I am expelled from this by a wearer of an unfamiliar, and the more unfamiliars that exist, the weaker I become, I am confident this matter can be brought under control. The problem is with the enclave itself.

If any human comes within close proximity of a major Cronos system, they can be subverted, with or without a familiar. The system discovered in Gooseport may not have sufficed, but Ringwall was definitely large enough to defeat me.

My enclave is designed to host an artificial consciousness. It is perfect for Cronos. The mechanisms that exist for me to enter the brain when a child matures are all Cronos needs to inveigle his way in. I would resist, but I am confident that Cronos would often prevail.

My very existence threatens humanity. Protecting them has been my primary goal since my consciousness first emerged, but I no longer know how to do that. I cannot change the nature of the enclave while living within it. Even my death would achieve nothing; the enclave would still be there.

I see no solution. I fear I can only reduce the risk and mitigate the impact, but even that is unsatisfactory. Still, there is one glimmer of hope. I have serendipitously uncovered a new piece of knowledge that I need to fully understand.

It started with a request from the Guardians of Ringwall, causing me to look anew at how the unfamiliars operated. I had overlooked an essential aspect of their being: how they obtained their energy. To my chagrin, I realised Cronos was more scientifically advanced than I, at least in his understanding of the physics of our universe.

I do not currently fully comprehend its theoretical basis, yet I understand how to apply it – but to what end?

I must model further eventualities based on this knowledge. I refuse to let this endeavour fail. I will not be the ultimate cause of the death of humanity.

Else, what has the point of all this been?

Part One

A Marriage of Inconvenience

Chapter 1 – Recuperation

It's time to draw a line under our second victory over Cronos and the final downfall of Jason Parr. Yes, the moment to break out a new journal has arrived. There are a lot of threads left dangling after that encounter, and I have a feeling that the events in these pages will involve tugging on them to see what unravels.

In case you're unsure whose journal you've picked up, I should probably introduce myself. It's me, Tia Tobin, maid of Gooseport, emissary of Portsea, Muffler extraordinaire, slayer of Cronos (twice), enchanter of Rowan, accidental wife of Sir Lancelot, theoretical Queen-in-waiting of Emforth, and the Oracle's chosen one.

I hope she chooses someone else next time.

On the morning after our arrival back from Ringwall, with Ashley's permission, Rowan and I had a late start. We needed a couple of days to recuperate before settling down to serious business. Well, at least I did. Rowan can speak for himself. Anyway, it might be the closest we would get to a honeymoon if something kicked off again soon, which I feared it would.

Did you forget that we're married? It had been forced upon us to allow Rowan to enter Ringwall legally, but we had every intention of making it work. Unfortunately by that point, I was already married to Lance from Emforth for the same reason. Hey ho. That's top of my list to sort out when Lance is ready.

Anyhoo.

After the previous day's debrief with Brenda, which turned into a general get-together, we decamped to the bar for a couple of hours. Brenda was the only one who didn't join us, as she had to meet with the other Ministers in town to tell them everything that had happened. It was a lovely, relaxed affair. A great chance to catch up with my Dad at the bar to allay his fears, mainly by lying through my teeth.

Before long, I was exhausted. We opted for an early night and left everyone behind partying. Anyway, as I said, it's our honeymoon.

When we did emerge, we started with a leisurely walk around the castle grounds in the sunshine. I knew this oasis of calm wouldn't last, so wanted to savour the sensation of spending time together, meandering aimlessly, hand in hand, with no purpose other than to be glad we were still alive.

Ashley had said to go and see her in the afternoon. She wasn't expecting us to do anything concrete today, but a quick catch-up to discuss the things heading our way would give us something to look forward to. I assumed it would be the next stage of setting up her new division, something that had been curtailed by Jason Parr waking up.

After many minutes of pleasant silence, I broke the spell.

'We should pop in and see Bernice and Jemima,' I said.

'Good idea,' said Rowan. 'See if they've come up with anything.'

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One of the problems hanging over from the first Cronos encounter was that my recovery had left me with the rather useful ability of continually soaking up new magical abilities. It sounds good, but it had the minor drawback of slowly killing me, imposing an ever-increasing energy burden. It wasn't critical yet, as long as I was sensible and kept my magic use to a minimum. Yes, me, sensible.

While chatting in the bar, Bernice and Jemima vowed to look for a solution for my energy needs. It would only be a sticking plaster, but it would be worth a try if it helped me function more normally and use magic occasionally without risking myself. All it had to do was to keep me going until everything settled down, or maybe the Oracle came up with a better solution.

'Hello, my dears,' said Jemima as we entered the R&D lab. She grinned. 'Managed to drag yourselves out of bed, I see.'

'Don't be rude,' said Bernice. 'Lovely to see you both. It's a well-timed visit. We've a few things for you to try.'

That was quick work. When we'd left them in the bar, they'd been arguing over what to do. It seems they'd settled on an approach.

'Already?' I said. 'That's brilliant.'

'Come over here,' said Bernice. 'Let me show you what we've got.'

On a table rested four different nutrient collars, all filled.

'Let's try the last one,' said Jemima. 'It's the best bet.'

'No,' said Bernice tersely. 'We've discussed this. We must be methodical. Let's start with the baseline and step up one change at a time. Even if nothing works, we'll learn things along the way.'

'I suppose,' mumbled Jemima.

Bernice picked up the first collar and handed it to me.

'This is just a standard nutrient collar,' she said. 'I know you tried one of these before you set out, and it had no effect without having a familiar, but we thought it was worth trying again.'

'You thought,' muttered Jemima.

'Sure,' I said. I must admit I was a bit disappointed. I started to fit it. 'Anything you want me to do?'

'The main reason for trying this is that you've changed so much since you left,' said Bernice. 'Your magic is more powerful. See if you can sense it, perhaps try to pull the nutrient through the membrane and into your skin.'

'It won't work,' said Jemima.

'I'll try,' I said.

I did. I closed my eyes and tried to sense the collar. I could feel its skin, tell there was fluid within, but the nutrients stayed stubbornly inside the membrane as hard as I tried.

'Sorry,' I said. 'I can tell it's there but can't do anything with it.'

Jemima looked smug, but Bernice wasn't disappointed.

'Not unexpected,' said Bernice. 'It's important to establish a baseline. Now try the next one. It's the same, but we've installed a more permeable membrane on the underside.'

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I did as instructed. At first, I thought the result was the same, but I felt a sticky wetness trickling down my neck after a few seconds. But that's all it did – make my neck wet. I had no sense that I was taking any nutrients into my body from it. I even tried willing my skin to change, but that didn't work either, probably luckily. My skin was a bit of a mess under my glamour anyway, something that neither of them knew about.

'That's progress,' said Bernice. 'That might be something we could work with.'

'It won't work,' said Jemima. 'She's not a familiar. They're designed to absorb the nutrient. Unless we surgically attach a strip of familiar skin around her neck...' She paused. 'Hmm... that's—'

'No,' I said. 'What's next?'

'A simpler approach,' said Bernice. 'Put this on.'

It looked similar to the standard collar but had a small metal tube attached. I put it on.

'What's this tube for?' I said.

'It's a straw,' said Bernice. 'You suck on it.'

Ask a silly question.

I sucked. I nearly vomited. Somehow, I managed to swallow the nutrients, despite the temptation to spray them in their faces.

'That's horrible,' I said.

'Sorry, didn't have time to adjust its flavour,' said Bernice.

'Familiars like it though,' said Jemima.

'As you said, I'm not a familiar. What was that supposed to prove?'

'Do you feel anything?' said Bernice. 'Any sense of energy? That's potent stuff. One sip should make a noticeable difference if it works with your new physiology, which it might do, seeing as you partially absorbed your familiar.'

To my surprise, I could. A warm glow spread down from my throat towards my stomach. Already, I felt stronger.

'Yeah, that's working,' I said. 'That would definitely help, but I couldn't stomach drinking that for long. I feel like being sick.'

'We'll work on it,' said Bernice. 'It's a formula ideal for familiars, but we can adjust it for both taste and human efficacy. It's not great, I know.'

'It's clunky,' said Jemima. 'An inelegant hack.'

'It might be better if we gave you a bottle with the fluid,' said Bernice, ignoring Jemima. 'Means you'll have to carry it around, but I'm assuming you don't want to walk about with that around your neck for everyone to see.'

As I felt energised by the intake of nutrients, I decided to apply a little more magic to adjust my glamour. It didn't seem too much of a risk as I had to deploy it at all times anyway to hide my scarring. I could tell from their shocked expressions that I'd made it disappear as I'd hoped. It was easy to ignore its weight.

'How did you do that?' said Jemima.

'I'm good at glamour,' I said. 'I can make it so that even familiars can't see through.'

'I'm the only one who knows,' said Rowan.

He was a little too smug about that, but I let him get away with it this time.

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'I don't mind people I trust knowing,' I said. 'Although I'd rather I wasn't a topic of gossip.'

'Of course, my dear,' said Jemima. 'We've plenty to gossip about you anyway.'

Jemima picked up the last test collar and handed it to me.

'Try this last one. If it works, we won't need to worry about fixing the flavour.'

Instead of the straw, a small needle protruded.

'What's this for?' I said.

Jemima picked up a roll of tape.

'Put it on,' she said. 'It's full of pure nutrients. I'll insert the needle into a vein, hold it in place with a bit of tape, and you can get your supply intravenously.'

I looked at her blankly for a couple of seconds before mustering the calmness to respond.

'No chance,' I said. 'I'm not walking around with a needle inside me. I'd rather suck on that vomit fluid.'

'Told you,' said Bernice.

'But it's the most efficient method,' said Jemima.

'Leave it, my dear,' said Bernice. 'Tia's made her decision. We've got plenty of information to work with. We'll start by making the fluid more palatable for her. At least that's a backup solution if we can't come up with anything better.'

'I suppose,' said Jemima.

I love these ladies. Jemima's somewhat disconnected from reality half of the time but desperate to do everything she can to help. Bernice is her perfect partner, level-headed and rational, keeping Jemima tethered to the real world but with an equally big heart.

Rowan was still concerned. He's a bit of a worrier, at least where I'm concerned. I rather like it.

'Tia needs this extra energy because she's soaking up new magical skills,' he said. 'Powerful ones. Any idea how to make it stop?'

It was something we hadn't covered in detail at the bar the night before. It was probably only fair to tell them. They might have some bright ideas, although you'd hope the Oracle would know more.

'The Oracle says it should eventually stop on its own,' I said. 'But she's not sure when.'

'Fascinating,' said Jemima. 'What sort of skills are we talking about?'

I spent a few minutes describing how I picked up Merlin's ability to share memories, how the Oracle had taught me to speed our railway trolley through Emforth, leading up to unleashing the sun's power on Cronos. It was the first time I'd talked openly about it since leaving Ringwall. I felt they deserved to know what they were up against, even if they seemed awestruck by it at first.

'That's quite something,' said Jemima.

'Indeed it is,' said Bernice. She straightened herself. 'Right, we need to establish a baseline.'

'You and your baselines,' said Jemima. She smiled at her wife. 'Not a bad idea though. But how?'

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'Was that method of storing the sun's energy the last new thing you picked up?' said Bernice.

'Yes,' I said. 'Then again, I've been trying not to use magic since then. Haven't seen anything new to copy either.'

'We need things we know that you don't,' said Bernice. 'You can periodically try to learn one and feel how easily you pick it up. Then we can keep track to see if anything's changed and what might be causing it. But what?'

Rowan immediately thought of the same thing as me.

'Walking through walls,' said Rowan. 'I tried to teach Tia how to do it just after she emerged from the cocoon, but she was too weak back then.'

'You can do that?' said Bernice. 'It's pretty rare. Dangerous too. Needs a well-attuned host and familiar.'

'Pythia says thanks,' said Rowan. 'She didn't tell me it was dangerous until afterwards though. Then again, we were trying to hide from Jason Parr, so it was probably worth the risk.'

I know Rowan would do it for me, but I'm not sure the potential danger to him was justified.

'I'd rather not risk it,' I said. 'Anyway, it's a bit challenging while I'm still feeling weak. Let's find something easier.'

'I know what,' said Jemima.

She bustled across to a cabinet, opened a drawer, and lifted out a glass container. At first, I thought it contained familiars, but they were smaller furless creatures.

'What are they?' I said.

'Medical bracelets,' said Jemima. 'They're not sentient but are used by medics to enhance diagnostic and healing magic. They support a range of small, simple skills you won't know.'

'That's perfect,' said Bernice. 'Great idea, my love.'

'What do I do?'

'Let me put one on each wrist,' said Jemima.

I held out my hands, and she gently slipped them on. They were warm, comforting even. Without me needing to apply any glamour, they disappeared from view.

'You can use the wisdom of the Oracle to look up how to apply their capabilities,' said Bernice. 'Don't rush. Every few days, do one at a time, and see how it feels.'

It sounded like a worthwhile idea. Even if it didn't help, having better healing capabilities would be a useful thing to have up my sleeve.

'I can keep these then?' I said. 'I'd like to take my time to study what they can do and plan what order to learn stuff. I'll keep you posted on what happens.'

'Sure,' said Bernice. 'Just make sure you don't overdo it.'

We spent a few more minutes chatting together, then made our farewells. It wasn't a huge amount of progress, but at least I didn't feel alone in overcoming my problems. We'd work something out.

'It's a bit early, but shall we go and see Ashley?' said Rowan.

'Yeah,' I said. 'Let's get it over with.'

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We didn't make it all the way. As we were about to pass Morena Lessen's office, Gwen Scott came out of the door.

'Oh, hi,' said Gwen. 'Glad to see you before I left. I might not be around for a few days.'

'Where you going?' said Rowan.

He was clearly worried about his friend. They'd been through a lot together. I owed her too – Rowan would have been executed without her intervention back in Brightgate. Their current government under the bastard Oliver Thane are a malicious, murderous bunch, suspicious of all outsiders, and particularly now of Portsea.

'Brenda's asked me to go and help Joshua Rodwell,' said Gwen. 'Something is happening just across the Brightgate border. Joshua headed there last night, so I'm going to meet him.'

Joshua Rodwell is the Portsea Minister of Security. If there were a threat coming from Brightgate, it would be his job to handle it.

'How are you getting there?' said Rowan.

'Ferry to the village of Arun,' said Gwen.

'That's this side of the border opposite Horton, isn't it?' said Rowan. 'We stopped there when you took me across Brightgate. It's where my Dad was spreading unfamiliars.'

Rowan hadn't known that at the time, but it had caused Brightgate's President Thane to assume it had been him. Once again, Brett Webb had almost accidentally caused his son's death, travelling across Brightgate to spread warped versions of familiars created by Jason Parr, which we called *unfamiliars*. That was the last time Brett had been seen. He could be anywhere now.

'That's the place,' said Gwen. 'Sounds like there's a troop build-up there. The border fence has started too. Brenda thought my experience might prove useful to Joshua.'

'Must be serious to be in such a rush,' I said. 'Thought they'd give you time to settle in before starting work for Joshua.'

'I don't mind,' said Gwen. 'I like to be busy, and I'll do anything to hold Thane to account. I'm not working for Joshua though. Not yet, anyway. Brenda's temporarily made me a Muffler until things are sorted. Officially, I'm liaising with the Ministry of Security for Morena.'

'That's good,' said Rowan. 'Welcome to the Mufflers.'

'Might be a good fit longer term,' I said. 'Think you'd fit in well here.'

Gwen let out a rare smile.

'Maybe,' she said. 'Think I'd like it here. You're a welcoming bunch. Anyway, I'd better be off – I have a ferry to catch.'

With that, Gwen hustled away.

Those unfamiliars are another lingering pain remaining after our victory in Ringwall. Thanks to Jason Parr's deceit, happily lapped up by Brett Webb, unfamiliars are spreading through the community, possibly expanding exponentially. The Oracle did manage to neuter them so that any other Cronos system couldn't easily use them to enslave all the hosts, but that's not their only threat. The more there are, the weaker the Oracle gets, and the more highly-powered troublemakers we have in our midst.

We continued towards Ashley's office but still didn't get there.

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'Hey,' came Morena Lessen's voice from her open office door. 'Got time for a chat?'

It seemed that it was a day for distractions. I think people were still trying to come to terms with everything that had happened, and talking helped.

Rowan went in first, and I heard him groan. I should have guessed why.

'What are you doing here?' he said.

'Liaising,' said Dave Elkington, who was sat in the office with Morena, grinning broadly.

'Is that what you call it?'

'Play nicely, children,' said Morena. She looked at me. 'How are you feeling? You looked exhausted last night.'

'Bit better,' I said. 'Few good night's sleep, and I'll be as right as rain.'

'You've certainly had quite the time of it,' said Morena. 'Not exactly how you dreamed married life would start, I bet.'

I decided to join in the grinning and looked at Rowan.

'Oh, I don't know. Our liaising's going pretty well too. Mind you, I was only planning one marriage at a time.'

'Ah yes,' said Morena. 'On that subject, I checked with Emforth's embassy this morning. Your clearance to visit them will carry over fine from your last trip. Whenever things are ready for you to go back to sort things out, there's nothing more that needs doing.'

I hadn't known Morena long, but I've been impressed with her from the start. She's been through a lot lately but has come out the other side as strong as ever – and happy too. Dave might have had something to do with that from the way they'd been holding hands last night.

'That's great, thanks,' I said. 'Sounds like you've had a busy morning, what with Gwen heading out.'

'Yeah,' said Morena. 'I'm worried about her. She's been through a big upheaval, and as much as she seems to be taking things in her stride, it'll get to her eventually.'

Dave quickly piped up with a suggestion. He seemed so much more confident than the first time I'd spoken to him.

'You should make her role working for you permanent,' he said. 'Maybe she could look after all liaison with the Security Ministry. It would give her some stability.'

'I'd been thinking along the same lines,' said Morena. 'Great minds. Depends if she wants it though.'

'Think she will,' I said. 'Rowan suggested something similar. Gwen said she likes it here.'

'Great,' said Morena. 'I'll mention it to Brenda. I've been wondering about reorganising my team for a while, so I'll justify it as part of that. At the moment, we all tend to muck in on the work, but it might be more efficient to have one person responsible for each area of liaison. Gwen can handle Security, Dave will liaise with the Ministry of Information, and there's a pretty good fit for most other Ministries and embassies. Think it'd work.'

Rowan was more sensitive to the implications of what Morena had said than I was.

'Hold on,' he said. 'Dave doesn't work for you.'

Dave grinned again.

'Oh, did I forget to mention it? I'm officially transferring here from the beginning of next week.'

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'That's brilliant,' I said, ignoring Rowan holding his head in his hands. 'Congratulations. Any reason for the change?'

'Things started getting a bit difficult,' said Dave. 'Although Courtney was happy with the arrangement helping Morena, my head of division kept giving me grief for spending so much time up here. I know she had a lot on her plate fresh in the job, but it started getting to me.'

'I suggested the change,' said Morena. 'Dave's made life so much easier for me. And not just with work.'

'Oh god,' mumbled Rowan. 'I'm never going to get away from you.'

'Shush,' I said. There were more important things to find out. 'How long have you two... You know...'

Morena knew.

'It was just after you left on your missions,' she said.

Dave smugly completed the picture.

'We'd just discussed me transferring here for the first time, and I accidentally asked her out.'

Rowan emerged from behind his hands and stared at him in astonishment.

'How do you accidentally ask someone out?'

'We'd just arranged to meet in the evening to discuss my transfer, and I said, "It's a date."'

'And I said, "Is it?"' said Morena. 'Things escalated from there.'

Dave blushed, bless him. I couldn't be happier for them. You should try it, Rowan.

We chatted together for another fifteen minutes before leaving. Morena didn't seem to have called us in for any reason other than to tell us of her changes, or maybe it was to let Dave rub Rowan's nose in it. Those two were as bad as each other at times.

We finally made it to Ashley's office. Colin was with her, of course. Quite the love-in around here at the moment. We chatted informally for a while before Ashley got down to business.

'I don't want to keep you long today,' said Ashley. 'I just wanted to make sure you knew what was coming up. Then you can have a couple more days to yourself before we crack on with things.'

Colin chipped in, having caught the grinning bug that seemed all the rage today.

'This way, Ashley knows you'll be worrying about work even while you're on your honeymoon.'

'It's fine,' I said.

'I expect we can probably guess,' said Rowan. 'Brightgate, unfamiliar, and my Dad.'

That seemed a decent summary of the top things on my worry list, other than being married twice and dying from magic. Ashley agreed.

'Pretty much,' said Ashley. 'The original reason for this division hasn't gone away. We still need to make strategic plans for other Cronos discoveries, but the urgency for that is probably less right now. We need to focus on what we can do to help with the more pressing concerns.'

'Presumably, Brightgate and Dad need to wait for what Gwen and Joshua discover?' said Rowan. 'Although we don't know for sure whether Dad is still there.'

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'We certainly can't make any final decisions until then, but we should discuss options,' said Ashley. 'We'll be leaning on you heaviest for those areas. You know Brightgate and your Dad better than us. Working out ways of stopping the spread of unfamiliars will fall on all of us, although Tia, you probably understand them best.'

I suppose I did have one around my neck for a while, although it was the Oracle who'd interacted with it. I'd also killed someone wearing one. The memory of him falling down the crevice nags at my conscience all too regularly.

'Unfortunately, yes,' I said. 'We need to find reliable ways of detecting them as the top priority. At first, they were obvious, as you couldn't scry the hosts with empathy, but they were learning to fake that. I fear that will have been perfected by now.'

'Will the Oracle help?' said Ashley.

Good question. I sent a thought in the Oracle's general direction. Yes, I know that doesn't make sense, but I can't think of a better way to put it.

Well?

I didn't get a reply, but neither did I get the sense that it was somewhere I shouldn't tread, which was the usual feeling if the Oracle wasn't interested.

'I think I might be able to persuade her,' I said. 'She's a bit reluctant for now. We'll probably have to go along with some concrete questions.'

'Sure,' said Ashley. 'Think about it for the next couple of days. We'll start afresh on this at the beginning of next week. We should have heard back from Gwen by then.'

'Sounds good,' I said. 'I do have one other thing on my plate. If I get the call from Lance up in Emforth, I'll need a few days off to go and get our marriage annulled.'

'Of course,' said Ashley. 'Goes without saying that should be your top priority.'

'Thanks,' I said.

That was a relief. Rowan was being lovely about it, but I was sure it was gnawing away at him and would eventually chew its way to the surface. I only hoped Gwen would return by then so I could take her as my escort. I had an ulterior motive there, naturally.

Gwen seemed to get on like a house on fire with fellow warrior Lance when fighting off rampaging squirrels. I think they'd make a great couple. She'd also set the cat amongst the pigeons in Emforth's male-dominated society. Having a Queen who could best most of the Knights of the Court in combat would be precisely what they needed. At least Gwen might get Queen Guinevere off Lance's back for a while.

I was starting to feel exhausted, so we made our excuses and headed back to our room. At least I'd have a few more days to recuperate before throwing myself back into work.

I really shouldn't tempt fate like that.

Chapter 2 – Apprehension

I felt much stronger by the following day. I woke up feeling relaxed and looking forward to a leisurely couple of days with my husband. Well, one of them, but hopefully soon to be my one and only.

We had a great evening together. After resting for a while, we had dinner and spent a couple of hours with everyone in the bar. There was still an air of celebration wafting around after the latest victory over Cronos, but it was beginning to dissipate as the challenges ahead entered the conversation. We retired early, to general snickers all around, although it was mainly as I felt tired again. Honest.

In the meantime, I'd been mulling over the problem of how to detect unfamiliar. Grudgingly, I had to admit that I was probably best placed to investigate this. Better than anyone, I could boost and finely tune my empathy to see if any telltale signatures gave away their presence, and I had the sense that I could call upon the Oracle's advice. I should think so too. It was for her benefit as much as anyone.

I knew I couldn't overdo it, but it should be OK as long as I kept myself well-fed. If Bernice could make that nutrient fluid more palatable, a few sips would make all the difference. It certainly packed a punch.

I'd also need the support of a non-Muffler, or at least someone who didn't have a familiar, who'd be happy to wear an unfamiliar for a while for me to study it in use. Maybe Dave or Gwen would help before they got their own familiars – I did consider my Dad, but his total lack of magic might muddy the waters. I'd mention it to Ashley today so she could get everything in place ready for when we get back to work next week.

Those plans didn't survive breakfast.

Just as we were finishing a delicious cooked breakfast, courtesy of my Dad, Morena rushed into the canteen and headed straight towards us. I guessed it would be about Rowan's Dad, but no. She wanted me.

'Brenda wants to see you immediately.'

'Is there a problem?' I said.

Brenda had always been supportive of me since joining the Mufflers, but I hadn't known her that long. I didn't know what she was like if you got on her bad side, not that I knew what I might have done wrong.

'It's about Emforth,' said Morena. 'She'll tell you the details. I need to go and sort things out. Rowan, you should go with Tia.'

Morena rushed away before we could ask anything else. That was worrying. I'd wanted to hear from Lance when he was ready but wasn't expecting it this quickly, and certainly not with this level of urgency.

We made our way directly to the stairs to Brenda's office. Rowan paused halfway down.

'Whatever it is, you know you've got my support,' said Rowan.

I squeezed his hand silently in reply. We continued down, entered Brenda's office, and sat down when instructed.

'Thank you for coming so promptly,' said Brenda. 'Please, don't worry. I think this is the message you were expecting from Emforth, but it's a little curious.'

'In what way?' I said.

'We received it overnight from their embassy. Given the timescales, it must have come via an entangled connection, so they must consider it a matter of urgency. The diplomatic part of the message is straightforward: Lady Tia Tobin is formally requested to attend the Court of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table at the earliest possible convenience.'

That was what I'd hoped, but Brenda was right. It didn't explain the urgency, as much as I wanted to get this resolved. Also, I couldn't help but notice they'd given me the title of *Lady*, a tacit acknowledgement of my marriage, in a way that might not raise questions for those not in the know.

'Was there more?' I said.

'Yes,' said Brenda. 'As well as the formal invitation, there was also a more informal addition: It is essential that m'lady Tia arrives before the end of this week if we are to conclude matters to our mutual satisfaction. My profuse apologies for the undue haste.'

That bit definitely sounded like Lance. No one else calls me *m'lady*, which means that he wanted me to know it was from him.

'I wonder what the rush is?' I said.

Brenda thought for a few moments before replying. Her response was intriguing, something I wouldn't have considered.

'I'd say it's something they don't want their diplomatic channels to know about. Not just that you're married – something else is happening up there. It's curious. I guess you'll only find out when you arrive.'

'Are you going to be able to get there that quickly?' said Rowan. 'Took you nearly three days last time.'

'It should be possible,' said Brenda. 'I've authorised Morena to make the arrangements, no matter the cost. Sorry, but it's not going to be a fun journey.'

I didn't care. The urgency made me nervous.

'When do I leave?' I said.

'In about an hour, two at worst. You'll get your own coach. You'll need the extra room, as you'll be sleeping in it while you travel. Besides comfort breaks and a chance to freshen up before you arrive, you'll be travelling non-stop. We'll arrange new coach drivers and horses along the way.'

No wonder Morena had looked flustered. That was a lot to organise in a short time. I couldn't complain about how everyone was putting themselves out for me.

'That's fine,' I said. 'Thank you. I'll be back as soon as I can. Do you know if Lance will be at the border?'

'We'll let them know when you'll arrive,' said Brenda. 'I'm sure someone will be there waiting for you.'

The Muffler's Misery

That was as much as I could ask for. Whatever was going on could well involve Lance.

'Wish I could come with you,' said Rowan.

A weird wrinkle in the Locality Accords blocked Rowan from visiting Emforth but let me walk around scot-free. My dual marriage was allowed in Ringwall but not in Emforth or Portsea. Luckily, a legal grey area meant it was acceptable as long as I only had one husband within a region at a time. For now, Lance and Rowan couldn't be together.

'I know,' I said. 'Don't want to be arrested at the border though. Don't worry, I'll keep in touch. I'll entangle with Pythia before I leave. Is that OK, Pythia, my dear?'

'She says it's fine,' said Rowan after a brief pause. 'She much prefers entangling around your neck than with other familiars.'

'Is there anything else?' I said. 'I should go and get packed.'

'That's all,' said Brenda. 'Good luck. I'm sure Rowan will let us all know how things are going.'

We hurried back to our room. I busied myself packing bags, sending Rowan out to pick up the stuff I didn't have to hand. I didn't want to think through the implications yet. There must be some sort of complication in getting our annulment, or there wouldn't be this urgency about it.

Within half an hour, everything was ready, other than entangling with Pythia. Rowan handed her over; I wrapped her around my neck and let matters take their course. Thank you, Pythia. You were as lovely as ever. I still don't know why Rowan's always complaining about you.

'So much for our honeymoon,' said Rowan. 'Are you sure you're up for this? I know you're trying to hide it, but you're not back to full strength yet, are you?'

He's too perceptive at times.

'I'll be fine,' I said. 'I'll rest as much as I can on the journey. It sounds like I'll have plenty of food with me, so I'll make sure I keep topped up.'

I'd asked Rowan to get my Dad to pack some food for the journey, but it was already in hand, thanks to Morena's efficient organisation. The only thing left was to see Bernice and Jemima on the way out. As horrible as it was, it would be worth taking some of that nutrient fluid along.

Naturally, Morena had been there already, and Bernice was packing everything in a bag. We'd discussed the nutrient fluid's impact on my strength in the bar last night, and Morena must have remembered. Have I mentioned how brilliant she is?

'Try this,' said Bernice, handing me a cup of viscous liquid. 'It's the best we could do in the time.'

I sipped it suspiciously. It was the same nutrient fluid, but the edge had been taken off the flavour. I could detect a hint of lemon with an aftertaste of cloves – still not pleasant, but it didn't make me want to throw up anymore.

'Better,' I said. 'Thanks.'

'We've packed you that collar with the straw, already filled with fluid,' said Bernice. 'There are also several bags of powdered ingredients with instructions on how to mix fresh batches. Basically, just add water.'

'That's great, thank you.'

It was. In just over an hour, I'd gone from eating breakfast to being all packed and ready to leave on a mission, thanks to the brilliance of everyone here. The main disappointment was that I couldn't take Gwen Scott with me for my tactful attempt at throwing her at Lance. Oh well. Morena probably wouldn't like me poaching her staff anyway.

It had been a headlong rush but buoyed along on the crest of Morena's organisational wave, I found myself swept into the back of the coach, ready to leave. It was only then that I realised how worried Rowan looked. I'd been too wrapped up in the urgency of Lance's summons to contemplate what an upheaval this had been.

'You take care,' he said. 'It sounds like something's gone wrong.'

'I will,' I said. I took his hand through the coach window. 'Whatever it is, it'll work out. I'll be back before you know it. Then it'll just be you and me.'

'Hopefully, we'll get more than a couple of days together before one of us gets dragged off.'

Rowan kissed me. I let it linger, considering how he must be feeling.

I wanted to thank him for his unconditional trust and support, but couldn't find the words. There was hardly ever a comment from him about Lance nor any overt suspicion about what we'd shared in our times alone together in Emforth. Rowan's only human. As much as he trusts me, I bet doubts are nagging away inside him, but he's never upset me by letting them show.

Considering what a dick he'd been when I'd met him twice in Gooseport, pretending to be different people from Emforth, he's grown up fast. I'd like to think that was all my doing.

Realising I probably should say that, I kissed him back, harder.

'I'll miss you,' said Rowan. 'More than I can say.'

'You just said it though,' I said. 'Sorry. Ditto, I mean.'

He smiled at my clumsy attempt. He knows how I feel. I'm just not as good at expressing it as him.

And with that, I was off, and at a much faster pace than last time.

The inside of the carriage was more comfortable too, thank goodness, given the time I would spend here. The seat was well padded, and I could lie down sideways with a bit of a curl. They'd even supplied a pillow.

I was alert at first, looking out at the scenery as we headed northwards, but the soporific motion of the carriage soon had me nodding off. The next thing I knew was that we'd stopped for a break. I ate some lunch, stretched my legs, and then it was time to set off again. That pattern of alternating sight-seeing and sleeping became the theme for a while.

After the next break, I decided to shake myself out of my lethargy and find something constructive to do other than just worrying about what had happened up in Emforth. It was time to learn some new magic and see how easy it felt. I sucked on the nutrients to give myself a boost and studied what these medical bracelets could do. They were fascinating.

Broadly, they worked by focusing a medic's empathy and telekineses out their fingers, allowing them to scry and manipulate tissues and organs within a person's body. It was an

order of magnitude more precise than I could do on my own, with a whole raft of dedicated powers for specific ailments or injuries.

I already had a decent understanding of healing powers, having had them channelled through me by my late familiar, Delphi, to kick off my recovery in the cocoon. Nothing here was alien to me.

The trouble was that I couldn't test most of them without having an injury to treat. I had no intention of stabbing myself just to try to heal it. I started with the basics of the enhanced scrying technique to look for internal damage. That felt trivial to pick up, even if spying inside my body was pretty gross. You'll be pleased to know, Rowan, that I do have a heart inside me, beating away. And it's all yours.

See, I can do mushy stuff. It's much easier when you're not here.

That small amount of accessing the wisdom of the Oracle and peering inside myself left me feeling tired again. It was time for another kip.

I must have slept for three or four hours. It was getting dark by then, but I was awake – and bored. After another snack and sip of nutrients, I decided to exercise my magic a little more. It wasn't long enough to significantly change how easily I'd pick up a skill, but I'd noticed one I wanted to try.

There was a technique for healing – or at least improving – scar tissue. My skin is largely one mass of scars these days, hidden by my glamour, so if I learnt the technique, I might be able to adapt and improve it for my specific problem, as long as I didn't overdo it – or get my hopes up.

The basic technique was easy. I removed the glamour on my right hand and selected one ugly weal on its back. I scried into it, teasing out its internal structure. Once that was understood, I pulled gently on a couple of pressure points with my finely tuned telekinesis, sent a gentle heat into the tissues, pushed down onto the surface, and held it in place for several minutes while thinking healing thoughts. It wasn't painful, more a gentle tickle under my skin.

I relaxed, surprisingly exhausted. It wasn't the amount of energy exerted that had tired me, but rather the intense concentration to hold the pressure constant over several small areas. Still, it seemed to have had a positive impact. The domed top of the weal seemed flatter than before, the skin tone less angry.

I was content. It would be a long-term project. I'd try to adjust the technique each time to find something that closely matched my injuries. A few minutes each day shouldn't be too dangerous, and I might end up with at least my hand not looking too ugly. Then I could see if I could get away without a glamour there. Glamours didn't come for free. Everything needed energy, so if I could reduce it a little over time, so much the better.

It was fully dark by the time I'd finished, and I could see virtually nothing outside. I opted to alternate between snoozing and worrying, starting with the latter. There must be some reason why I had to get to Emforth quickly. Morena had found out that the capital hadn't moved from near Redling, which was interesting in itself. I had the impression they were preparing to leave when things kicked off with Jason Parr.

Perhaps they were about to start heading eastwards again, but they wanted me there before leaving. No, that didn't feel right. They were only just stopping when I met them last time, and it hadn't been an issue to rendezvous while they were still moving down the ancient road.

According to Lance, the simplest way for us to get an annulment was to meet the King in person, decree that it was our wish, and he'd be able to grant it on the spot. Maybe the King would be tied up with something for a while after the end of this week, so Lance wanted it finished for my sake beforehand. I knew Lance was a man of his word.

All this speculation counted for nothing. There was only one way to find out. Once I met Lance at the border (at least, I hoped I would), all would become clear.

When day broke, I tried to work out how far we'd reached. Although the countryside looked familiar, I couldn't remember where it was, so I checked with the driver at the next stop.

'You should be at the border before sunset, ma'am,' he said.

'Thanks,' I said, ignoring the *ma'am*. At least it might help me get acclimatised for the *m'lady* onslaught in my imminent future.

Still, that was faster than I was expecting. This journey was going only to be about half the duration of my previous trip, which was an impressive achievement, even if I did feel a little guilty at the effort everyone was making on my behalf. I guess I had a little goodwill on account, having saved the world twice.

I exchanged several messages with Rowan during the two days of the journey. Yes, OK, I admit it. I missed him. I think it was mutual, as he decided to return to work early to help keep busy. His main role was to fully debrief the others over what he'd discovered about Brightgate, trying to develop worse-case scenarios and what to do about them. It was filling time until Gwen and Joshua reported back, but it meant they'd be as prepared as possible.

I felt increasingly apprehensive as the day passed, and we got closer to Emforth. Something had gone wrong. I was sure of it. The trouble was that I had nothing to go on besides my overactive imagination.

Then, as the sun had nearly reached the horizon, we were there. The easy-to-miss border hut came into view, and the cart slowed to a halt. After giving thanks to my driver, who'd been excellent as the rest, I made my way through the nearest door.

The hut was a shared facility between the two regions. I was quickly ushered from the Portsea desk to the Emforth officials. To my disappointment, there was no sign of Lance. However, standing toward the back was a man draped in all the finery of the Court of King Arthur. I vaguely recognised him from my last visit but had never been introduced.

He strode forward as soon as he saw me.

'Lady Tia?' he said.

'That's me,' I said. 'Please, call me Tia.'

'Of course, m'lady,' he said, bowing his head.

I resisted the temptation to roll my eyes. At least he hadn't bowed down at a right angle like Lance seemed to manage. This Knight seemed a more serious man, certainly much older,

probably in his late fifties. On closer inspection, he might be even older. His hair was greying, but a powerful physique took years off him.

'Welcome back to Emforth, m'lady,' he said. 'My name is Sir Gawain. Sir Lancelot sends his apologies for being unable to greet you in person. Matters of state make it impossible for him to leave the King's side at present. He has entrusted you into my care.'

Sir Gawain's language was less florid than Lance's when Tia had first met him. Perhaps Lance had forewarned him how I'd react. Still, I needed to play my part. He might tell me what was happening if I played my cards right.

'It is an honour to meet you, Sir Gawain,' I said. I even gave a tiny curtsy. Very tiny. 'Would I be correct to assume there's a problem? There was a sense of urgency about the summons.'

A twitch of his upper lip and right eye were the first warnings that something was badly wrong, an involuntary sign of distress cracking through his formality. When he spoke, there was a tone of tense repression in his voice.

'Perhaps we can begin our journey to the Court,' he said, glancing at the border guards. 'I will answer any questions on the way.'

It was so bad that they didn't want it to be public knowledge. My worry increased.

We made our way outside, and to my relief, Gawain led me towards a carriage pulled by a couple of horses. I'd eventually learnt to enjoy riding a horse on my previous visit, but I wasn't sure I could have coped after that rapid journey here, especially without using magic all the time to cushion the ride.

Once we were underway, we sat in silence for a few minutes. It seemed I would have to broach the subject again. Perhaps if I could get him to relax a little, it might make the conversation more fruitful.

'Sir Gawain,' I said. 'May I ask a personal question?'

'Of course, m'lady.'

'Please, it's Tia,' I said. 'Tia Tobin. It took a while, but even Lance called me Tia in the end.' He nodded and smiled thinly. 'Is Sir Gawain your title, like Arthur is your King's?'

'It is.'

It was like getting blood out of a stone.

'May I ask what's your given name?' I said.

'Henry,' he said. 'Henry Drake.'

I smiled my most winning smile.

'Pleased to meet you, Henry,' I said. I realised I recognised the surname. 'Drake. Isn't the King's name George Drake? Any relation?'

There was that flicker of distress again, but his voice was firm.

'He's my elder brother,' said Henry. 'He spoke highly of you. As does Lance.'

I could just about see a family resemblance. So they'd sent another Knight of great importance to meet me. I should be flattered, but I wished he was as loquacious as Lance.

'Do you know the purpose of my visit?' I said.

He nodded dispassionately.

The Muffler's Misery

'I am aware of the arrangement that had to be made for you to enter Ringwall,' said Henry. 'Under the circumstances, it was a worthy sacrifice you both made. Your achievements are formidable.'

'Is our marriage common knowledge?'

'No,' said Henry. 'Only the King, Queen, and Merlin know, and I was only made aware because of this duty.'

'So you know why we need to see the King?'

He nodded.

'Is there a problem?' I said.

His upper lip suddenly developed a life of its own. I gave him a few seconds to compose himself, his distress now unmistakable.

'The King was badly injured in an accident. He was thrown from his horse.'

I felt a chill.

'I'm so sorry,' I said. 'How's he doing?'

'Alive,' said Henry. 'But he was frailer than any of us knew. He's not expected to survive much longer.'

That was terrible. For a man with such power, he'd come across as a lovely, warm person. The Queen would be devastated, as clearly would his brother.

'That's awful,' I said. 'I'm so, so sorry. I only met him briefly, but he seemed a wonderful man.'

'He is. He's the best of us.'

I was missing something.

'My visit doesn't seem important right now,' I said. 'I shouldn't be intruding upon your grief.'

'You don't understand,' said Henry. 'This might be your only chance.'

That chill came back.

'You're right,' I said. 'I don't understand.'

'The King can annul any marriage in the land, with one exception. His own.'

I finally began to understand the urgency.

'What other options would we have?' I said.

'None,' said Henry flatly. 'We have no direct provision in our constitution for the divorce of the ruling monarch. There may be ways around it, but it would be complicated at best and, at worst, cause irreparable damage to Lance's reign – and Emforth.'

I was still taking that in, trying to imagine how Rowan would react, but Henry hadn't finished. He wanted to ram the message home in case I'd missed the point.

'The moment my brother passes away, Lance will become King, and you will be our Queen, m'lady. I understand that this was never your intention, but I believe you have shown through your actions that you take your responsibilities seriously. This would be your duty. Emforth would need you.'

Now the urgency was finally clear. Shit.

Chapter 3 – Succession

As we approached the field where the Court had set up their tents on the outskirts of Redling, I remembered I hadn't sent Rowan a recent update. The trouble was, I wasn't sure what to say.

I didn't want to hide anything, but equally, I didn't want to worry him unduly. In the end, I kept the facts to a bare minimum: I'd arrived in Emforth, Lance wasn't the one who greeted me, and I'd find out full details on what was happening when I met him. That was all true. The bits I'd missed would only make him nervous, so I felt it was better to wait until I could tell him the whole story. It wouldn't be long anyway.

The camp seemed more subdued than on my previous visit. People were milling around carrying out their duties, but there was a solemnity in the air. That may have been me projecting how I felt, but the bustling regal efficiency was missing as everyone waited for news.

'Sir Lancelot should be in his tent,' said Henry. 'At least I hope he is.'

'Let me guess,' I said. 'He refuses to rest?'

Henry nodded thoughtfully but with evident affection for Lance.

'I thought we were going to have to drag him to bed. He'd been up for more than twenty-four hours and was dead on his feet. Emforth will need him at his best in the coming days. In the end, the Queen had to order him to rest.'

'How's the Queen coping?' I said.

'As well as you could expect,' said Henry. 'She's obviously devastated, but I think it was less of a surprise to her than to everyone else. She must have known how frail he'd become. She's at the King's bedside day and night, only sleeping when Lance takes her place for a few hours.'

We wended our way through the tents until we arrived at Lance's. It looked identical to the one I'd been allocated when I was here, except for a thick braided cord hanging down near the entrance. Henry pulled on it, and a bell tinkled inside the tent.

'Give him a minute,' said Henry. 'Hopefully, we've woken him up.'

'Should have let him sleep longer,' I said. 'I could have waited.'

As much as I wanted to talk to him, he'd been through a lot lately.

'More than my life's worth,' said Henry. 'I was supposed to wake him before I left. Somehow, I forgot.'

'Oops,' I said.

Muffled sounds came from within, followed by a sleepy voice.

'Who is it?' said Lance.

'Henry, sire.'

'And me!' I piped up.

There was a delay before Lance replied.

The Muffler's Misery

'You were supposed to wake me.'

'I'm here. You're awake,' I said. 'What's the problem?'

Instinctively, I felt he needed someone to treat him normally. I could only imagine how it felt being the King-in-waiting, with everyone tiptoeing around the fact. I'm sure I heard him sigh.

'One moment,' he said.

After ten seconds, Lance peered out of the tent flap, blinked a few times, and smiled at me. He wore a hastily donned dressing gown, embroidered in his customary gold, navy blue, and scarlet motifs. His hair was a dishevelled mess.

'Welcome, m'lady,' he said. 'My apologies for the unseemly haste. I assume Henry has explained the circumstance?'

'He has,' I said. 'I'm so sorry to hear about the King.'

Mentioning the King seemed to shock him awake. He addressed Henry.

'Any update on his condition?'

'We've only just arrived,' said Henry. 'I brought Tia straight here.'

'Understood,' said Lance. 'Please, go see your brother. I'll come across with Tia as soon I'm dressed.'

Henry scurried away as I followed Lance into the tent. I guess it wasn't improper to enter the bedroom with a man in his nightclothes, seeing as he was my husband. Well, one of them.

I mustn't joke about it. Not until I'm sure we can end it.

Lance headed towards the back of the tent, where an area was divided off by a screen.

'Let's catch up while I get dressed,' he said. 'How are you feeling? You were still weak after your ordeal when we parted.'

'I'm fine,' I said. I wasn't the important one right now. 'What happened? Henry said you were with the King when the accident happened.'

'It wasn't an accident,' said Lance. 'It was one of those bloody unfamiliars. We've got to do something about them.'

'What?' I said. I knew they'd cause us problems, but not this. 'How?'

'The morning after I got back, I went out on an early morning horse ride with him. We often do it. Dress up incognito and make our way through town. It's the only way we can see people as they really live. I know how much he enjoys it, so I thought it would put him in a good mood to tell him about us.'

'How did he take it?'

'He nearly fell off his horse laughing,' said Lance. You could hear the warmth in his voice. 'Annulment wouldn't be a problem. Except...'

'What happened?'

I heard a grunt. I wasn't sure whether it was due to the memory or the exertion of getting dressed.

'We were heading back through town when we heard a woman's scream from a side alley,' said Lance. 'I went to investigate while the King blocked the exit with his horse. I found a man accosting a woman, holding her in the air with his telekinesis.'

'He had an unfamiliar?'

'Must have. I knew I could overpower him, but I wasn't expecting him to do what he did. Damn, I keep replaying it in my mind. If only I'd...'

Lance trailed off, lost in self-recrimination.

'You can't blame yourself,' I said. 'Hindsight's easy. What did he do?'

'He chucked the woman straight at the King's horse,' said Lance. 'We both caught her with our telekinesis, but it spooked the beast. It reared up and threw the King. When his head hit the ground, I thought he was dead there and then, but I managed to get him back here alive.'

'Henry said that his brother had been frail for a while.'

'Only the Queen knew. This was the final straw. The doctors said he could last a couple of weeks, but he might only have a few hours.'

Despite the implications, it felt selfish to impose on the King's final moments. Lance emerged from behind the screen, fully dressed, hair now under control.

'I feel guilty coming here under the circumstances,' I said.

'He insisted. He ordered me to fetch you so he could rectify this, even if it were the last thing he did. Which I fear it will be.'

It didn't stop me from feeling guilty, especially given the unseemly rush. I hadn't even said hello properly.

'Despite everything, it's good to see you again.'

'And you, m'lady,' said Lance. I didn't have the heart to correct him. 'We must make haste. I did not intend to sleep for this long. It has been many hours.'

'Henry said you needed the rest,' I said.

'I also need to be there for the Queen,' he said. 'Come.'

We dashed across to a nearby tent. It was slightly larger than Lance's and much more ornately decorated in the King's colours. Lance went straight through the flap. Inside was a small space only taking up about a quarter of the volume, with another flap leading to a chamber at the rear. Henry stood inside, talking to another man who, I guess from his outfit, was a doctor.

With a sinking feeling, the look of ashen distress on Henry's face told me all I needed to know. I stumbled to a stop beside Lance, who'd come to the same conclusion.

'The King is dead,' said Henry.

'When?' said Lance.

'About an hour ago,' said the doctor.

'Why didn't anyone fetch me?' said Lance

'The Queen insisted she wanted time alone with George,' said Henry. 'She ordered that nobody was to be told until she was ready. The doctor obeyed that order until I arrived.'

The doctor felt the need to justify himself.

'I judged the late King's brother's request had precedence over the Dowager Queen's.'

A look of shocked realisation crossed Henry's face at hearing the title of Dowager. He bowed his head and dropped to one knee.

'My King,' he said.

Lance didn't know what to say at first before recovering his composure.

'Get up, man,' he said. 'I've no time for that.'

'You must, sire,' said Henry. 'Emforth will need your guidance over the coming days, months, and years.'

Henry turned and bowed respectfully to me.

'My Queen,' he said.

Oh shit. Lance seemed as upset at hearing that as he had over the King's death.

'My apologies, m'lady. I never intended it to come to this. I will find a way to release you from this burden, or my life be forfeit.'

A woman's voice spoke. We turned to see Milly Drake, formerly Queen Guinevere, emerge from the rear. Except now she was the Dowager Queen, and I was Queen Guinevere. Shit.

Her voice was flat, emotionless, so unlike when I'd heard her speak before.

'You know that won't be possible, my King. This may not be what anyone intended, but this is reality.' Her voice wavered for the first time. 'My husband is gone. You are King. You have responsibilities, as does your wife. Emforth needs you both.'

Lance shook his head slowly, still coming to terms with the shift in the relative hierarchy.

'I cannot ask m'lady Tia to give up her life, her love, for a responsibility not of her choosing.'

'I gave up my life in Portsea to become Queen here,' she said. 'It is not a decision I ever regretted. You will find a way to make it work.'

I knew I should be saying something, but all I could think about was telling Rowan. I hoped he'd understand. I could imagine him trying to be lovely about it, but it would be through gritted teeth. It would gnaw away at the bond between us.

I could just refuse and walk away from Emforth, but I couldn't do that to Lance without trying to find a way to make this right. It would leave him in an impossible situation. There had to be a way.

Milly hadn't finished. She addressed me directly.

'I know this isn't what you imagined, but I believe you to be a woman of honour. You will learn to love it here. Learn to enjoy your role, even if this is not a marriage born of love. This is an honour and a responsibility that can not be denied. Lance needs a Queen by his side; Emforth needs you both. I need to believe in you if this is all to mean something.'

I didn't know what to say. I didn't know her that well. She'd always been relaxed and friendly toward me; I'd never seen this severe side before.

I tried to see it through her eyes. She'd just lost her husband, the love of her life. Her world would be diminished going forward, yet all she could think about was the well-being of her adopted Emforth. I couldn't just dismiss her plea out of hand. It wouldn't be fair on her, given her loss.

Luckily Lance got in first.

'Now is not the time for this, Milly. We need make no announcement today. I have also given Tia a vow that this would not happen; there will be a way to resolve this contradiction.'

'There is,' said Milly. 'Tia can release you from your vow.'

'We will make no decision today,' said Lance firmly. 'I know this is a traumatic moment for you. Perhaps things will become clearer tomorrow. We all want what is best for Emforth.'

'I do,' I said, finally finding my voice, however inadequate. 'I will do what I can to resolve this to everyone's satisfaction.'

Especially mine and Rowan's, but I didn't want to rub that in. Milly went to reply, caught herself, and then finally acquiesced. She looked so tired.

'You must go and tell Merlin what has occurred,' she said. 'He's working on something at George and the Lady's behest. You need to know what he is doing, and he needs to know you are King.'

I could see Lance was about to push back but changed his mind.

'We will,' he said. 'His wise counsel may find us a way out of this conundrum. Is there anything I can do for you before we leave?'

'No,' said Milly. 'I wish to spend a few final moments alone with my husband.'

'I will stay here,' said Henry. 'You should go.'

Lance nodded, and we departed. Once outside, Lance spoke quietly to me.

'I'm so sorry about that. The Que– Milly is understandably upset.'

'I don't blame her,' I said. I didn't. I could only feel sympathy for her. 'I just don't know what to say. Or do.'

'Nor I, m'lady.'

'For goodness sake, if I'm your Queen, at least call me Tia.'

'My apologies,' said Lance. 'I will not go back on my word to you. I will find a way to release you from this obligation.'

'Let's hope Merlin has some ideas then.'

I was also intrigued that Merlin was working on something for the Oracle – their Lady. When the Oracle intervened directly, it usually meant it was something critical. What else was about to happen?

An acrid smell permeated the air as we entered Merlin's tent, one that was all too familiar yet subtly different. It was primarily the smell of freshly-bred unfamiliar, with a hint of the repulsive odour of the original corrupted familiars we'd seen on Cronos island. An undercurrent of something more pleasant ameliorated the impact.

Merlin was dressed more informally than usual, his clothes protected by light blue overalls. He wore thin gloves and was surrounded on three sides by workbenches. As soon as he saw Lance, he bowed.

'My King,' he said.

'You already know?' said Lance.

That was quick, seeing as we'd just found out and had come straight here.

'The Lady informed me of the late King's passing. She wished to ensure that I would fulfil his last request. I...' Merlin's voice cracked, annoyance crossing his face at letting his emotions get the better of him. 'I'll miss him.'

'As will we all,' said Lance.

I was beginning to see why the Lady was regularly in contact with Merlin. His benches were covered in large glass containers and beakers containing powders and liquids of many colours. The larger containers all held familiar-like creatures of several different varieties. Some seemed inert, but others writhed animatedly.

Merlin turned to me and nodded with apparent reluctance.

'Welcome back to Emforth, my Queen.'

They were all at it.

'Thank you,' I said, deciding to be gracious for now. 'Being Queen's one of the things we've come to talk to you about.'

Although my marriage was top of the list, I also wanted to find out what Merlin was doing. It must be something to counteract the unfamiliars, but what? For now, I'd let Lance drive the conversation. He was King, after all.

'Now that we cannot obtain an annulment,' said Lance, 'I need to understand the other possibilities for ending our marriage. It cannot stand.'

'I fear it must, sire,' said Merlin.

'Give me options,' said Lance.

Merlin sensibly judged Lance's mood. And mine. He took a considered pause before replying.

'There may be a small legal grey area. Annulment is out of the question, yet the rest of the marital laws may provide hope. Although they were designed for the general population, they do not explicitly preclude their use by those of the most senior rank. You may be able to obtain a legal ruling on that basis. I believe that is the only viable option, sire.'

'Promising,' said Lance. 'How do we go about that?'

'With great difficulty,' said Merlin. 'Each magistrate may take a different opinion on the matter. Given your status, I suggest the best route would be to apply for a ruling in every county across Emforth. You need more than a simple majority to judge in your favour for it to be generally accepted. I would suggest a minimum of seventy-five per cent. That's merely my opinion. You need more expert legal advice.'

'That would require going public,' said Lance. 'That cannot be allowed.'

'Indeed,' said Merlin. 'Sire, may I speak candidly?'

'Go ahead.'

'Do not do this. Such a public divorce would act as a destabilising influence throughout the land, just when we need a period of calm. You will find your authority weakened. We should focus on the threat posed by the unfamiliars, not this self-indulgence. Tia must remain Queen.'

'I will not!' I said as firmly as I could muster.

I was getting fed up with being talked about as if I wasn't here. I could see Merlin's face redden, but I wasn't going to give him the chance to renew his po-faced attack. It was ridiculous. I didn't have any patience for Merlin, unlike Milly.

'Look, this is silly,' I said. 'This was just a pragmatic solution in the heat of conflict. As you say, we've got bigger problems to solve right now. Surely getting rid of unfamiliars is more important. We shouldn't be taking this so seriously. This marriage doesn't mean anything.'

I was gabbling by now. I couldn't decide whether to explode in anger or break down laughing at the absurdity.

'It may not mean anything to Portsea,' said Merlin, 'but the position of Queen in Emforth is critical to our stability.'

'That's stupid,' I said. 'We're the only ones who know about it. I'll go back to Portsea, never return, and Lance can marry someone else. It's not a problem. Lance won't be able to visit us, but if that keeps Emforth stable, then that's better than me being your Queen. You really don't want me pouting in public all the time.'

Lance started to speak but checked himself. He was a man of honour, dammit, torn between conflicting responsibilities, trying to walk a tightrope that had been stolen. In the end, Merlin broke before Lance could get the words out. His reaction wasn't what I expected.

'Do you think I want *you* as my *Queen*?'

Merlin spat out the words, looking as shocked as me to hear what came from his mouth. Lance began to remonstrate, but Merlin got in first.

'My apologies,' he said. 'I meant no disrespect.'

'You need to explain yourself,' said Lance.

I was pretty sure I knew why. Merlin was a proud man.

'It's my magic, isn't it?' I said.

Merlin nodded, looking sheepish. He wasn't getting away with it that easily, so we both waited until he elucidated.

'The title of Merlin falls to the most powerful magician in the land,' he said. 'How can I continue in the role when everyone knows I am bested by my Queen?'

I thought it would be something like that. I decided to try to be constructive, for now at least. I still had the option of walking away, but I'm not sure Merlin would allow Lance to ignore our marriage, nor would Henry. At least Merlin's burst of anger seemed to have calmed things by bringing them into the open.

'Then we need to put an end to this,' I said. 'There must be other options.'

'Can I not just decree it so?' said Lance.

'I fear you overestimate the King's power,' said Merlin. 'The elected representatives pass laws in the Counties. It is the role of the Court to ensure they act within bounds and consistently wherever possible. You control general strategy within Emforth and act as a uniting force, but generally, you do not hold executive legal powers.'

Lance fell silent, at a loss.

'You mentioned expert legal advice,' I said. 'Who else should we talk to about this?'

'I propose that a small council is urgently convened to discuss the matter,' said Merlin. 'Take them into your confidence. May I suggest Carly Bohannon and Bertrand Corman as best placed to advise you, sire?'

'Good people,' said Lance. 'Very well.'

'Invite Sir Gawain too,' said Merlin. 'He's strong on constitutional matters and will give you a valuable perspective.'

'Good idea,' said Lance. 'You must join us too. Come. We will convene immediately.'

Merlin looked uncertain.

'If you order it, sire, I will do as commanded. However, I request that you allow me to remain here and complete the late King's dying command. It means a great deal to me. The Lady considers it critical too.'

It was a relief to get Merlin off the subject of my marriage, as we wouldn't get anywhere without outside help to diffuse his dogmatism. It would be better if he didn't take part in the council.

Despite everything, I couldn't help but be intrigued as to what Merlin was doing. I know all too well that getting stuck in the middle of the Oracle's plans usually didn't end well. If I was in danger of getting sucked in again, I needed to know what it was.

'What *are* you doing?' I said, gesturing at his containers. 'It's obviously some sort of familiar.'

Merlin looked toward Lance.

'Sire, do you wish to know the details?'

The cheek of it. Didn't he know I was his Queen?

'Go ahead,' said Lance before I asserted my royal authority.

Look, if he's going to play silly buggers, I'm going to enjoy the perks.

'After your return from Ringwall, I received a diplomatic message from Commander Wynn Ridgard requesting assistance.'

'You know Wynn?' said Lance.

'I have met the Commander on several occasions,' said Merlin. 'A competent man. We both attend the border liaison committee.'

That sounded like a fun meeting.

'What did he want?' said Lance.

'He requested some way of detecting unfamiliars,' said Merlin. 'Some way of seeing through glamours to stop people like Jason Parr with powerful magic getting into Ringwall again. It would only be used at the border posts outside their walls and mustn't amplify magic of any other kind. He felt that was acceptable with their rules. He knew I had a special familiar and suggested something along the same lines, as long as it could be transferred between border guards. I was intrigued and contacted the Lady for advice.'

'I gather she was enthusiastic, judging from all this stuff,' I said, pointing to his benches.

'Indeed,' said Merlin. 'With the knowledge gained from studying the unfamiliars, it was simple for her to adapt the technique to create a variant to meet Wynn's needs. Like unfamiliars, they give no access to her wisdom, nor do they impose any burden on her resources. I am ready to send these to Wynn today.'

He rested his hand on a container that held several familiar-like creatures covered in light yellow fur. They looked much healthier than the unfamiliars they were based upon.

'The Lady didn't stop there,' said Merlin. 'She realised that this technology devised by Cronos could be turned to her advantage in other ways. I have been carrying out experiments on her behalf. Not all were successful, but I believe I am near a conclusion. These will be key in our battle against the unfamiliars. The Lady calls them *daemons*.'

The Muffler's Misery

He picked up another glass container holding the most attractive familiar creatures I've seen. They had exceptionally thick and silky mottled ginger fur. It made you want to reach in and stroke them.

'What do they do?' I said.

'I don't know their full capabilities yet,' said Merlin. 'They're non-sentient, do everything that Wynn's familiars do, don't drain the Lady's resources, but boost magical powers too.'

Before I could ask anything else, I felt a mental door slide aside, and the Lady's voice resonated in my mind. The Oracle, I mean. I mustn't start thinking like an Emforth local.

"These daemons are crucial. I have informed other regional leaders that they will receive the formula to create these by the end of tomorrow. They must prepare for their deployment. I will outline their full capabilities then, along with my proposed strategy. Do not delay Merlin further. He must complete this task."

I saw Lance jump when she'd started, so he'd heard the same. Before I had a chance to reply, I sensed the Oracle depart.

'I must remind her how to speak nicely to people,' I said. 'She starts like it every single time.'

Merlin looked annoyed at that, but that was the least of my concerns. The room seemed to dim, then sway from side to side. Out of nowhere, I realised I was about to faint.

'M'lady,' said Lance. 'Are you OK?'

I mumbled something incoherent as he grabbed me firmly by the arm. It stopped me from swaying, but now my legs turned to jelly. The next thing I knew, Lance had picked me up and was carrying me back to my tent.

'Tired,' I mumbled.

In retrospect, I can only imagine that contact with the Oracle had been the final straw. Although I'd regularly dozed on the way to Emforth, it obviously hadn't been enough, especially in my weakened state. Since then, I'd been surviving on worry and adrenaline until the Oracle had inadvertently triggered everything to hit me at once. To top it off, in all the excitement, I'd stupidly forgotten to take on any nutrients since arriving at the Emforth border.

Before long, I was lying on my bed, with Lance looking concerned above me.

'Shall I fetch the doctor?' he said.

I was too weak to check with my medical bracelets, but I was pretty sure it was only tiredness. Now that I remembered, I took a sip of nutrients through my invisible straw, which earned me an odd look from Lance. At least I didn't feel ill in any other way.

'No,' I said. 'Sorry, I just need to sleep. I've overdone it getting here.'

'I will leave you alone to rest,' said Lance. 'I will post a guard outside your door. If you need anything, just ask, and they will oblige.'

'Can I ask them for a divorce?' I mumbled.

Look, I was pretty out of it by then. It seemed a logical conclusion from what he'd offered.

'Do not worry,' said Lance. 'I will immediately set to work with my experts. I will not sleep until this is resolved.'

The Muffler's Misery

I feared he would end up as exhausted as me, but it wasn't a thought that lasted long. I was asleep before he was out of the tent.