

Chapter 1: The Highwayman

I hadn't planned on shooting anyone when I woke up this morning, but Landsmen Yarroll and Pieter were doing their best to make me consider it as a possibility.

“Ser Kellan! Clearly the responsibility lies with yeoman Pieter’s failure —”

“Did you hear that, Highwayman? A deliberate insult! I am a landsman, whether he likes it or not; and deserve to be addressed as such!”

“A landsman would have kept his bull out of my fields!”

I pinched the bridge of my nose while they continued to bicker. An early-morning summons from the provincial seat didn't help, either. Governor Tanner wanted me to return today, which meant that after resolving the dispute between these two, I'd have to ride hard to make it back to Dart before nightfall.

I forced my attention back to the present. The mayor had been happy to lend me his office to hear the dispute before murmuring vague apologies and disappearing on some other task. After half an hour with the bickering landsmen, I wished I could join him. With the windows closed, the air was getting stale. The idea of getting on the road immediately was suddenly appealing.

I held up my hand to silence the two men standing before me. It took them more than a moment to notice, and even longer for their voices to trail off into a pair of angry glowers. The young man and woman standing behind them—Arrus Yarroll and Isolde Pieter—looked simultaneously terrified and ashamed of their sire’s behavior.

I took advantage of the moment of silence to concentrate and raise my Talent. A halo of light expanded around Yarroll and Pieter, both auras made of roiling red and streaked with violet. Anger and indignation in equal measure. No question, there was bad blood between the two of them. I searched for any hint of black—a clear sign of a known lie or untruth—but saw nothing.

A twinge of pain made my jaw ache. I pushed through it, trying to find any hint of which one might be at fault, when a faint sparkle of golden light caught my eye. Not from the landsmen; from behind them. I shifted my focus to the two teenagers standing behind their parents. Amid the muted blues and browns of their auras were faint, bright golden threads.

Ah. I'd been so focused on lies and animosity that I missed another type of relationship entirely.

Another pulse of pain spread out from my forehead. I winced, dropping my concentration, and let my Talent fade. At that moment, Isolde’s hand twitched, starting if she meant to reach out to Arrus. If I hadn't been looking at them, I would have missed it entirely.

I stirred in my seat. “Gentlemen. Let me see if I have the facts of the matter straight. Landsman Yarroll, you built a fence between your farm and Pieter’s property two years ago. Is that correct?”

Yarroll’s face flushed a brighter red than it already was. “I did, Ser Kellan! But that was only because —”

I raised my hand, interrupting the impending tirade before it turned into another avalanche of accusations.

“Answer my questions, please. No need to elaborate when a yes or no will do.” I waited until Yarroll pursed his lips in acquiescence before I turned to Pieter and lowered my hand.

“And you, Landsman Pieter. You had no problems with the fence? In fact, you fenced in your own meadow using it, with Yarroll’s permission?”

Pieter opened his mouth, shooting a glance at Yarroll. I watched the thoughts turning over in his head, grinding his outburst down to a perfunctory, “Yes, sir.”

“Good. According to both your testimonies, two months ago, there was an incident where the fence was damaged. Yarroll, you claim that Pieter’s bull ran the fence and ended up breeding with

three of your milk cows. Correct?”

“Sir.”

“I’ll take that as a yes. Landsman Pieter, you claim your son was leading the bull to pasture when a cow of Landsman Yarroll’s leaned against the fence, causing it to collapse. Is that correct?”

“That’s what my boy says.” I frowned, and Pieter hurriedly added, “Sir.”

“So, the question is one of responsibility. Do you both agree with that assessment?”

That was too much for the men in front of me. “I ain’t paying no stud fee for his *zera* bull!” Yarroll snapped.

“Three cows, he gets for free!” Pieter growled. “Two are with calf, for sure! And he’s claiming the both of ‘em for his own!”

“Only right, as I didn’t ask for this! I already had a contract with Muguyen, over the other side of the mountain. I can’t afford to pay him to break that contract!”

“*Gentlemen!*”

I spoke from my diaphragm, the way my father taught me. He’d been an officer of the King in the war against the Accuser. My mother once swore she’d seen him stop a wild wolf in its tracks using his voice alone.

Yarroll and Pieter stopped mid-rant, staring at me.

I let my hand rest casually on the old, Empire-manufactured black powder revolver at my hip. Another gift from my father, and a formidable relic of the same war. The medallion granted to me by King Iaestus might have been his official designation marking me as his Highwayman; but in the Outlands, it was my pistol that carried real weight and served as a symbol of my office.

“Arrus. Isolde. Front and center, please.”

The two of them froze at the mention of their names. Arrus started around his father first. Isolde followed a heartbeat later. They came to stand in front of their fathers, eyes on me, carefully ignoring each other.

“The two of you look to be about fifteen. Is that right?”

“Um.” Arrus cleared his throat. “Seventeen, sir. And, uh, I think Isolde’s a year younger.”

Isolde blushed when I glanced at her. “Yes, sir. Sixteen.”

“More than old enough to understand you represent your families. Your fathers had a mutual interest in maintaining this fence. An agreement to do so, even. They trusted the two of you to pay attention to that, didn’t they? And to watch over your animals as well?”

“Yes, sir.” Arrus stared straight ahead, eyes carefully avoiding mine.

“Very well. Arrus Yarroll. Isolde Pieter. You are each equally responsible for the breach of agreement that damaged your fathers’ relationship with each other. As such, you will each work to repair that relationship.”

The two young people looked at me, confusion plain on their faces. I continued. “You will repair the fence, together. You will take responsibility for the cows with calf, together. When those calves are born, you will raise them and care for them, together. You will do this until the stud fees to Landsman Pieter and the contract fees of Landsman Yarroll are paid off. Am I clear?”

Arrus swallowed and nodded sharply. “Yes, sir. I mean Highwayman. Sir.” Isolde glanced at Arrus before responding. Her nod was slower and more thoughtful.

“Wonderful. Landsmen Yarroll and Pieter. You’ve heard my judgement. Do you accept it, or do you wish to take the matter before the King?”

Both men grumbled something close enough to acceptance for my purposes. I clapped my hands. “Again—wonderful! I’ll be back in two months to check on your progress. In the meantime? Landsman Yarroll, notify the stables that I will leave shortly. Landsman Pieter, tell the

inn I will need lunch for the road.”

“But —” Yarroll and Pieter spoke simultaneously. They snapped their mouths shut simultaneously as well, turning to glare at each other.

“Those were not requests, gentlemen. See to it. Arrus and Isolde, stay.” With a huff, the landsmen turned and bustled out of the room, maneuvering like two tomcats ready for an excuse to fight.

I waited until the door slammed behind them and I heard their bickering resume before I turned my attention to the pair standing before me.

“Those two don’t get along at all, do they? Relax, Arrus. I won’t bite your head off.” Isolde looked slightly less confused. She was a step ahead of him, so I turned to her first.

“How long?”

“Sir?”

I nodded at Arrus. “How long?”

She raised her chin, lips pursed. “About a year, sir.”

“Isolde!”

“It’s obvious he knows, Arrus.” She met my eyes, shoulders tense. “How could you tell?”

I shrugged. “Experience.”

I wasn’t about to explain my Talent to her. The ability to tell when someone was lying to me was only an advantage when people didn’t know about it. Plus, the Empire was wary of letting an *ayloshea* out from under its thumb. Any world-mage they considered useful was immediately conscripted into Imperial service. I harbored no illusions about how they would treat me if my abilities became known.

Isolde’s scowl deepened. “Do you mean to tell our sires?”

“Empress above, no!” The young couple gawked at me. “*You* are.”

“What?”

I waved my hand. “Eventually. You’ll be spending lots of time together, after all. It’s only natural you’d get to know one another better. And if you get to the point you want to make it official, you’ll have your own section of pasture and a few cattle to start you on your way.”

“When.” Arrus reached out and took Isolde’s hand. “When we want to make it official.”

I didn’t have to raise my Talent to imagine the golden lines wrapping around their clasped hands. “When. If I were you, I’d wait a bit. Give it a year or so.”

“Why?” Arrus blurted out. “I mean...”

“It’s in the King’s interest to see his Landsmen cooperating. Especially in the Outlands.” I leaned forward. “Now, I told you your job is to repair your father’s relationship. I mean that. I’ve given you two an excuse to see each other regularly without having to hide it. You two getting along will encourage the families to get along.”

“We can do that,” Isolde said. “It’s really just our fathers.”

“My ma and Isolde’s still chat in town,” Arrus added.

I grinned. “Good. If your fathers bring it up, be sure to mention me. Let them blame me for throwing you two together.”

Arrus looked from me to Isolde and back again. “That doesn’t seem right, sir. If you don’t mind me saying so.”

I shrugged. “They’ll make me feel unwelcome around here for a bit, I’m sure. I’ve weathered worse. I swore an oath to the King to do what needs to be done for his people. Some days it’s harder than others; but in the end, it’s always worth it.” I waved at the door. “Now, I’d appreciate it if you two would go check on your fathers, please. Make sure they’re making things ready for

me. I need to be in Dart by nightfall.”

* * *

I was on the road to Dart well before noon. Destiny was well rested and eager to canter as we made our way along the road. I only slowed her when I needed to eat in the saddle. Otherwise, I let her have her head, so that the miles slipped away under her hooves. Even with a stop for water, we made good enough time that the sun was still over the horizon when the town came into view.

I paused to watch a pair of dragonlets spin around each other in tight loops above the dusty road. Their wings were only the size of my hand, but the speed of their mating dance kicked up a miniature dust devil that twirled between them. Sand and grit sparkled in the sunlight as it rotated, undisturbed by the hint of a breeze.

It was a hard life, riding the circuits, but there were advantages. My cousins downriver near Victar de Reya might have advances we did not: things like newly poured stone streets and electric lights, along with gifts of magic and technology the Empire had brought with them from across the Unreal. Here in the Outlands, the wonders might be smaller, but they still lurked around every corner.

Destiny nickered at me. The dragonlets darted away skyward in a panic. The dust devil gave one final spin before collapsing into nothing.

“Impudent beast. I know you’re thirsty. Don’t worry, we’re almost there.”

Spurred gently, Destiny moved slowly, yet without protest. The dead and drying grass along the road baked in the waning heat of the summer day, raising its own unmistakable scent. It mingled with the odor of the dust and horse sweat in a distinctive but not unpleasant way.

The town’s stone wall came into view shortly after. I lifted my hand in greeting to the guards at the gate; they gestured vaguely in my direction in return, doing the bare minimum to recognize me. I could hardly blame them for the informality. The heat sapped their energy as it did mine. Fortunately, my horse knew the way well. She carried me slowly along paved streets toward the center of town. The few people out and about were as listless as the guards.

We entered the stables attached to the garrison house, and Destiny huffed a greeting to her favorite stablehand. I dismounted and gave him a nod.

“Fetch fresh water, please, Dankei.” I patted Destiny on the flank. A summons from the governor was no reason to ignore my horse. “I’ll rub her down.”

Dankei grabbed her reins. “Nay, sir. I’ll take care of her for ya. Governor Tanner left word. Wants ya to see him, soon as you wash the grime off ya.”

I swung down, stretching my back. “Huh. He’s letting me clean up, at least. Any idea what’s going on?”

Dankei jerked his head toward the stables without speaking. A huge gray stallion stood in the largest stall, staring at us. He snorted and tossed his head when he caught me looking his way.

“Who does that monster belong to?”

Dankei shrugged. He was already whispering to Destiny. He didn’t chatter and engage in idle talk the way other stable hands did, but for him to ignore my question completely was out of character. I focused my Talent just for a moment and brought Dankei’s aura into view. Normally, the halo of color surrounding him was a uniform bright blue, placid and calm. Today, his aura was mottled and rippling. I let loose of my focus before it could start my head aching.

“Dankei.” I waited until he looked back at me reluctantly. “Who is it?”

“Empire man, Kellan. Real Empire, I mean.”

“You’re sure?”

“You can tell by his accent. Sounds like our old schoolteacher, the one they sent after they ran off the Accuser.”

He turned back to Destiny. I gave her a final scratch under the chin before heading to the bathhouse to wash the dust from my face. What was a representative of the worlds-spanning Empire doing here? And why did the governor want me involved? I’d find out soon enough.

* * *

The governor’s office was in a small outbuilding next to the prison, well away from the usual bustle of the government offices.

“Kellan!” Governor Tanner beamed at me. “Come in! Ser Prospero, this is the one I was telling you about.”

The Imperial man was middle-aged, middling height, middling condition. His plain white tunic and pants were the same nondescript dress any off-duty legionnaire might wear. Sandy brown hair and a close-cut beard framed a face entirely indistinguishable from many of the Empire’s soldiers. Everything about him shrugged metaphorical shoulders and said “average” except for his eyes: one blue, one green.

I started to bring my Talent to bear on him out of habit when I noticed his pendant. A simple silver triangle adorned with a stylized sun, moon, and star, one at each point; the insignia the Empire’s military used to denote their most accomplished magical practitioners. I forced my focus elsewhere and let my Talent drop, coughing to cover up my moment of distraction.

I’d made it this far in life without attracting the attention of the Empire’s military recruiters. The magi, in particular, were always on the lookout for fresh blood. Any hint of magical ability could easily turn into a life of military service to the Empire. I was already sworn to King Iaestus. He, in turn, was a loyal servant of the Empress. That was close enough to Empire service for me.

“Apologies. Dust from the road, Magus.” I raised my right fist to my chest in salute. He returned the salute with a raised eyebrow.

“Highwayman.” Dankei was right. His accent had the unique Center sound to it, with stresses on unexpected syllables. He seemed pleased. “I see your reputation as an investigator is well deserved. Was it the pendant?”

“Yes, sir. It is rather distinctive.”

The Magus tucked his pendant under his tunic. He must have left it out intentionally. Test passed.

“Kellan is one of our best,” Tanner said. “The Highwaymen are the King’s voice among the people. They hear cases and adjudicate disputes.”

“And investigating crimes and meting out punishments as needed, I understand.” The Magus nodded at me. “Quite a lot of responsibility for one man.”

Tanner chuckled. “Kellan makes it look easy.” He turned to me. “The Magus is here on business. He’s asked to accompany you on your rounds.”

“I am honored, sir.” There was no other acceptable response. “May I ask what your purpose is, Magus? I’ve got my circuit to ride. If you need me to detour for something, I can send word and let those towns know I’ll be late.”

“No need for detours. Accompanying you will be fine. Certain oracles point to a possible *kehyzana* in your region. The seers of the Black House requested assistance, and I was available.” His expression tacked on an unspoken word: *unfortunately*.

I smiled slightly, trying to look mildly befuddled. “I am sorry, sir. I deal with the mundane. Is that a creature from the Unreal? A feral beastling or an unbound *maziken* from the time of the Accuser?”

“No, not a demon. It’s a type of *ayloshea*. A truth-teller. And the emphasis is on *possible*,” Prospero said. He waved his hand dismissively. “The oracles are wrong as often as they are right in these matters. Still, someone needs to investigate it.”

I nodded, cursing inwardly. I must have failed to completely hide my emotions. The Magus held up a hand with a knowing smile.

“I’ll do my best not to interfere with your normal activities, Highwayman. I’m not here to examine you or your work.” He actually looked apologetic. “Normally, the Empire has functionaries to deal with this sort of thing. I was in the area on another matter, though. Auguries pointed favorably at my involvement, so they requested my help.”

I didn’t need my Talent to see what he thought of that request, or the type of functionary that must have made it. Clerical busy-bodies were apparently the same, whether they were homegrown or imported by the Empire.

Tanner clapped his hands together lightly, breaking that train of thought. “Which is what brings us all together today. Kellan, you are to continue with your rounds. The magus shall accompany you. I expect you will provide whatever help he might need in his search for this *kehyzana*.”

I met the governor’s eyes. “Of course, Ser Tanner. It will be no trouble at all.”

I raised my fist in salute once again. I knew if I were to raise my Talent and examine my own aura, I would see the reddish-black of a blatant lie.

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The Magus dined with the governor that evening. I begged off, claiming exhaustion and a desire to get a proper bath for the first time in weeks. I enjoyed the bath and a decent meal, yet sleep eluded me for a long while as I fretted over the coming day.

Prospero was amiable enough, but a magus of the Empire was no one to be trifled with. They were the equals of kings, and answered only to the Empress herself, worlds away across the Unreal. I fell asleep with those thoughts chasing one another through my head. They followed me into sleep, where I tossed and turned, dreaming of something unseen hunting me in the night.

Despite that, I still woke shortly after dawn. The habits of a lifetime are hard to break. I packed my belongings, nibbled on the cheese I had saved from dinner the night before, and headed to the stables.

Prospero was already there and waiting for me. I gave him a nod as he cinched up the saddle on his stallion and hoped my unease from the night before did not show on my face.

“Dankei! I see you’ve already taken care of the Magus. Please bring me Destiny.” The stable hand’s eyes widened a bit at the revelation of who Prospero was, and he hustled off to see to my horse.

Prospero laid a hand on my shoulder. Gentle, but it made me start. He dropped it and I turned to face him.

“No need for the honorific, Kellan.” He spoke with authority; a man used to being obeyed.

“Apologies. How shall I address you, sir?”

“Prospero will do. Where are we headed?”

“Canter.” Dankei led Destiny out and handed me her reins. “It’s a hard day’s ride from here. I’d rather not push my horse so hard two days in a row. We’ll ride for a caravan station tonight,

then on to Canter in the morning, and Frog’s End the day after. That will get me back on my usual circuit.” I paused. “If that meets with your approval.”

I wasn’t sure what reaction I hoped to elicit. The Magus simply nodding and mounting his horse was certainly more understated than I expected. I checked my packs, mounted Destiny, and led the way through the early morning streets of Dart.

* * *

Destiny complained a little at first, but settled down quickly. Once we were beyond the city walls, the dawn air was cool, with just a hint of the earthy aroma that the night’s dew brought up from the ground.

We rode without talking for a good while. The Magus finally broke the silence when the sun was high enough in the sky to melt away the cool of the morning.

“You’re not much of a talker, are you, Ser Kellan?”

I kept my eyes forward. “Not really, sir. Most times I am on the road alone, I travel alone. It lends itself to spending time in thought. I apologize for being lost in my own head.”

“That doesn’t surprise me. There’s something else, though.”

I’d considered this moment carefully, knowing it was bound to come. Considering how to handle it had kept me tossing and turning the night before. I sighed and shifted in the saddle just enough to watch the Magus out of the corner of my eye.

“Respectfully, sir? My father told me stories of what he saw the Magi do on the battlefield. You’re a powerful man, and I’m wondering what you want with me. To be brief, you scare the crap out of me.”

The Magus snorted, and the snort turned into a genuine chuckle. “Now, that’s not the kind of answer I expected.”

I turned my head to face him. “You don’t expect people to be afraid of you?”

“Honestly? Yes. Most aren’t willing to admit it. At least not to my face.”

“Ah. Please understand that I mean no disrespect. It’s part of my office. I often have to tell people things they don’t want to hear. Including my superiors. I’m charged to hide nothing from my king or his officers.”

As far as I was concerned, the Magus was not part of that group. It would suit me for him to think otherwise, though.

“I see. Interesting.” He pursed his lips. “Not the most singular custom I’ve found across the worlds I’ve been in, but it’s up there. The Empire can use a bit more of that brutal practicality, I think. I can see why the Empress spent time and treasure to liberate your world.”

I saw my chance. “If you don’t mind, sir. I don’t mean to pry, but... why your search?”

“The truth-teller, you mean?” Prospero sighed. “I’ll be as honest with you as you were with me. The oracles have me chasing shadows. That type of world-mage is rarer than an honest whore.”

“If they are that scarce, then why even bother?”

“I got conscripted.”

That didn’t sound right. I raised my eyebrows. “A magus can get ordered around like a common soldier?”

“Ha! It all depends on who’s doing the ordering. The Empire is a tangle of responsibilities, obligations, and paperwork. Heaven above, so much paperwork!” He shook his head. “Still. It’s an important job. If a *kehyszana* is out there, though, I need to find them.”

“Why? I mean, *ayloshea* are permitted, aren’t they? I know we have our own geomancers, and

you can find hags in most of the bigger cities now.”

“The line between *ayloshea* and *lamoshea*, between world-mage and magus, is not as definitive as most people think. A world-mage’s talents are limited, true. They can’t learn how to walk the Unreal or manipulate the Weave the way the Magi can. Still, their abilities can be even more dangerous in the wrong hands.”

“Magi can call up fire, call down lightning, banish demons! What could be more dangerous than that?”

Prospero cocked his head. “Letting it be known that you can do exactly that—and then telling people the truth is a lie, or that a lie is the truth. Or being able to find things and using it to locate the weaknesses of a king.” He shook his head. “It’s easy to deal with people who can shape the world. It’s harder to get a handle on those who can shape people.”

I pondered his statement while we continued on in silence. After a few minutes, he stirred again.

“What’s it like, being a highwayman?”

I glanced over at him. “Mostly long hours on the road, punctuated by irritated landsmen who are sure I’m an idiot. Unless I rule their way, in which case I’m a genius.”

“Ha! Sounds like the Legion. Except with more marching and less riding. How’d you end up doing it?”

“My father. I used to ride the circuit with him. He taught me law, and justice, and what it means to serve. In the end, when he retired, I took his place. Swore an oath to the King himself. To protect the innocent, to see justice served, and to avenge those whom justice has failed. To do what needs to be done, whatever that might be, for his people and in his name.” I cocked my head. “So, I do it. And you?”

I decided to risk raising my Talent just for a moment, watching the magus out of the corner of my eye.

“The same. I serve the Empress. I do as I am commanded.” He shook his head. “What more could I ask for?”

His aura was tight, reeled in, under rigid control. Something I’d seen before, but never to this extent. A faded purple revealed truth and belief evenly mixed with an overlay of deception.

He was lying to himself about something.

I inclined my head slightly, acknowledging his words and the end of the subject.

* * *

We talked little for the rest of the day, except for the minimal chatter about the road and the condition of our horses. I wasn’t sure if it was because the Magus didn’t want to intrude on my thoughts, or if he enjoyed the silence itself.

We rode through until the setting sun unraveled the heat of the day. The air was still uncomfortably hot, but there was a definite promise of relief when we reached the caravan station and stopped for the evening. A wide clearing just off the road, the station cast with salt and sand to keep it clear of weeds and underbrush.

We swung down off our mounts in tandem, both of us stretching to release muscles sore from the day’s ride.

I turned to the Magus. “Let me take care of the horses, and I’ll get to the fire.”

Prospero snorted. “Pick one. I’ll do the other. This isn’t my first time away from civilization.”

Not knowing him, I was reluctant to leave Destiny in his hands. The fire was the easier task in

any case. “I’ll take the horses, if you’ll get the fire going.”

“Sealed.” He left to search through the woods, gathering kindling. I turned to the horses and started rubbing them down, starting with Destiny.

I was only halfway done when wood crackled behind me and the odor of burning wood tickled my nostrils. I stopped to check on the Magus. He had a decent sized pile of dry wood next to a small, expertly built fire. I would have been hard-pressed to get something started so quickly myself.

“Not bad. We’ll need a bit more wood than that.”

“I’ll gather more. Figured I could help you with the horses.” He moved to take care of his stallion. The beast whinnied, happy to have his master’s hands on him.

“Don’t worry. I’m almost done with Destiny. I’ll see to finding more.” Prospero nodded, focused on rubbing down his horse. He did it with the same quickness and skill he had showed with the fire.

We worked together to get the horses rubbed down and fed as the fire grew and warmed us. True to my word, I finished first and went to look for wood. I returned with an armful to find Prospero breaking out a kettle. I pulled out a cook pan, and we worked together to make dinner with only a word or two of conversation until we’d finished our corn cakes.

The last light of day was long gone when Prospero sighed and stretched. “Been too long since I’ve enjoyed a good meal by the fire.”

He sat with his cloak pulled around him against the cold, folded Empire-style, keeping the throat of his scabbard uncovered and the hilt of his sword close at hand. I settled down and arranged my cloak the same way, leaving my pistol at the ready.

Prospero nodded at me. “You’ve served?”

“No. Learned this from my father, though, and he did. He taught me most of what I know about woodcraft before he passed.”

“That’s not all you got from your father, was it?” Prospero nodded at my pistol. “I recognize the pattern. It’s a bit older, but still reliable. An officer’s weapon.”

“Yes. Two shot, black powder. It’ll put a hole through a bear. I should know, I’ve done it before. It was my father’s during the war against the Accuser.”

“Battle.” Prospero spoke absent-mindedly; this was obviously a correction he’d made many times before. He didn’t elaborate, but I understood what he meant. The war with the Accuser was never-ending.

Since he’d broached the subject, I nodded at his weapon. “If you don’t mind me asking—why the sword? I know you can’t carry technology through the Unreal easily. They are making Empire-designed repeating pistols in the capital now. It would have been easy enough for you to get one.”

“I could have, I suppose. That’s the problem with the Empire. It spans worlds. Magic works here, technology works there.” He grinned. “Now, swords? Swords work *everywhere*. This one’s been with me for a while. Good, solid steel, even if it’s not enchanted like your pistol.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“No!” I drew my weapon and examined it by the firelight. The dull metal of the weapon gave no hint of any sort of magical properties. “How can you tell?”

“I could sense it today, while we were riding. It was like an odor that came and went, one I couldn’t quite identify. Once I realized it was moving with us, I started paying attention. Detecting the active manipulation of the Weave is more obvious, of course. Still, this was easy enough to see once I knew where to focus.”

A chill ran up my spine. *I'd risked using my Talent right in front of him when he might have been studying me!* I resolved to be more cautious in the future.

“What kind of enchantment is it? Can you tell that?”

“A fairly standard one. It's designed to cut through protections and break the enchantments of the Accuser.”

“I suppose you have something like that on your sword?”

Prospero burst out laughing. “Oh, Deus, no! Mine's as plain a piece of steel as I could get. Having an enchantment on you while you work the Weave is, well, like carrying an open powder keg around a bonfire. You might be fine, but all it takes is a stray spark. Then you won't be worrying about anything else, ever again.”

“Ah. I can see why you'd avoid it.”

“Much the same way you'd avoid a bear. Speaking of which—didn't you mention shooting one? What's the story behind that?”

“Ah.” The horses snorted quietly behind me, and the fire crackled before me. I was comfortable being alone in the wilderness, but I was also at home telling tales around the fire. I settled in and Prospero followed suit; just two travelers sitting by the fire, breaking their journey on a lonely road at the end of the day.

“It started with a woman, as these things always do. The governor got a letter asking for the investigation of a murder out toward Pond; which would have been odd enough, except the woman who wrote it and the victim were one and the same...”

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