

The Apprentice's Talent

Ray McCarthy

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Books by Ray McCarthy

Talents Universe

The Apprentice's Talent
The Journeyman's Talent
The Solar Alliance
Starship Chief
The Master's Talent
The Legal Talent
The Mission's Talent

Celtic Otherworld

Under the Stone of Destiny
Carrying the Shining Sword
Seeking the Flaming Spear
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The Wooing of Marion
The Ensorcelled Maid
Four Kids, One Foxe

Trader's Isle

Restoring the Talismans
The White Fire Stones

The Apprentice's Talent

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Talents Universe 1

Mei Zhen Kelly is a twenty-three year old computer programmer from Belfast working in Dublin for nearly three years. She's talented and very dedicated to her work. People think she'll go far, now that she's had her second major promotion. Only her Chinese mother called her Mei Zhen, her official name. Her parents died while she was at university and now everyone calls her Maisie. Wrapped up in her personal issues, she doesn't pay a huge amount of attention to the news of the alien starship appearing at the edge of the Solar system.

About the Talents Universe series

Mei Zhen Kelly is a twenty-three year old computer programmer from Belfast working in Dublin for nearly three years. She's talented and very dedicated to her work. People think she'll go far, now that she's had her second major promotion. Only her Chinese mother called her Mei Zhen, her official name. Her parents died while she was at university and now everyone calls her Maisie. Wrapped up in her personal issues, she doesn't pay a huge amount of attention to the news of the alien starship appearing at the edge of the Solar system.

The UN and the governments are confused. While it's wonderful that the aliens hope to explain how the interstellar Jump Drive works, they aren't even going to orbit. They want to send a team to talk to an unspecified European woman and leave.

The aliens want Maisie to attend a special college about 80,000 light years away. Very little is really explained till she arrives. The series was started in 1997 as a contemporary themed First Contact story, though parts were written in 1988.

~

'The Apprentice's Talent', 'The Journeyman's Talent' and 'The Master's Talent' are a trilogy but work stand-alone, they follow Maisie's career. 'The Solar Alliance' is about parallel events on Earth to the first two books. 'Starship Chief' is a prequel and can be read directly after The Apprentice's Talent though before The Master's Talent.



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Dedication

To other authors for hours and years of delicious books.
To my supporters and Family.

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Act I: The Voyage

0: Beginnings

Just over a year earlier on the other side of the galaxy a pair of very human looking marsupial like aliens had a discussion, one using Telepathy and the other using her voice.

To start with there was nothing. Then a voice spoke, which was something, read Pedar.

“I wonder what was said?” asked Chainai.

Pedar put the book down.

Probably the clerics and priests would say that is the wrong question, Pedar sent to her telepathically.

“I don’t even know what your voice sounds like,” she said, “or really what you look like. Other people’s impressions of hearing and seeing isn’t likely the same. Anyway I do appreciate you coming and reading to me. Are you laughing? I sense you are very amused!”

Oh, Chainai dear! sent Pedar. I know I’m a Journeyman of the First Circle and a Telepath. I can block a Master Empath. But I can’t block you because besides being overwhelmed by your stunning beauty, you are an Adept, maybe even an Arch Empath.

“Well yes I sense you believe it, but I’m still baffled why you do think it. I’m blind and deaf since I was very small and can only have proper conversations with people that have some telepathic or empathic Talent. My poor mangled speech must be tiring too.” She paused. “No don’t deny it, I know it is!”

OK, you win, He laughed.

“Anyway, scoot off. I have to change and go on duty shortly. No, you can’t kiss me. Go!” Chainai waved towards the door.

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What about I take you over?

"No, I'm not a child and my locator does more than your eyes!"

OK Master Chainai, see you in about five hours, Pedar sent.

Ruefully Pedar took and patted her hand and slowly walked off turning and pausing at the doorway. Chainai imperiously pointed at the door. He went out and closed it softly.

In the passage he met Luci, Chainai's Assistant, also heading to the Refectory.

"If you didn't pester her you'd get on faster," said Luci. "With Chainai less will be more."

"I should have an Assistant," said Pedar, "then you wouldn't feel the need to give me advice."

"So you should!" Then Luci laughed.

Chainai stripped off and showered quickly, dried and put on the robes left out on her bed. Then fastened her belt, donned the locator and plugged it into the belt. Of course it didn't give her actual vision but a clear sense of her surroundings based more on material though than light. Confidently she went out and strode left down the corridor. At the next main intersection she got into the waiting buggy which whisked her off toward the Cone.

She mused on Pedar's attentions. She knew she was being hard on him denying even the slight intimacy of a kiss, but knew she had to be strong for both of them. With so few people and so much opportunity to be alone together she had to. Her thoughts were interrupted by the buggy stopping. She selected the bottom button on the lift by touch, and her stomach lurched as the lift plummeted on the 12 km deep journey. She sat on the bench and waited. If any Talent ever needed an

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Assistant, Pedar certainly did. Besides she wasn't too sure of her feelings for him anyway.

* * *

Pedar and Luci trudged toward the refractory across the park on the gravel path. He could only hear what Chainai choose to say, he couldn't read her at all. It was frustrating as he could read anyone else, except better Telepaths. No other Empath had what seemed to be a natural unconscious block either!

As was often the case the Hall was almost empty. He poured a mug of Jhai and selected a RediMeal from the servitor machine. It certainly was lonely and tedious stationed on the Listening Post. Darneem was a barren empty planet, especially so for about the last thousand years since the last natives left. As he and Luci sat down Janera the Malthin Arch Empath came in. Janera's Assistant, Geenra, was already sitting drinking a mug of something.

Janera nodded to him and also poured a hot drink and ordered food; "Mind if I join you?"

"I need to discuss something with Geenra," said Luci.
Pedar beckoned.

"I thought today my five hours felt like ten," said Janera. She shook her head of grey hair. "I do declare I felt today age was catching me up. I wish we had more suitable Adept Empaths willing to come here and then I could retire. Not a whisper."

Pedar tried to look sympathetic. The Listening post had five Empaths and one Telepath. Janera had certainly done more than her fair share in the last two hundred years.

"I have even less to do," Pedar pointed out. "I'm only here because radio is limited to light speed and Talent

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isn't! I've nothing to do at all unless you find a new Talent."

"I think you are selling yourself short, because Chainai certainly appreciates your reading. Her embossed books must be very tedious to feel and she can't have a conversation with the other three of us off duty Empaths, none are Telepaths, even weakly, so all she can do is sense broader aspects of what we focus on. Her locator doesn't have the resolution or the ability for pictures much less our entertainment library."

Pedar fetched the two meal trays. For a while they ate in silence which was suddenly broken by piercing bleeps.

"Well, answer it!" urged Janera.

Pedar picked the Crystal from his belt pouch and tapped it.

"I thought you'd fallen asleep." Chainai's flat monotone sounded thin on the Crystal.

Well? Pedar thought hard at her.

"Ouch! softer, that hurt," she answered. "Anyway a confirmed Talent. I let go of the logging button just after the signature peaked. Very short and garbled, so she must be very far off. I suspect a record distance unless she was shielding. Too short to sense what kind of Talent. I'll go back to listening now, though another contact inside the next year would be unusually soon. We will certainly pick it up again this time tomorrow if she isn't shielding."

Pedar concentrated on his contact on Decius who would relay to the College Council. When Kilium answered he read off, telepathically, all the co-ordinates and other statistics presented automatically on his Crystal from the Station Computer calculations based on the time. He was puzzled, the computer analysis

0: Beginnings

suggested well over 60,000 light years away on the far side of the Galactic Core. Perhaps it was much closer and the Talent was shielded in some unlikely way?

Chainai, he sent, there is a starship placing sync-sats, so there is no need for me here shortly. We are both to join the ship and get dropped off at Grand Central. Obviously also Luci will come. They want you and I to help in the planetary search for this new Talent. Our old friend Olef will be there too, they found him on Yaram. You are to give him therapy.

Soon the Intergal One, which was in deep space so would not waste four to six months accelerating away from a star, was diverted to pick-up Chainai, Luci, Pedar and Olef from Grand Central Space Station and then to the unknown star system 80,000 light years from Caemoria in a hitherto unexplored portion of the Galaxy. It was coincidentally the maiden voyage of the Intergal One, the only starship of the Galactic Council, which was to travel to the Andromeda Galaxy. Something not yet attempted by anyone known to the Caemorian Empire or the Galactic Council.

1: Aliens

“Maisie, we need to talk,” insisted Sharon.

“Mmm?” Maisie couldn’t answer as her mouth was full.

Sharon poured a cup of coffee and drowned it in milk. She sat at the opposite end of the table in the apartment’s kitchen-dinette.

“What was that, a full Irish breakfast?” asked Sharon.

“No,” quipped Maisie, “an Ulster fry.”

“Same thing really. It looks like something died on your plate.”

“Just a little egg yolk and a lot of tomato sauce left,” Maisie replied. “What’s wrong? You want to leave?”

“Um,” murmured Sharon, “sometimes you are so dense and other times amazing. Yes, I’ve been trying to work up courage for ages.”

“It’s all right,” explained Maisie. “I don’t need the money, I just thought it would be better to have a flatmate, I do sometimes take a break from working or studying. So what are you going to do?”

“Commute from home. It’s not too bad.”

“Why?” asked Maisie. “I mean really.”

“I just can’t relax here,” explained Sharon. “You know that’s why they gave you your own office. I know I’m only a receptionist and not even in your department. People actually do like you being their team leader, but as long as meetings are short and you are far enough away. I didn’t believe the rumours till I moved in with you. I was fine for ages.”

“What rumours?”

“Like you have some sort of personal force field, the closer people get the more disturbed they feel. Of course it takes a few weeks and might not even be real. I’ll pay a month in lieu of notice.”

“No need,” insisted Maisie. “I guess I’m used to it now.”

“Well thanks,” said Sharon, “but why the Ulster fry? I thought I was making progress on helping you with your eating habits. You know it especially doesn’t suit your Eurasian body.”

“Comfort,” said Maisie. “I think I have stopped getting worse. I have to meet the HR director first thing. Besides I’m not fat, just short, though I claim to be 5’, I know I’m really closer to 4’ 11” in bare feet.”

“More reason to take care! It seems strange that there are things that make you nervous, as you always seem so confident.”

“Lots of things, especially unexpected meetings.”

“I’d bet I know what it is, Maisie. I’m not saying though. I better go. Anyway, don’t backslide and lose your progress, you aren’t really fat, but certainly too plump for your own good. Look at me, I’m not skinny, my boyfriend likes something to cuddle.”

“I promise I’ll stick to the plan, Sharon. Do you need me to bring anything?”

“It would save me coming back at lunch time,” mused Sharon. She thought about it. “The blue wheelie case?”

“Fine. Still friends?”

“Yes, Maisie,” insisted Sharon. “I don’t need to live here to be your friend. See you later.”

Maisie watched Sharon head off with a backpack and a wheelie suitcase into the mist of the early morning drizzle.

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She put on the radio for the UK's BBC R4 News. It was still too early for the local Irish RTE, as they only have music at that time of the morning. Maisie listened as she poured a coffee. The speculation was over. The strange moving light at the outer limits of the solar system was not only decelerating in a way impossible for any natural object, it was now periodically transmitting English claiming to be a starship. Perhaps Maisie would have taken more notice if not worried by HR and disappointed by Sharon's inevitable, but ultimately sudden, exit. Still, Sharon had stuck it for four months. Though after the first few weeks she'd given up on the upstairs lounge and lurked in her own downstairs bedroom.

Maisie selected an album for her Minidisc that she had bought herself for her recent birthday and headed to the office. Maisie had a moment of regret that no-one had mentioned it or got her a card. Perhaps people in their twenties only got presents from boyfriends and parents. She had neither. Maisie dropped off Sharon's case to her in reception and headed to HR. Maisie knocked gently after turning off the music player and pocketing the earphones.

"Come in," John O'Connell called loudly.

Maisie sat in the indicated chair and smiled, though she didn't feel like smiling.

"You've not taken any leave, ever, apart from when we are closed," said John.

"I like my work and I don't like travel or holidays."

"Yes, I know. You're the best programmer we ever had."

They both sat quietly, as Maisie couldn't think of a reply; she wasn't about to offer to go on holiday.

1: Aliens

“The Aliens have announced a date they expect to arrive,” said John.

“That’s nice,” replied Maisie. “It was logical that if Faster Than Light travel is possible that there would be Alien starships. Actual Aliens are inevitable. They might never have visited us though.”

“Really, you surprise me. The entire world is excited and you are so matter of fact about it.”

“There must be millions if not billions of planets with life in our Galaxy,” said Maisie. “It’s amazing though that anyone would notice or visit us.”

“Maybe they detected our radio and TV?”

“Not likely unless they are as close as the nearby stars, which is unlikely.”

“Anyway,” said John finally getting back to the point, “you need to use up your annual leave before the end of the financial year. You have eight weeks outstanding.”

“I couldn’t take eight weeks. What about two weeks, actually why do I have to take them? The project is at a critical stage.”

“It sets a bad precedent. Isn’t Henry capable? Can’t he take over as team leader, then you could pick a new blue sky project and work at it for a month at your flat when you come back, take four weeks. It will look like you are off for eight weeks. It’s not even at a critical stage, you finished the design work ages ago.”

“What does Gerry think?” said Maisie.

“That’s his idea.”

“Well, I’ll check it out with Gerry.”

“He’s expecting you.”

Maisie passed the CEO’s P.A. and knocked on the door labelled Operations Director.

“Coffee, Maisie?” said Gerry.

“Thanks, black.”

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“What did you agree with John?”

“I’m sure he told you.”

“Well, yes,” admitted Gerry, “humour me.”

“I’ll take eight weeks away from the office, four weeks real holiday and four weeks working at home, if I want.”

“Yes, really going off somewhere,” said Gerry, “not eight weeks programming at home. I mean in your apartment.”

“This isn’t a plan to get rid of me?”

“No, you’re too good,” said Gerry. “we just need a break, I mean you need a break, you’ve never had a holiday since university, probably not since your parents died? I also think you find the work a bit routine and boring at times. There is only implementation and testing left to do on the current project; Henry can manage the team for that—”

Maisie laughed.

“That’s funny?”

“You know implementation schedules are guesswork and test schedules are fantasy,” insisted Maisie.

“Never mind that now. When you come back you’ll have new job title, Software Architect. You’ll won’t have to manage any programmers, but interface between Marketing and the Programming groups. Not that anyone really manages the programmers, herding cats seems too kind a description. It will mean I’ll give up the technical aspects of my role and I’ll be purely management. You don’t have a problem with that?”

“He should be team leader anyway,” said Maisie, “he’s a better manager, better with people, older, more mature. The others call him Danny as a joke because he’s a Doyle. I guess we just point the programmers at projects and hope they don’t go off on a tangent. So Software Architect and not Deputy Operations?” Maisie

was worried. Even if wasn't intended to get rid of her it might make her irrelevant.

"He's not as good a system architect or designer as you though. Deputies are managers, you won't be a manager, more like a consultant. You'll be able to veto features as impractical. I'll back you up."

"Thanks," said Maisie. "I should sell the house in Belfast, I rented it out, it's not home now without my parents. Perhaps I should sort that out during the time off."

They sipped coffee. Maisie wasn't really suspicious that this was plan to get rid of her, but she wasn't completely sure. However the meeting had depressed her. Maisie felt for the first time a sense of failure. Maisie realised she'd never be a manager here, or probably anywhere. She liked explaining things to people, though she didn't really want to be a manager. Though in fairness they really did seem to have created a role that would suit her and the company. Mostly beyond a certain point you have to give up engineering or programming and progress in a company as a manager, silly really.

"So what do you think about the aliens, Maisie?" asked Gerry.

"I don't know," Maisie replied slowly, thinking hard. "Sharon moved out this morning and I was worried about meeting John, as he'd wouldn't say what the meeting was for. I thought I'd be excited if anything like that happened. I expect we will be more of a problem to them, than they will be." That was a failure too. Though at least Sharon was still friendly. Maisie didn't want to chat about aliens today, or really about anything with anyone.

"How so?" said Gerry.

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"It's hardly likely they'd want to conquer us," explained Maisie. "The logistics wouldn't make sense. I also expect morality is as universal as light or gravity. I guess we'll know more when they get here."

* * *

Maisie picked Italy by dropping a button on a map of Europe in her atlas. Henry was delighted with his pay rise and running the project he thought should have been his. The next morning her office had a name plate instead of being anonymous, M. Kelly Senior Software Architect. She'd managed to put off the date to go on leave for months.

Hmm, Maisie thought, not waiting till I come back. Maybe they don't want rid of me.

"Does this mean I have to talk to clients?" she asked Gerry.

"Maybe on the phone," he explained. "You'll have to be unavailable any time they actually visit us until a project is under way. Technically you are still in charge of your project till your holiday, but Henry should be visibly in charge, so sort out any issues with him in your office."

Maisie knew why, her apparent youth. Not the other thing. That needed more exposure than a meeting or two, if it was even real. Maybe I'll pick up a smart suit in Italy when I'm on holiday, Maisie thought, perhaps that will make me look more like twenty-three than hardly thirteen. Maisie knew her choice of clothes was usually too haphazard.

"I've finally booked. Off to Roma for four weeks from the 8th November, a few days time, back in the office in the middle of January."

"Roma?" said Gerry. "You speak Italian?"

“Not as well as some other languages. It’s not as useful as German for following computer and programming research.”

“Does HR know what languages you speak?”

“I told them about French and German. I didn’t want to boast.”

Maisie hoped Gerry wouldn’t ask anything more, but he was determined to be friendly.

“What about Christmas? Any plans?”

“Just the usual.” She hoped Gerry wouldn’t ask what the usual was, which was to listen to music, watch TV and eat Chinese take-outs on her own. She’d never bothered with a tree or decorations either, though her parents had always had a tree and decorated the house.

“You should have booked earlier,” said Gerry. “John in HR was beginning to worry you’d not go.”

“I wanted to make sure Henry had taken over OK and also I couldn’t decide where to go.”

“I suppose old bookshops, libraries, museums and galleries are as good in the winter.”

“You are right, I like bookshops and some nice Italian books would be fine.”

“You’re not into sunbathing anyway?”

“No,” said Maisie, “though I don’t really tan, I don’t burn either which is strange.”

“That would be your Chinese heritage?”

“I think it’s just me. Mum avoided the sun. Chinese people do tan and sunburn, maybe not as easily as Irish people. Being paler is as much a thing in China as Victorian England. Besides I’m not very Chinese looking due to my dad being from here?”

“Your hair and hint of something in your complexion certainly is,” said Gerry. He hesitated. “Perhaps classic Eurasian beauty as your eyes, while dark are not so

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Chinese shaped. You certainly don't look like anyone from Belfast. Have a good holiday if I don't see you again before you go. You know the aliens and the UN will be exchanging five people while you are still in Rome?"

"I'd not been following it," said Maisie, "too much speculation and not enough fact. I'm sure I can follow the historic encounter almost as easily in Roma as here." Maisie wondered if he was going to suggest she was starting to get fat. It was altogether too personal a comment, but out of character for Gerry.

Later Sharon in reception called Maisie on the phone.

"A big box came for you," she said. "Is it personal or will I send it up?"

"It's my own new HP laptop, better keep it there and I'll take it to the apartment at lunch time. I'm glad it came before I left. You still OK to move back into the apartment while I'm away?"

"No problem to both," said Sharon. "I still have the key. Take it easy on the pasta on holiday."

"Thanks," said Maisie, "I think I'll take off from today and test out the teleworking. I got ISDN in last week. You're really sure you are still OK for house sitting the apartment?"

"Yeah, Maisie, the commuting really sucks. I will give living with you another go, maybe I've been drinking too much coffee!"

No more comfort meals, Maisie thought. Being strange was one thing, becoming a short fat person was an additional problem to be avoided.

That evening Maisie transferred all her files from the PC to the new laptop after wiping and re-installing the Windows NT OS.

* * *

The aliens had obviously reverse engineered Earth's transmissions as they had been transmitting video and data for a while. The Galaxy map they sent was examined with some scepticism.

Maisie sat on her bed watching the news on RAI. She was tired of Roma. However the visit had improved her Italian. Maisie thought that if it was genuinely a starship with some sort of interstellar Jump Drive that only worked in deep space, that the map wasn't unreasonable. It was a huge civilisation, practically a third of the Milky Way galaxy, yet about as far away as possible from Earth.

She watched the alien starship's shuttle craft, called a Flitter, landing at the Vandenberg base in America. The crew lined up for the camera and were introduced by Juili, the Captain. Pedar and Chainai were all almost child like in size though Juili was taller with dusky skin and bright red hair. Chainai was very pale blonde with very pale skin. Virona was an adult size and shape, but with fur, tail and teeth like a cat. Olef was very tall, perhaps nearly 2 m, and had skin that looked like it had mica all over it. They met the US President flanked by his security and a General. It was somewhat annoying hearing the English in the background with the excited Italian voice-over. Presumably the aliens had learnt English during the months of deceleration. Only months for a journey that might take a NASA probe fifteen to thirty years. Even Voyager 1 and 2 had not yet reached the distance that the starship had been at when it first appeared.

Maisie was most fascinated not by the appearance of the aliens or first contact, but the fact that the aliens knew how to beat the light speed limit by some sort of

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folding of space-time. Scientists were ecstatic that the aliens had promised to share the mathematics and an example of the Jump technology.

After the Flitter took off with a shriek, apparently for New York, RAI cut to repeating previously recorded transmissions of the team of Earth Astronauts and Cosmonauts docking with the starship and excerpts of their tour. Maisie was amazed how ordinary the starship seemed on the inside, like offices or apartments or a luxury hotel, with even a large park like area. On the outside it was more than 15 km of lattice frame work, power supplies and a huge habitat cylinder at the head end.

She had earlier watched the hurriedly prepared spacecraft from Earth dock in the massive freighter Flitter's hanger. As it was a repeat there were Italian subtitles and the audio was original with just occasional RAI inserted Italian comments when no-one was speaking. Obviously NASA's camera was being held by one of the Aliens as the entire Earth team was introduced to the starship's six most senior officers, which had included Captain Juili of the Alien ground team, She was recognisable as much the tallest of her type of Alien, who were the smallest, like dwarves or children in height, but otherwise the most human looking.

Maisie supposed it must be a NASA camera, as there had been a lot of speculation about the fact that all the images and video sent by the Aliens had all been monochrome, black and white.

RAI then cut to a studio discussion with experts that only seemed to be expert in talking, later there might be coverage from the UNGA in New York. So Maisie simply muted the TV and picked up her book.

Later Maisie realised that RAI was showing footage of New York. So she turned up the volume and waited. Captain Juili would be addressing the UNGA shortly.

Maisie was amazed by the UN Chairman introducing Jack Casey, an Irish diplomat who had been hurriedly appointed as the UN Observer responsible for monitoring the alien's visit.

She watched Jack introduce the three alien women, Captain Juili, Chainai and Virona. There was a plinth at the podium to give more height. Virona stood in front. She certainly looked very alien with the scary teeth, fur and tail. But Chainai and Juili looked suspiciously like short humans or children until you realised the chest hadn't quite the right curves, the hair was too shiny and one finger less per hand. Juili looked almost Indian with her tawny dusky skin, something Asian but not Han Chinese anyway, but bright red hair, the shorter Chainai while obviously the same species, had very pale skin and long almost white hair. On close up she had very dark eyes, so probably not an albino?

Maisie thought no biological details had been released except there seemed to be very many species. Maisie concentrated as Juili stepped up to the podium and scratched the microphone. Juili was wearing a simple tunic top, leggings or close stretchy pants and soft flat ankle boots. In contrast the other two had almost mediaeval style dresses and robes. Chainai in earthy browns and Virona in brown and orange tones.

"Good afternoon nations and peoples of Tellus, err, Earth," said Juili. "I give you best wishes from our Galactic Council on the other side of the Galaxy, our shared Milky Way. I have only been learning the English for just under four months, so I may stumble at it a little. I'm sorry that we are not better prepared and

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staying longer, we are on a first mission to visit Andromeda in our city ship, like a little travelling world that is an example of our culture. We have been diverted here, we wish to talk to a particular woman, that is meet her, and leave. Some other ship will send people to visit longer in the future, probably from Caemoria. Our starship, the Intergal One, is already passing Earth so we must leave very soon. You have already used the sync-sat to communicate. They use Fusion power and Jump technology. They can only be used in deep space, but we have put a pair in orbit here so you can examine them, or at least they will orbit eventually. We are already exchanging very much digitised data you can spend years studying, including the designs of sync-sat. Thank you also for loaning us Jack Casey as a guide for our visit to Europe. I trust you find solutions in this worthy institution to all your conflicts. Thank you and goodbye.”

The feed switched to a camera following them leaving the General Assembly. RAI then started repeating the tantalisingly short sequence with an Italian voice-over.

This time Maisie was more interested in the studio analysis. There was no doubt that the Aliens had wrong footed everyone.

There was considerable speculation as to why the only thing the Aliens planned to do was speak to a woman, presuming they understood English and human gender, possibly in Europe, and leave!

Still, the fact of a vast alien civilisation that had fusion power and Jump Drive for thousands of years was pretty amazing even if it was a puzzling and short visit. None of the major religions had any difficulty with the idea. Some smaller evangelical groups seemed very upset. The usual conspiracy theorists went into overdrive.

It was now very late at night, so Maisie turned everything off.

Very odd, she thought, not what anyone expected of First Contact at all and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

Despite the fact that the aliens were coming to Rome, Maisie stuck to her schedule, otherwise she'd have had the expense of a new ticket. Maisie thought she would be unlikely to get close enough to see them anyway. Maisie had just time to watch the chaotic press conference from a nearby hotel on TV in the hotel bar and then went off to get a taxi to the airport. At the airport there was a rising hubbub of noise. Almost a sense of panic in the air.

Maisie approached an airport official. "Excuse me, officer," she asked in perfect Italian, "is there a problem?"

"Yes, signorina," he replied, "perhaps there will be trouble, you are too young to be alone. Have you parents or a guardian here?"

Maisie sighed and passed her open passport, pointing, "My age?"

"You speak well for an Irlandese," he said, "but unfortunately one of the aliens has been shot, the very pale one. They think very badly. There is talk of martial law."

"Are flights grounded?"

"No, not yet."

"Perhaps the aliens have really good medicine and logically they will only be concerned with the perpetrator rather than punishing all of Earth," said Maisie. "I think it's unlikely they are like aliens in the movies."

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"I hope you are correct, Signorina," he replied.

Later on the flight the Captain announced that the alien would be fine and that the aliens were content for the normal legal processes to deal with the attack as if it was an ordinary Italian that had been shot.

Everyone applauded.

"See," said Maisie to her neighbour, "the aliens are reasonable people, not like the ones in Hollywood." She wondered why the alien had been shot.

"Maybe they just want us to think that," the man replied in a north of England accent.

Maisie went back to her book. After that nothing happened till she got to the apartment.

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Maisie was only just back from going out to the local shop for bread and milk after getting in from Dublin Airport when the doorbell rang.

She thought it very strange to see the Irish UN diplomat, a child sized person with an almost human face and human sized person with large wide brimmed hat pulled well down and scarf pulled up high with a curiously fuzzy looking face. She'd seen all three on TV at the UNGA when she was in Rome. Maisie was sure it was Chainai and Virona from the alien starship. Maisie was initially very surprised. Then she suspected she was the woman they especially wanted to meet. That didn't need genius.

"Are you Meizhen Kelly?" he asked. "Or perhaps a young visitor or a relative? I'm Jack Casey, previously the Irish UN representative in New York, and now keeping an eye on the visiting aliens."

"Yes," said Maisie, "but everyone calls me Maisie, it only says Mei Zhen on my passport and birth cert. I have no relatives, I do look a bit young. So why does the Irish UN New York representative want me and who are your two odd companions?" Maisie was fairly sure who they were.

Can you invite us in?" Jack asked. "This is Chainai and Virona from the alien ship."

"You better come in out of the wet," suggested Maisie softly. She looked at the rain falling past the yellow sodium glow of the street lamp across the road. "Follow me upstairs and latch the door, there isn't much space in the hall and downstairs only has the utility space and the

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spare bedroom." Maisie turned her head and pointed upstairs. She was certain now, that incredible as it would seem to anyone else, that the starship had only come past Earth so these aliens could talk to her.

"I'll put a kettle on. Make yourselves comfortable. Just chuck the coats in the corner, the floor is clean and won't mind the wet. I thought you were my flatmate Sharon." Maisie headed into the kitchen-dinette and as she filled the kettle she heard Jack Casey say something like, "looks more like twelve or thirteen than twenty-three." Then there was a softer reply she couldn't make out.

The small very pale skinned woman sat on the two-seater settee. She had a thick Alice band holding back her long white hair. Her chest didn't seem quite right. The taller woman was very alien looking with black fur and a thick tail, sitting on the arm. Probably more comfortable for her large tail that occasionally twitched. Jack Casey sat on his own to the side in one of the seats. Maisie sat on the remaining seat turning it from the TV screen to face them. They were obviously two of the aliens from the starship that had been in the news. Certainly the pair at Vanderbilt and the UNGA.

"So what's this about?" asked Maisie, trying not to sound aggressive.

"The girls here have a proposal you should listen to," Jack answered. "I'm here as a kind of neutral bystander I guess. I've been with them long enough to think of them as people, not just aliens." He looked at the dwarfish one. "I've been assigned as UN contact to their Galactic Council and observer on their Flitter. It's a thing like a cross between a NASA shuttle and an aircraft. I'm breaking the rules. I was supposed to say if they found you, but they argued that if the UN or

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Governments were involved it would take too long and you might not be free to choose. Um, Chainai is actually deaf and blind, her hair band gives her a rough 3D view of the surroundings and this is the tricky bit. Virona here is using Telepathy to tell Chainai what is happening.”

“Chainai can’t speak English,” explained Virona, “she learned to talk before going deaf and blind. I’ll translate what she says.” Virona paused and Chainai shook her head in a very human way.

Chainai spoke for a minute in a flat voice.

“Chainai says, ‘Please don’t think of me as a dwarf, I’m not at all like the ones in your mythology, I don’t even know any miners and I certainly don’t like enclosed spaces’,” explained Virona.

For a moment you could have heard a pin drop.

Again Maisie felt a couple of strange touches and almost heard a couple of distant whispers. “You aren’t guessing I thought that are you?” she asked rhetorically. “There is something funny going on. I don’t mean anything derogatory by it. It’s just the nearest description that sort of popped into my mind.” She turned to Virona. “I can’t help it, but when I see you I just think cat. I know your fur isn’t quite like cat fur, but you do have a splendid tail. Chainai, are you telepathic too? Why are you here?”

Chainai spoke and then Virona responded. “No, she says, she is an Empath, only very weakly telepathic. Strangely your thoughts are very bright to her, she practically only needs me to know what Jack is saying. She can’t understand it, as you are not a Telepath.”

Virona smiled. It was a disconcerting smile, because it was a little like a human’s and with almost human lips except for the sharp needle like carnivore’s teeth. Virona

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laughed as did Chainai. Jack didn't seem in on the joke whatever it was. It seemed unlikely that aliens should have similar body language, had they deliberately learned it?

"You don't seem as surprised as I'd have thought," said Jack.

"I'm not easily surprised," said Maisie, "but you might be surprised."

"Perhaps this will be easier than we thought," Virona suggested. "I won't beat about the bush as you say. You have Talent. A little like what people here call magic in children's fairy tales and more adult fantasy." She held up her hand as Maisie started to protest. "Please listen a minute, we don't regard it as magic, some of your writers hypothetically propose psychic powers, it's more like that. You are almost certainly the only person on the planet Earth or Tellus that has it. Untrained it's very dangerous. That's partly why we both can hear your thoughts, though I'm a proper Telepath, this close Chainai can sometimes hear your thoughts as clearly as I can, and she is a very good Empath but not really a Telepath. She says you are not a Telepath, she is expert at these judgements, yet you seem to be intermittently broadcasting your thoughts as if you are. Even an untalented person would find it disturbing in an unconscious way being too close, Yet Jack senses nothing. You don't have any friends? You are broadcasting a no and wanting to say yes, but they are only acquaintances. No one ever said they knew what you were thinking?"

Maisie thought here's a test! *Quick what is that at the window!* She thought as hard as possible. They both started to look round to the window behind!

"Ha!" exclaimed Virona. "You nearly got me there!"

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“So what is my talent? I presume it’s because you are telepath you know it’s not really Telepathy?”

“We have some idea, we both sense you have Talents, not telepathy, we will confirm our ideas from your experiences,” Virona explained. “At the Circle College where all Talents are trained they will explain more. Your Talent would surely have manifested quite a while ago?”

Maisie noticed Virona glance at Jack who seemed fascinated with his fingernails.

“How old are you, and um, can I ask you a personal question telepathically?” Virona asked.

“I’m twenty-three, soon I’ll be closer to twenty-four,” Maisie answered thinking hard, Yes?

Maisie felt the strange touch again. *How many years ago did you pass from being a girl?*

Maisie knew clearly what Virona meant. The Aliens were obviously shy or cautious people.

“It was almost seven years ago. Er, quite late really,” Maisie explained slowly. “My mother was from the Far East, China in the Orient. Apparently that can be a reason, that’s also why my real name isn’t Maisie but měi zhēn, so Mei Zhen is on my birth certificate. Usually no one can spell it. It’s literally beautiful treasure or pretty pearl so Maisie is a good English nickname as it means pearl and sounds a little bit similar. Strangely I don’t seem to have aged much since then. I even have to carry my passport to prove my age!”

“Ah, is intermarriage between your different ethnic groups rare then?” asked Virona.

Maisie thought about this for a moment. “Well, until the last seventy-five years and more mobility such as air travel, yes. Notice I don’t have the same skin type or

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eyes compared to most people like Mr Casey. My hair is much coarser, my eyes dark brown.”

“The very slow ageing is a common symptom of Talent,” Virona said. “Try now to think of strange events.”

Maisie felt a gentle caress, yet no-one was near.

Jack yawned. “Sorry folks.”

“I don’t have to think hard.” Maisie leaned back and laughed. “I have never told this to a soul, but I can make my finger nails glow. Sometimes it happens unconsciously so I often wear gloves. The gloves don’t last. Also I work at computer programming and sometimes my keyboards only last about a month. The letters wear off. Late at night if I’m cross my finger tips emit like little crackles or tiny balls of light that float off and make little burn marks on the ceiling.” Maisie paused and sat up straight. “I’d have thought it imagination, except the flatmate remarked my bedroom ceiling needed painting and was there a leak?”

Maisie demonstrated making her finger tips glow. Jack was suddenly very alert. Virona and Chainai looked worried.

“Chainai says your Talent is the sixth Circle,” Virona seemed extremely nervous, “concerned with energy. Though some people have a weaker secondary Talent. You have a secondary talent, it’s not automatically dangerous. We talk of circles as the one with talent can sense the kind and amount of talent in the adjoining circles. The symbol for Talent is represented by seven overlapping circles arranged in a circle. Chainai as a very powerful Empath can sense talent at huge distances and which Circle they are.”

Maisie could now feel two flavours of touch that both seemed to suggest nervousness and a sudden desire to

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be anywhere else. “Mr Casey,” she asked, “how much of this do you know or have seen?”

“Call me Jack, please,” he replied. “Healing. Chainai had two gunshot wounds that would have killed most people and in an hour there wasn’t even a scar, Virona healed it.” He paused and leaned forward. “This is the first I heard of them talk about energy magic or talent as they call it. Actually all along they have been sensibly very coy about mentioning talent at all, letting people think everything is technology. So I have no idea really, I’ve learnt more in the last few minutes than in the last two days. I’ve spent a good length of time in their Flitter. It allegedly runs on a fusion reactor. Well, the problem is I’m on the appropriations committee at UNCS for fusion research. Our largest Tokamak fusion reactor is better than the last, it actually nearly has a net output. It’s enormous. The next one will be very much larger. Maybe they use fusion energy, but it might as well be magic how they do it. It’s said ‘Sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’, but a different joker said ‘Sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology’. I’m beginning to think that our alien visitors are mostly in the second category while talking quick and hand waving hoping we will think it’s the first.”

“Larry Niven or Arthur C. Clarke,” muttered Maisie, “probably both.”

“Very perceptive,” Virona answered wryly. “Most of our technology doesn’t use talent, but you guessed very close. Our fusion reactors are really star stuff compressed more than liquid hydrogen and superheated. That is contained in an artefact created using talent that sort of freezes time, what your SF calls stasis. Except really this explanation is a lie for children

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in a way. The shield lets out the amount of energy needed. If no energy is withdrawn the star stuff isn't consumed obviously. Physics as you know it in terms of energy conservation isn't cheated. You can't cheat on the universe. Unless you take it and give it back so quickly that the universe doesn't notice. Like Hawkins Radiation on an event horizon of a black hole you can momentarily upset the balance. This is how the warp or Jump drive works. Almost no talent."

Chainai interrupted. Though she could speak clearly, she didn't speak English.

"Chainai says this is why frankly we are very worried," explained Virona. "Seven years is very long time for an energy talent to be without training. Unheard of. She says 'Can you see, you need to come to the Circle College for training like all our talents do?' She will probably be one of your teachers, unlike me, Chainai is not part of the starship crew."

"I shouldn't be. I should be laughing at you," said Maisie, "but oddly, I'm convinced." Maisie felt it explained everything.

"Have you any family?" Virona inquired.

"No. My parents died while I was at university. I'm an only child and they were both too, so no uncles or aunts. My grandparents and other older relatives died while I was a baby and toddler. I have a vague memory of one, but it could have been my dad talking about his aunt."

"Also should we call you Mei Zhen or Maisie?" asked Virona.

"I think call me Maisie, really only my mum called me Mei Zhen. I have no real ties at all. Not even to my job."

"What about your companion, Sharon?" pressed Virona.

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“She is the receptionist at work,” explained Maisie. “She moved out ages ago, but I suggested she could stay here while I was away on holiday in Italy. It saves her commuting, we just know each other slightly from meeting at work.”

“She will be here later?”

“Maybe, I’m not sure if she’s staying now that I’m back.”

For a while no-one spoke.

“Look,” said Virona, “did you see the TV news video of the shooting? I healed Chainai.”

“No, I was at the airport, I only heard about it.”

Chainai came close and exposed her skin. Her skin was pale and unblemished.

“I agree, there is no indication you were shot a couple of days ago,” said Maisie. “It’s amazing how close I was to you in Rome when you were shot.”

“I don’t think so, considering that we only went to Rome from Geneva to find you,” Virona explained.

Irrationally Maisie remembered the kettle, she was angry about forgetting to make tea. However just then Maisie heard it click. Maisie didn’t much like thinking about her mum and dad either.

“I think we need a cup of tea,” said Maisie. “This is getting intense.” Maisie got up and Virona followed her closely.

The kettle was still steaming. Maisie thought it should be cold again by now as she moved to lift it.

Virona unexpectedly grabbed the kettle. “See the plug? Did you ever do that before?”

Maisie stared blankly at the kettle. Suddenly she was astonished to see what Virona meant. Not only was the plug sitting loose on the work surface, but she had not even set the kettle on its holder. Suddenly Maisie

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wondered how many cups of tea she had made this way when tired after work as it was Sharon's habit to unplug the kettle at the wall. Sharon didn't trust the cordless kettle holder or the kettle switch.

Chainai and Jack had followed Virona into the kitchen-dinette.

"You probably didn't actually save any electricity though," Virona added. "Is there a meter for the electricity?"

"Yes, it's in the utility space downstairs beside the front door. A black box with numbers and a spinning disk that speeds up as you take more electricity. Newer ones are electronic, but it's mostly mechanical with a coil to sense current."

"Chainai wants to know if we can we try a possibly safe experiment?" Virona asked.

Somehow Maisie knew what she was going to say, without telepathy. "Yes," she sighed, "you, Virona, can go and watch the meter. It's too high on the wall for Chainai and probably not smart to climb on the washing machine."

"She'd not be able to read it," explained Virona, "her locator is no use to read or even make out faces, just to see where people are. She uses her empathy talent to recognise people."

Virona rushed off. Maisie puzzled about the locator and Chainai's disabilities. It seemed strange for people supposedly about 7000 years from the dawn of their technological age to be unable to provide a better solution.

"Is an audience off putting?" asked Jack.

"I don't think so as long as you don't tell anyone, either way. If nothing happens I'm an idiot and if

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something does then I'm a freak. You already know more than I have ever admitted to anyone."

Almost automatically Maisie fished out four tea bags and reached down four mugs and poured the water. Then she emptied the remains and refilled the kettle setting beside the holder as before. She pressed down the on switch as usual though and took her usual spot at the head of the table.

"Sit," she urged. "I'm usually here alone. Nice to have company." Maisie laughed, perhaps slightly nervously.

They sat and sipped the black tea. Jack grimaced.

"The milk in the fridge is fresh from the shop since I got back," Maisie explained. She set the unopened plastic container on the table.

He poured in a dash in and sat again. Maisie thought about the kettle as she put the milk back in the fridge. She didn't know how or what she had done before other than wonder if the kettle had boiled with its loud click of the switch resetting. Virona's tea looked lonely. Maisie thought how she needed to boil a fresh kettle and make a new cup for her.

The kettle popped. The others stared at it and then at Maisie. Then Maisie heard Virona coming up the stairs as the door had been left open. Then the lounge door as Virona closed it.

"Well?" asked Maisie.

Virona looked at the steaming kettle. "You didn't plug it in?"

"No, I only put it on the holder." Maisie stood up and pointed. "You can see the plug isn't disturbed."

"The disk just went round very slowly for quite a while then spun very fast and went back to slow so I came up." Virona hesitated, then sat with them. "You didn't feel strange or very tired?"

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"I just sat and thought about how I wanted a cup of tea," said Maisie.

Chainai spoke again.

Of course Maisie didn't understand. "What?" She was puzzled now by the reaction of the Aliens.

"Well, you have an unusual variation of Talent," explained Virona. "Chainai is right though, we are not qualified to say exactly what else you might be doing."

Maisie thought about the energy to boil two kettles of water very quickly and was glad that somehow she was only transferring it from nearby wiring. Maisie idly wondered if it was possible beside a street light or buried power cable and what else she could put energy into? "So what else might I be doing?"

"Sorry," Virona interrupted. "It's bad to read people's minds without permission. I'm not spying on you but your thoughts are so bright and strong it's almost painful! Chainai agrees that we don't understand exactly what you did."

Jack just looked very tired again.

Virona continued, "Actually, trust me this is a very unhealthy train of thought for anyone with your talent and no training, so much so I'm not going to even explain why!"

"I should go with them Jack?" asked Maisie. "Obviously I'm some sort of freak, I have this talent stuff and it could be dangerous?"

"I can't officially recommend that. Quite the reverse. Certainly I'll have to report what the aliens have been saying," he said slowly. "Eventually, anyway. I'd imagine certain agencies might interview and test you indefinitely. I think if you stay you'll be permanently in a military research establishment. The fact you have no

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family or real friends will encourage the military to make you vanish.”

Maisie watched Jack pacing up and down. “These aliens obviously have experience in training people with your talents, but you need to decide. I’m only here to ensure they don’t pressure or kidnap you. I’m even going out on limb letting you decide before I inform the UN.”

“It’s likely you could have some sort of dangerous accident,” Virona explained. “Does Maisie really look like thirteen or fourteen, Jack, rather than twenty-three?”

“Hmm, you barely look thirteen.” Jack leaned over and stared at Maisie. “The skin is too smooth up close.”

“I think if you don’t have an accident possibly killing other people you may find being thirty-two very awkward,” said Virona. “It’s probable you won’t look any older than today. Have you a photo from sixteen or earlier?”

Maisie got her passport from her leather jacket pocket and tossed it. Jack and Virona stared at it and then Maisie. “I have to carry this all the time. I have no driving licence.”

“This passport is dated nearly nine years ago,” Jack remarked. “The photo could have been taken today.”

“Yes, actually it wasn’t an up to date photo, it was taken on my thirteenth birthday. I’d need to be renewing the passport soon. It was for a trip to Taiwan and Hong Kong originally that was put off till I was nearly fifteen.”

“Only thirteen! Uncanny!” exclaimed Jack Casey.

“Can I come with you now?” asked Maisie. “How long does it take?” Maisie suddenly didn’t like the phrase ‘certain agencies might interview and test you indefinitely’ and everything seemed to stack up as the aliens claimed. It explained a lot. Perhaps more than

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they had talked about. She didn't want to end up as some agency's lab rat. Besides what an opportunity, a real adventure, but without jungle insects, dangerous animals, sunstroke or freezing to death.

"To get to the Flitter, the starship or the college on Caemoria were they will train you?" Virona asked.

"All, I guess," said Maisie.

"I think the taxi is about half an hour depending on traffic," Virona explained. "Our Flitter is in a field near Marley Park, maybe another half hour walk from the gate, but likely the Carrier can meet us. The flight to the starship is a few days, but you can sleep in a bed. Then about three and a half months acceleration out of your Solar System to space deep enough to Jump. The Jump is instant, usually up to about 12,000 light years, but our ship is designed to travel to another galaxy so can do the 80,000 to Caemoria in two Jumps of 50,000 light years. Knowing the destination exactly makes a longer Jump easier too. Then just over three months to decelerate in the Caemorian system to Caemoria. A Flitter from Caemoria will meet the starship. Or we might drop you at Grand Central, still two Jumps, that won't add any time for you and saves us on the starship over three and half months."

Virona never did get a cup of tea.

Don't talk, urged Virona telepathically, someone has a radio eavesdropping device. Jack, anyone give you something? Write it down.

Maisie took the wipe off notepad from the fridge and handed it to Jack.

'Only the mobile phone,' he wrote.

'Give it to me,' Maisie wrote.

Maisie wrapped it in about three layers of cooking foil. Virona amazed her by laughing.

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‘Best we keep writing?’ Maisie wrote.
Chainai spoke for a moment.

There was silence for a while, then Virona spoke.
“Chainai says she sensed the elation when I said where
the Flitter is parked, they didn’t know. She then sensed
their disappointment when you wrapped the phone up.
You obviously know some physics. I’ve told the Flitter to
take off shortly.”

“How?” asked Maisie.

“There is a very powerful Telepath and also a good
secondary Telepath on the Flitter, I have been keeping
them informed. Normally we use these Crystals.”

Virona produced a phone sized slab of what looked
almost like very dark brown glass. Or obsidian. It was
featureless. She did something and white text appeared
on the almost black top. Maisie realised the top was
actually clear and the black layer was below the text. She
waved her hand over it.

“The text is reflective, it emits no light?” suggested
Maisie.

“Yes, but the satellite network for it is not active yet. It
will be later, and your people can use it for weather
monitoring, but communications only with our Crystals.
We must hurry now. I will break the normal rules as
these men are spies and I will spy telepathically on
them. They might decide to move in and take you into
custody, but there are only two. They have been told to
wait for backup.”

Maisie wrote a resignation letter and packed all the
bags and cases with stuff she wanted to keep, basically
everything except the furniture, kitchen contents,
bedding, PC, laser printer, TV and HiFi. Maisie made a
set of encryption keys for Jack Casey and Sharon as the
aliens said email would be possible. How, she couldn’t

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imagine. Maisie then wrote a note for Sharon. She packed her favourite chopsticks, her stash of chocolate and Chinese bowls, spoons and tea things.

Virona explained that there was no need for any clothes unless there were items Maisie especially wanted, but no weight limit apart from what was possible to pack in a taxi. Power could be arranged for the personal music player, digital camera and computers if Maisie wanted them.

Maisie realised most of her CDs were at home in Belfast where she had two locked rooms out of bounds to her tenant. She packed the few in the apartment. Maisie took the drive out of the desktop and packed an adaptor for it. She packed her laptop. Maisie thought she shouldn't leave anything of a personal nature, but actually for various reasons she had nothing from home, not even a photo album, though she had scans of the photos. Maisie emailed the resignation. She wrote to her solicitor and explained various things, he'd been her dad's solicitor so would be as flexible as he could. He'd been looking after Maisie's financial affairs since her parents' death as initially Maisie didn't want to.

Then Maisie wrote to her banks explaining that she would be unavailable for a few years and to contact the solicitor about any issues. Maisie took clothes back out of the cases and put them in bin bags to fit all her books and calligraphy stuff in the cases. She left anything much worn in a bag marked rubbish.

Maisie heard the front door as she was re-arranging the last of the packing.

“Maisie!” called Sharon. “Are you decent?”

Maisie went to the head of the stairs. Sharon came to the return and they saw each other.

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“Yes, I have some visitors, I hoped you’d be back as I’m leaving again with them.”

“Can I bring Frank Doyle up?”

“Um, my co-worker Henry’s brother? Sure. Why is he here?”

Sharon didn’t answer till they were both in the lounge.

“Frank and Sharon,” said Maisie, “Jack Casey from the Department of Foreign Affairs and this is Chainai from Caemoria and Virona from the Intergal One.”

Sharon and Frank stared.

“Well, you’ve never had visitors before,” muttered Sharon.

Maisie could tell that she was embarrassed, which was unusual for Sharon.

“Come into my room, Sharon.” They crossed the hall to Maisie’s bedroom, now stripped apart from the desk, the PC and the bedclothes. Maisie sat on the bed. “Have a seat, Sharon.”

Instead she came and sat on the edge of Maisie’s larger case, up close. Sharon held out her left hand.

Maisie looked at it and realised Sharon had a ring with a diamond, though somehow she thought it might be something else.

“It’s only a zircon,” Sharon said when Maisie looked at her face. “Frank says we should save for a house. You are really moving out again the same day you got back? Where?”

“Caemoria, the alien world on the other side of the Galaxy. They have a special college for people like me. You and Frank can confirm I wasn’t kidnapped or coerced if you are asked? I’m the woman they told the UN they wanted to meet.”

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“I saw that on TV. It was weird.” She got up walked around and peered in the wardrobe. “You really are going, what about the apartment? What about the rent?”

“I lied, Sharon. There is no rent. My parents were well off. There was, well, sort of insurance too. I bought this place. Investment.”

“How long are you going away for?”

“Maybe three or four years, I don’t know really,” Maisie mumbled.

“What about the mortgage?”

“There is no mortgage, I bought it outright when I was doing the work experience here.”

“So are you selling it?”

“No time, Sharon, I’m leaving as soon as I can get a taxi.”

“What about me?” She looked around. “You taking all the stuff in sacks in the lounge too? All the books?”

“Yes.”

“You’ll need more than a taxi. Maybe Frank can run you if it’s not too far, he has the panel van here. Um. Maisie, what about me?”

“I told my solicitor you can stay and then to sell the place if you leave. I don’t want it empty or having someone I don’t know in it.”

“I wanted to talk about that anyway,” insisted Sharon. “Frank isn’t getting on too well with Henry, he has to move out. I thought maybe he could move in here, you’d have hardly noticed him downstairs with me. However if you aren’t actually going to be here?”

“You only got engaged while I was away?” Maisie sighed.

“We are hoping to get married in the spring.” Sharon sat down on the edge of the case again and smiled at Maisie.

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Maisie blushed. “You must think I’m a terrible prude, I guess it’s Frank’s idea, I doubt Henry has told him much about me. Possibly Henry is so wrapped up in programming he only knows my views on C++ inheritance and not on... Well, whatever people might do in private. Well, the pair of you can have the whole place as I’m leaving.”

“What about the rent?” asked Sharon. “Do we pay it to the solicitor or keep paying it to your bank account?”

“I told the solicitor it was up to you. You have to pay the bills and I think you should repair anything you break. I think you have to pay some rent or the solicitor will be annoyed with me. He told me before you came the first time that it could affect my ownership or something if I let you stay for free. Contact John, the Solicitor, if any maintenance needs done.”

Maisie got up and went to the lounge. Sharon followed.

“Sharon and I have sorted it, Frank,” explained Maisie. “Can you help move my stuff to the alien’s Flitter? It won’t be far.”

“We can stay here while you are away?” asked Frank sounding surprised.

“Yes, I need to go now.”

“No problem moving your gear, Maisie,” he enthused. “Thanks, that’s great. But why are you going away?”

“I’m a lot odder than your brother Henry or Sharon imagines. I need to learn stuff about it. Besides if you were single with no ties or family wouldn’t you take up an offer to visit an alien world on a starship? I’m the reason they visited Earth at all!”

“I suppose, Sharon?” asked Frank.

“They won’t be too happy in work though Henry won’t mind!” exclaimed Maisie.

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Maisie tore open the two letters to John the solicitor and added a note she got Sharon and Frank to sign. Maisie copied it and they signed again. She addressed fresh envelopes and wrote out the address and number of the solicitor for Sharon. No stamps!

Maisie phoned for two taxis from the neighbour's flat. Maisie passed the neighbour one set of letters in case the watchers grabbed the others as Maisie had duplicated them. She gave Jack the other set. Maisie was feeling elated, excited. Sharon and Frank helped to load all her stuff in the van and talked loudly about moving. It was thought in the office that Sharon was only staying till Maisie came back from Italy, so Maisie thought this was a good cover story.

Jack and Virona climbed down from the balcony when they saw a taxi in the car park behind the apartment. Virona caught Chainai and Jack caught Maisie as they dropped off the edge. Jack promised to post the duplicate letters. He'd not be heading to the Flitter.

"I'll wait for the other taxi," said Jack.

The three girls, the freak show, thought Maisie as she got into the waiting taxi. Maisie sat in the front and the aliens slipped into the back. Suddenly Maisie had a thought. "Eh, can you go to the late night supermarket?" she asked the driver. "I have a few things I need." She put a twenty on the dash. "This will cover it." Fortunately it was a Friday night. Frank was following in the big white van.

Maisie explained more when they got there.

"Another fifty if you wait fifteen minutes or so, on top of the fare." Maisie waved the note. "Tricky to get another taxi this time of night. It's urgent I get somewhere."

"I dunno."

2: The Visitors

Maisie tore off one part of the note with a serial number and handed it to him. “The bank won’t mind some tape on it.”

“Right,” he said, “I’ll wait.”

“What’s the problem, Maisie?” asked Virona. “There is no immediate rush, but eventually they may try and intercept the Flitter. It won’t take off just yet for a new rendezvous.”

“I’ll show you.”

Shortly the taxi parked and Virona and Chainai got out with Maisie. “Keep your collar up and hands in the pockets. What do other people that are not Karnds do for vitamins at college? You know what a vitamin is?”

“Many have to have certain supplements,” explained Virona. “Actual food is very universal in nutrition though. I don’t know what you need. We were not intending to take any new species on board originally, there was scepticism that you existed or would come with us. I’m sure that they can work it out on the starship, probably they have already as they asked the visiting team of Astronauts to bring food and supplements for analysis without explaining why. It won’t do any harm to get some things, but I’m sure you don’t need to.”

Frank came over. “What gives?”

“I want to grab a few things,” explained Maisie, “just in case, I won’t be more than ten minutes, is that OK?”

“No problem, is the taxi guy cool on it?”

“Promised him fifty extra if he waits.”

“Sharon’s right, you’re nuts.”

“They don’t take our money were I’m going.”

Frank nodded and sauntered back to the van.

Maisie got a trolley and they went in. She got some more chocolate and loads of every kind of vitamin

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supplement. Maisie fancied some white wine but didn't fancy the argument over the passport. More than once she'd been accused of changing the date of birth on it!

Maisie had no further use for money, perhaps for years, so if in doubt she bought it. Besides she had plenty in the bank. Maybe the house in Belfast was worth more than half a million. Eventually she'd sell it somehow. Toothbrushes, toothpaste and shampoo. Maisie didn't bother with aspirin as she'd not had a headache or any illness at all for seven years or more. She'd never been short of money anyway even before her parent's death.

"Why are there so many brands and versions of the same product?" asked Virona.

"Competition," explained Maisie, "if a product is a success everyone wants to sell it."

"Chainai thinks it seems an inefficient way to do things," said Virona. "Surely it would be better to have more variety?"

Maisie added some tights, knickers and socks.

"I don't think you need any of that, but I suppose it does no harm," suggested Virona.

They headed back to the taxi.

"Where to Miss?" he asked.

"Is there a flat field anywhere near, Maisie?" asked Virona.

"Why do you want that?" asked the driver.

"These are emergency supplies," said Maisie thinking quickly, "and a small plane will pick them up."

"I know a place," he said.

About twenty minutes later they got to a large flat field outside the city.

"Now how you going to tell the plane?" he asked.

"In a minute on my mobile," explained Virona.

2: The Visitors

Maisie paid the driver and he left. He seemed sceptical but wasn't going to argue with the money.

Frank drew up the van and got out. "That was quite a chase!"

"I presume you have explained to the Flitter somehow where we are, Virona?" said Maisie.

"Pedar and Olef can sense us."

"Olef was the tall one on TV?" asked Maisie.

"Yes," shouted Virona, as there was an enormous scream of jet engines coupled with a roar like a rocket. The Flitter landed in what seemed like an impossibly short distance, turned and taxied toward them. It looked like a cross between the space shuttle and an aircraft. It was huge but not as large as a jumbo jet.

"I'll reverse in, the field is obviously firm enough," suggested Frank. The Flitter had finished taxiing and opened a large rear hatch which became a ramp.

Virona and Maisie opened the gate and the van reversed to the Flitter's ramp. They all worked to carry everything from the van to the ramp.

"Thanks, Frank," said Maisie. "I hope the wedding goes well."

"Yeah, well at least we have somewhere very inexpensive to live. The rent is crazy cheap, so thanks. Are you sure about this, leaving with the aliens?"

"Absolutely, you can't imagine!" Maisie exclaimed enthusiastically.

"No, actually I can't. I hope it works out for you."

Maisie was quickly introduced to Juili, Olef and Pedar at the ramp.

Juili looked at Maisie's luggage. Mostly packed in black bin bags!

"You certainly have plenty of luggage!"

Chainai spoke a bit in the alien language.

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"Chainai thinks it's a special case," Virona explained in English. "She has a splitting headache and I can't help it. She's checking sick bay and going to bed. I may do the same soon as I don't feel much better. It's very unusual. Chainai says sorry to be poor company, Maisie."

"We better secure it and take off, Juili," said Pedar. "They have tracked down the taxi and he has told them were he left us. He thinks we are smugglers or other criminals."

They all worked to carry everything from the ramp to the cargo hold were everything was locked down with nets.

"Just in case you hear rumours," said Olef softly, "I'm only on the Intergal One to get treatment from Chainai because I stole something from a museum. However I won't be arrested as I'm not a criminal."

"Ah right," replied Maisie, softly. She puzzled over this information. He was a tall species, perhaps about 6' as Maisie had thought when he was on TV, with random tufts of hair all over his skin. His skin had looked a little like it had flakes of mica.

"Come with us to the flight deck and strap in there," said Juili.

With a noisy scream and roar the Flitter was soon airborne.

"Do you think they will try to intercept us?"

"They can try," explained Juili. "In the atmosphere the USA fighters are faster for longer distances as our skin overheats on the wings. But we have more acceleration and can do faster bursts in atmosphere. We will soon be above their ceiling. Also they are intercepting from the UK. We will be at the speed of sound shortly."

"The Irish don't have anything supersonic," confirmed Maisie.

2: The Visitors

“I think as you are unused to space travel and due to your special Talent you should rest in bed and be sedated?” suggested Juili. “You’ll be awake, just feel a bit sleepy. It will take a few days to reach the starship, it’s just for the transit from atmosphere to space.”

“It’s a bit noisy,” explained Olef, “though it’s not as rough as re-entry. It’s just Chainai sensed you seem very tense. She is worried about you.”

“OK,” agreed Maisie, “I’m tired anyway from the travelling today and the meeting.”

Virona led Maisie to a cabin. Maisie laid down on a bunk after taking off her jacket.

“The hypo has no needles, but you’ll feel a prickle on your skin.” Virona pushed up Maisie’s blouse sleeve and wiped a patch on her arm with a damp tissue from a sealed packet. The hypo spray did prickle as if it had a lot of needles. At first Maisie felt nothing, then she was drowsy.

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Virona as Maisie drifted off to sleep.

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Maisie thought she was on a steel table, a gurney. The lights were bright and it was cold. A tall thin man approached wearing a mask and green gown. There was a rattle as somebody passed him a scalpel.

Maisie screamed as she woke up. Maisie was covered in sweat. She was in a small room in a large bed, not quite double bed sized, and a desk. It was difficult to make out much. The door was open letting in a dull orange glow. Maisie realised that Virona was standing beside her.

“What’s wrong?” asked Virona.

“How did I get here?” responded Maisie. She tried to get up. “Oh, I’m so heavy!” She remembered that Virona was the cat like alien with black mole like fur though the light was poor. She’d recognised the voice.

“Don’t you remember the journey to the Flitter?” said Virona. “You agreed to be sedated for the flight, which took some days as I said it would, though the sedation unexpectedly put you to sleep, something strange happened.” She hesitated. “I don’t understand it, it should have been compatible.”

“I’m fine now I think,” said Maisie, suddenly wide awake. “I just had a bad dream, but where are my clothes?” Maisie realised she was wearing a full length chemise style nightgown and absolutely nothing else. “Who undressed me?” Maisie was also very hungry, which took her mind off freaking out about aliens seeing her naked.

“Chainai and her assistant Luci did it whilst almost in the dark for your privacy, Chainai is blind and deaf

3: Travelling

anyway,” explained Virona. “We have decontamination procedures, viruses are no risk at all and bacteria has never been a problem, though in theory it’s possible. You have lots of little creatures but they are species specific. We have to make sure there is no fungus, even the spores, plants or seeds, insects, protozoa, animals. Your clothes are laundered and in the...” Virona thought about the word. “Storage here in the room. I think there is a better word. The rest of your luggage is in the lounge. You should get dressed and eat. We only could give you water with a little sugar the last few days.”

Virona set down a small glowing lamp beside the bed. Maisie was amazed to see it seemed to be an oil lamp.

“I’ll wait in the lounge,” said Virona. “Olef is there too as you have met him. Juili will come soon.” She unhooked a large hooded robe made of thick fluffy material and laid it on the chair. “Bath robe, the bathroom with only a shower is next door and the small Personal you call a toilet is beside it. The ship’s council insisted the electricity supply was disconnected to this section because you can use your Talent with electricity, though you never harmed anything at your apartment or office?”

“No, I was fine, I can only do what we discussed that night we left.”

The small bedroom had a built in wardrobe and drawer unit as well as bookshelves and cupboards. There was a small desk with a mirror. There was no sensation of movement, noise or vibration, so it was hard to believe she was really on a starship. It reminded her of her room at college, but without a window. It just seemed so ordinary. Maisie put on the robe and examined the room. A vent near the floor had a slight positive draft. There was a matching one on the other

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side of the room just under the ceiling. The floor was a little like padded vinyl, slightly warm to the touch, but plain. The weak orangey oil lamp made it hard to make out colours.

Virona and Olef were sitting at the table. Maisie had only seen Olef briefly on TV and when she boarded the Flitter. Why had he unexpectedly told her he was only incidentally on the Intergal One starship because he was a thief getting treatment from Chainai? Had he made a mistake with his English? Why would they have let a thief help on their mission?

“Why am I so leaden?”

“The acceleration of the Intergal One is nearly a third more than the gravity you are used to,” explained Virona.

Maisie went in search of the Personal thinking this was a strange euphemism for toilet though less odd than the Americans calling it a bathroom or restroom. She was a bit flummoxed by the lack of toilet paper, but figured it out. Then Maisie went to the bathroom which didn't actually have a bath. The shower looked quite ordinary with two buttons and two knobs. There was a snowflake and cloud on one knob, the other one a small drop and several drops. The buttons had a running stick person and one at attention. Maisie wondered why had aliens such recognisable icons for controls; she shrugged and supposed it was logical.

Soon Maisie was dressed in the same clothes as she'd been wearing in the apartment the night she left. Since when did being sedated mean being knocked out for several days? How was that even possible? The accommodation was more like a large windowless apartment than she'd imagined a cabin on a starship. It was more like a hotel suite than anything, only the

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bedroom had been like the halls of residence. The lounge-dinette seemed quite lavish and spacious. It had large plants including one climbing a frame on part of a wall. There was a large nearly square black glass like panel that looked a little like a window on one wall, Maisie suspected it had to be a screen of some kind.

There was a bowl with what looked like muesli and chopped fruit. Maisie was very hungry. The table mostly had stools, but one padded chair with a back, on an adjustable pillar and pedestal. Gratefully she sank into it.

“Hello Olef,” said Maisie.

“I’m glad to see you are up now,” he said. “We were all worried.”

“It’s rising time meal on the artificial day of the starship,” explained Virona. “You call it breakfast? Try this. Those are supplement tablets on the side plate. They have all the things you need lacking from this. There are two sorts to take on alternate days as some things work better without others.”

“No more sedatives?” asked Maisie. She thought it seemed amazingly co-incidental that she should have awokened naturally at the correct time.

“No, just essential amino acids and vitamins, we are sorry about that. Balanced better than what you got in the shop, which was only vitamins. We know from the information from NASA and ESA. Do you know how much of each vitamin tablet to take?”

“I supposed it said on the tubs.”

“It was sensible to think of it,” said Virona, “but it’s a problem we all have. An Akasurip like me would die eventually without supplements if I lived on Chainai’s and Juili’s native food, they eat very little meat anyway. Though personally I don’t need them. At the college they

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will try and teach you how to do without. Many at the College do need supplements, so it's not a problem. We can synthesize any organic compounds from a formula or sample. We did get samples from your UN team of astronauts and cosmonauts. How strange they had two names even in English."

"How come I woke now?"

"I and the doctor were anxious," admitted Virona. "I used mage talent to wake you. Should I say doctor and I?"

"Yes, though it's not important," said Maisie. "I have a lot of questions, first though I need to eat and then concentrate on learning your language? I'll have plenty of time to ask questions and if I learn the language I can look up stuff on your computers? Likely I don't know the right questions."

"You should eat," agreed Virona. "I'm glad you see learning Karndic language as the priority. That's what Chainai was hoping. She thinks it will help Olef if he does most of the teaching. Captain Juili and I are part of the bridge crew so we can only help during some of our time off."

The bowl of food looked less like muesli when examined closely. None of the chopped fresh fruit like items were actually recognisable. Maisie thought they seemed very confident about feeding her. The mixed muesli like food was totally dry apart from moisture on the fruit like parts.

"Milk?" Though Maisie was wondering why some people at the Circle College didn't need supplements and how on earth anyone could learn how to do without essential vitamins and amino acids.

Virona looked surprised. "If you don't like it dry there is water. Babies of many species take their mother's

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milk. I don't know any adult that does apart from you Tellurians."

Maisie considered this. "Actually in some of our cultures adults don't take milk and can't even digest it." She took her tablets, tried the muesli style stuff and tipped in half the glass of water. "It tastes good. Perhaps I can try fruit juice instead of milk. I'm not actually that fond of milk. The fruit is surprising as none of it tastes how it looks. Is there anything like coffee?"

"I did try the coffee once in Switzerland," said Virona. "Our Molruk isn't at all the same really, otherwise we'd simply call it coffee in English, but I think," she paused and considered. "Never mind, we can't make Molruk because the electricity is disconnected for peace of mind of others. I personally think it's an overreaction. No doubt in a while we can get it reconnected."

"You are very quiet Olef," observed Maisie. "Are you sure about teaching me Karndic?"

"I learnt English for something to do," explained Olef, "but I doubt anyone else will learn it. Perhaps some government specialists. Chainai said it would be good for me. It's nearly eight months to get to Caemoria, so it will be a delight having something important to do."

"You may hear that he has stolen a valuable thing," said Virona. "Obviously we don't regard him as a criminal as we let him help. You'll find that things that aren't actually really the same thing might have been given English names by our linguistic team. Like bread, beer or wine."

"Just so you know," explained Olef, "because there can be rumours. Though technically I stole the Orb of Ghillion from the museum vault, I'm actually being rescued rather than arrested. I'm the only person here that speaks English with no job, so as I'm also from the

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College, it makes sense I teach you, though Chainai says teaching you Karndic will be good for both of us.”

“I remember you mentioned it briefly when we were loading my baggage. What is the Orb of Ghillion?” Maisie looked at Virona. “What do you mean technically stole it?”

“He was forced,” said Virona, “he can’t even remember it. We’ll explain later, perhaps Chainai can help with the missing memories.”

“She has helped me a little already,” said Olef. “She is also what you might call a therapist of the mind.”

Virona and Olef started pointing at things and giving the Karndic names when Maisie finished eating.

“I’m amazed,” said Virona, “as you only seemed to need to be told once or twice to learn a word and your pronunciation is rapidly improving. I’ve not known anyone learn so fast, your only mistake is that the pronunciation changes due to suffix not just for singular, plural and gender, but also for proper nouns, like written with a capital in English, or for things that might be emphasised in some way. Spoken Karndic is almost identical to the written language. English speech can only add a ‘the’ instead of an ‘a’ or nothing. Are all you Tellurians able to learn languages so easily?”

“No,” admitted Maisie, “actually usually I play down my language abilities. I don’t think I’m very typical even apart from this Talent stuff. So the ending of a word is really tonal to indicate a proper noun? I can get that. I know one language that’s very tonal. I’m quite as slow as anyone learning a language from books and tapes, I hate that. I’m fast only with native speakers, or at least truly multilingual. You, Juili and Olef are good for beginners in English. How do you have such a good vocabulary?”

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“Spending over three months doing nearly nothing else!” said Olef. “We also can access the computer dictionary.”

There was a chime.

“It’s the door alert,” said Virona.

A doorbell, Maisie thought.

“How do you do that!” said Virona. “I sensed your thought as if broadcast, yet you are not a telepath! You better see who it is, because this is your apartment.”

Maisie wondered what Virona meant and why she personally had to struggle to the door, Maisie got up, which was unpleasant, and opened the door. It was Captain Juili, who was tall for the child sized Karnd species, though still shorter than Maisie. Maisie marvelled at how red and shiny Juili’s hair was.

“I have taken a break to see how you are now that you are awake,” said Juili. “I have a flask of Molruk as I know you have no electricity.”

“Come in then.” Maisie noticed that the corridor was almost dark. “Are you sure you can spare the time?”

“There are five others of command rank,” explained Juili. “That’s why I was able to pilot the Flitter. We get plenty of time off. It’s politics. One each of the big six worlds of the Galactic Council.”

They sat at the table and Maisie decided that she liked Molruk very much. She also decided to spend as much time as possible lying on the large soft looking couch. She assumed unless there was artificial gravity that the starship must be accelerating at a lot more than 1 g .

Virona topped up the mugs.

“Maisie seems to have an amazing skill for Language!” said Virona.

“I’ve always easily learnt languages,” explained Maisie. “I have Chinese, French, German, Italian and a

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few others not so good. But I have no Irish. At least not more than a few words. I didn't know any native speakers."

"Jack Casey said you were only technically Irish," said Virona, "what did he mean? You've had an Irish passport for years."

"My fathers parents were born before 1922, also my father and I were both born in Northern Ireland which is in the United Kingdom, British. So by any of those reasons I was entitled to an Irish Passport. My mum was born in mainland China but her parents moved to Hong Kong in 1948 or 1949. They were refugees from the civil war and later they got British citizenship. That's why she spoke Mandarin rather than Cantonese with me, because her parents spoke it at home. You know what I mean?"

"The computer identifies Mandarin and Cantonese as quite different languages in the Chinese regions," said Juili.

"My dad had both passports. So I'm Irish with an ethnically Chinese mother who was British and a British father. I suppose I'm British if I want to be."

"Seems a strange arrangement," remarked Olef. "Was your mother still a Chinese national too?"

"I don't know," explained Maisie, "it's possible she was. Why is it important?"

"There have been suggestions from the Chinese and British that you have been abducted," explained Juili. "We said you came freely and said we can't discuss it any further by radio, but that the relevant authorities should email the Galactic Council. That will take a while."

"Should I talk on the radio?" said Maisie. "Are we still in range?"

3: Travelling

“We will be in range till we Jump, for over three months,” said Virona.

“Chainai says they will believe what they want to believe,” said Juili. “Jack Casey knows the truth. She thinks you should leave it up to the Wildgrave Plonnis to respond. It’s not as if they can do anything.”

“Who is the Wildgrave Plonnis?” asked Maisie.

“The Assistant or Deputy Emperor of Caemoria,” said Virona. “Like your Foreign Minister. Also the Envoy to the Galactic Council and their representative to Tellus.”

They taught Maisie Karndic until the virtual midday.

“I’m sorry,” explained Juili. “The way you use electricity with your talent, and also the kind of untrained talent you have worries people. You are not a prisoner. The Ship’s Council would prefer if you voluntarily stay in your apartment. I hope soon that Virona and Chainai can convince them that you are harmless. You seem quite level headed to me, as you are an adult and not a teenager and haven’t done harm despite having talent for seven years so there can’t be a genuine risk. I have a Slab for you, it’s a larger computer than the Crystal we use like your PDAs and mobile phones. Also I’m organising a Crystal that will be keyed to you. Then you can research stuff or call us. Virona and I have to go on our shift now. Will we come back tomorrow?”

“Yes, I want to learn more Karndic. I like your company too.”

Virona and Juili left and Maisie moved to lie down on the couch to study Karndic.

“I’ll be back later today, Maisie,” promised Olef. “I have to meet Chainai briefly and then I’ll be back with some food for you, though we eat the main meal later.”

4: Olef Teaching

Later Olef returned. He had an extra bag as well as the shoulder bag he'd had in the morning.

He looked surprised to see all the packaged items out of the kitchen on the table and even the floor. Maisie had been writing in a paper notebook. Maisie's laptop computer was open on the couch. Stuff from her cases and bags was heaped on the floor and chairs.

Maisie had forgotten he was coming back. "There is different Karndic script, letters for handwriting?"

"Um, technically," said Olef, "but no-one does much handwriting, not even signatures. People use the same glyphs as the printed ones if they are writing by hand."

"How is it pronounced compared with the sounds of the letters?"

"Much as it's written," said Olef. "You are better learning to speak more first. Glyphs is more accurate than letters as almost all basic shapes, the glyphs, take modifiers to become the more phonetic letters. I brought some food and Jhai. A drink not similar enough to be called tea in the opinion of the linguists. The Jhai and Molruk drinks are always the equivalent of capitalised, proper nouns to differentiate from the raw plants. That rule applies to any refined or processed food. I brought food as you'd not know what people eat this time of day. Actually it's a bit late."

"Now you mention it I am hungry again."

"That's the first time I've seen you smile," said Olef. "You seemed very serious this morning."

"You don't have to keep me company," said Maisie. "I'm not actually used to it. I was amazed how much

4: Olef Teaching

Chainai and Virona have body language I recognise, though Virona's smiles are unsettling."

"I'd rather stay if you don't mind, Maisie," suggested Olef.

"I don't mind."

"Most people find the Akasurip smile unsettling!" Olef smiled and then continued. Maisie thought his smile was quite pleasant, but said nothing. Maisie realised she thought the rest of his unusual appearance pleasant too. Olef stared at her for a moment.

"My secondary talent is mentalism, telepathy," explained Olef, "so I know you are not an Empath or Telepath. Yet often it's as if you are broadcasting like a Telepath. So I know you mean it. What ever it is you are doing only Mentalists, that's Empaths and Telepaths, are affected. It's really very odd. Chainai gets a headache from you! Actually I'm not supposed to explain anything about talent yet. I know it's going to be over seven months till we are at college, but Chainai says you should concentrate on Karndic language, Caemorian science and technology. She's in charge of all the college people, not Captain Juili or the ship's council. We will trans-ship at Grand Central in about three and a half months to another starship."

"What is Grand Central?"

"A way station," said Olef. "It seemed appropriate English. I better explain. An interstellar Jump takes no time, or as close to possible zero duration. I'm not a technical expert, so I don't have any idea how it works, except that if it did take any time the energy needed would be more than that in the visible universe, so I guess they don't mean very little time, but extremely close to none at all. A way station is moving at about the same relative velocity to a starship reaching deep space

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and using Jump Drive. It's in deep space so the starships can Jump to it directly and easily match velocity, hence starships always enter and exit a star system in the same relative direction as the way stations."

Maisie thought about it and sketched a diagram on her notebook. "Yes, I can see that makes sense."

"Captain Juili grew up on one," said Olef, "that's why she is taller as the diameter and rotation speed are limited by structural issues and something else, some sort of forces, so lower apparent gravity even than your homeworld."

"Coriolis forces," said Maisie.

"I don't know that word," said Olef, "though I have the earpiece and microphone for computer translation. It's slow because it has to work on a phrase. I see the translation in Karndic text. Or I would if I was wearing it. The screens are like contact lenses, so tiring."

"How come I don't have one?" asked Maisie. "Can you show me?"

"It would be poorer for Karndic to English and inhibit your learning," explained Olef. "There may not even be English text. It gives English as Karndic text using phonetic transliterations. So it would not work for you anyway."

He took a small box from his bag and showed Maisie the lenses and baked bean sized earpieces. "The lenses and earpieces are also cameras and microphones." He pointed at the food. "We should eat. Though our culture is thousands of years more advanced than yours, because of your science and technical education you may understand things that ordinary people in our culture don't even think about, nor understand."

Maisie was surprised at first that it was nearly like sandwiches. Sort of flat rectangular bread like rolls, a

4: Olef Teaching

little like ciabatta, sliced and filled with filling like salad vegetables, fruit and nuts.

“Yes, it’s a seed, ground fine and baked,” agreed Olef. “Something makes bubbles in it otherwise it would be hard and heavy. It’s a bit mad after a full morning of it wanting to learn more Karndic today.”

“No, I’m able,” insisted Maisie. She thought that otherwise it would be very tedious meeting people or being alone in the starship apartment.

Later Olef agreed to explain the written language. He showed Maisie the order of the strokes, important for input on touch screens, with the names and pronunciation.

“I’m beyond amazed now and puzzled about you, Maisie,” he said. “I know we asked before, but did you misunderstand what we asked? Do all Tellurians learn language as fast as this?”

“No, as I explained, it’s unusual. At school I pretended I already knew French but had forgotten it a little. Latin was harder, I don’t know why, perhaps the teacher was less expert. As I said, I discovered that I need a real face to face teacher. I’m not especially fast learning a language on my own.”

Later Olef insisted on getting supper. It couldn’t be prepared in Maisie’s kitchen because the electricity was off, so he took her to his own apartment. Olef unlatched and dragged his table to the couch as he only otherwise had stools.

“Thanks, even that amount of walking was tiring,” said Maisie. “I’m not even going to think about the energy the Intergal One must be using to maintain this sort of acceleration. For over three months?”

“It can be four months or more,” said Olef. “Older ships have less thrust and may take nearly six months to

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reach Jump distance from the gravity well of the star or gas giants, at lower acceleration. It uses a lot of hydrogen for fusion and then helium and oxygen for the reaction mass. More than that I don't understand."

Maisie was relieved that it was a hot meal.

"Maisie, you are stretching our society's privacy taboos," said Olef.

"How?"

"The first thing we must do at College is to teach you not to do what ever it is you are doing," said Olef. "I find it hard to completely turn off my Mentalist Talent. The more my telepathic sense is on, the brighter your thoughts are. Probably Chainai can show you, but she won't till we are in college."

"Isn't that how telepathy works?"

"No, not at all. I have to actively try and read thoughts. Or send them." Olef tried gently. *Can you sense what I'm sending?*

Absolutely, Maisie thought, but it's not really English or Karndic?

I'm surprised that you can notice this nuance, he sent. Yes, I can just about telepathically communicate even when I don't know the language of the other person. But that was needed on only one occasion. Karndic is very universal. "However," continued Olef speaking in English, "we should talk out loud. I get a sort of tension I have never experienced before doing Telepathy with you, maybe a weak version of Chainai's headache. That reminds me again, I need her authorisation to explain anything about Talent."

"How often do people eat a hot meal?" asked Maisie.

"It's common that only supper, the meal at the start of the evening, is the only cooked meal."

They concentrated on eating.

4: Olef Teaching

“Molruk or Jhai?” said Olef in Karndic.

“Jhai is sort of lighter,” she mused. “It’s like a herb tea, I don’t understand why in English you don’t just call it tea or herb tea.”

Shortly Olef returned with two glass mugs, or glasses with handles.

“Glass seems a popular material,” she remarked, “as the plates and cutlery seem to be coloured glasses.”

“I never thought of it,” said Olef. “It’s easily converted to material for road surfaces. Jars and bottles are reused. Glass isn’t much recycled otherwise, except on starships, I don’t believe we will run out of sand. Everything is recycled or if possible reused on a starship. All the food packaging is refilled, not recycled.”

“So, Olef,” said Maisie, “you know why I’m on the starship, going to the Circle College, but I don’t exactly know why you are here. Also why hasn’t Chainai met me again yet?”

“Actually all I know,” explained Olef, “is that you are a searched Talent, the only one from Tellus, Earth. That’s what we call anyone just found by people trained to search for Talent. Later you can access the official reports on your search, that’s normal, though otherwise only the people that filed them, the supervisor, the Arch Chancellor and the person searched can have access. All the homeworlds that have talents have a law that all newly searched talent must go to the Circle College until they are a journeyman. But your homeworld, Tellus, was unknown. It’s unheard of today to have only one person with Talent from a homeworld, though some worlds might only have eight to ten talents a generation. You are unusual because you have to come voluntarily. It’s because of the privacy laws that I know nothing really about you except your desire to be called Maisie, your

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real name is Mei Zhen Kelly, you worked as a computer programmer and you are what is called technically Irish. Jack Casey never explained that, though you did, not that it made sense. Well, I know you have strong primary and secondary talents, but they will explain more at the Circle College, you mustn't experiment or try to learn here. That would really upset people. Actually I only know the English for the first Circle, Mentalism, which you don't have. Virona has that and is also a healer as she is Milrangh, the third circle. You are Wighlardh, the sixth circle and secondarily Milrangh, but that doesn't always mean a healer. Probably at College you will meet Chainai regularly. Likely she will wait till you are proficient at Karndic before meeting you often as she will not be learning English. While she may use a Telepath to know what you are saying, she will want to speak to you directly."

"Can you tell me more about you?" she insisted. "I'll wait till College to tell you more about me, as by then I should know Karndic better and meet other people?"

"What I can remember of it," said Olef. "What job did you do, Jack Casey said a programmer, but that's a little vague?"

"I was a software development lead programmer, you know what that is?"

"Yes, Maisie," said Olef. "I think so."

"My first job, and nearly three years in it. Mostly software for inside things, not user applications. Stop me if I confuse you. I was renting an apartment in Dublin when I was on work experience and rented out my house in Belfast about four years ago—"

Olef interrupted, "You have family, friends in Belfast?"

4: Olef Teaching

“My parents died in a road accident while I was at third level college, Ulster University,” said Maisie, “so that’s why I rented out my house. I’m very self contained, I’ve never really had friends. I had a flatmate from work in Dublin. We got on, we never fell out, but she said she just couldn’t relax near me. It was the same in work. So they gave me an office of my own. No-one understood why they couldn’t concentrate sitting near me. It’s not an immediate thing and doesn’t affect everyone. One joker claimed it was because I’m too beautiful, but I know he was kidding. I’m too podgy. What do you think?”

“That’s a very personal question,” said Olef. “You really want honesty?”

“Yes, why not?” insisted Maisie.

“You’re not at all the conventional Penthnegin idea of a woman. I can see from comparison of Tellurian broadcasts and the data we downloaded that you don’t look at all Irish. Unusual in fact. I’d guess you read books and program and do nothing else, you do look a little plump compared to TV girls. Matron in College will soon sort that.”

“I do other things like calligraphy and I used to do some stylised Chinese exercises before I went to college. I think that’s enough about me. You know anyway how Chainai found me.”

“What’s calligraphy?”

“I guess fancy handwriting,” she explained. “I’m not supposed to leave my apartment, I better go back. Come and I’ll show you.”

“I’ll get another couple of emergency lamps.”

They put the lamps on the table in Maisie’s starship apartment.

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Maisie opened a folder on the table. "This is calligraphy."

Olef turned the plastic sleeves. There was Chinese done with brush on rice paper. Illuminated parchment with Carolingian script. German black letter Gothic. Spidery copper plate. Even some Hebrew and Arabic. Greek and Cyrillic.

"I can't really translate Russian, Arabic and Hebrew. Not much anyway. I can read and write modern and Classical Greek. The illuminated one is in Latin."

"I've heard of this," said Olef. "Well, nothing like this really. Fancy handwriting is somewhat an understatement. This is serious art. I had no idea."

He continued leafing through the sleeves until the end of the folder.

"I have more older ones in storage in my house," said Maisie. "Chainai said I could return when I finished the course, but I think she is naive. I can't ever go back while there is only one of me. I'll miss them."

Olef took Maisie's hand, his was much cooler than hers.

After a while Maisie got up and lay down on the couch, her back was getting sore.

"Make yourself comfortable on the floor near me, Olef."

Olef cleared a space among the clothes to put a cushion on the floor. Maisie could see he was studying her clothes, her bright red 6" heel platform shoes, purple satin skirt, pink silk blouse and bright turquoise short leather jacket. "Perhaps tomorrow I can help you pick some clothes more suitable for a starship. You'll break a leg in this higher gravity with those shoes. Well it feels like gravity with our acceleration, almost a third more than you are used to."

4: Olef Teaching

“I noticed that,” said Maisie. “Virona explained. It’s not too bad sitting but lying down is best. I’m not planning on running or walking any great distance. At least there have been no stairs or steps to navigate.”

“Best you stay lying down then while I tell you how I ended up here,” said Olef. “Like some juice to sip while I talk?”

“Something not too sweet or bitter.”

The doorbell chime sounded before Olef do anything.

“Come in,” Maisie shouted in Karndic. She was surprised as it was Juili and Virona. They had brought Molruk and buns.

“I thought you were coming back tomorrow?” Maisie continued in English.

“We thought you might like more Molruk,” said Juili. “We’ve finished our shift, there isn’t really anything to do on the bridge till we Jump anyway.”

Virona looked cross. She hauled Olef off the floor into the kitchen, though they didn’t close the door tight. The voices got slightly louder. They were arguing in Karndic. Juili got up and closed the door as the argument got louder. Maisie had no idea what the problem was till somewhat later.

~

“What are you thinking of?” insisted Virona, loudly in Karndic.

“She’s an adult,” replied Olef. “She’s not yet enrolled. Besides the rules about apprentices can’t possibly apply to a twenty-three year old adult that has had Talent for seven years. Why on earth is her electricity off? I had her for hours at my apartment. She’s not going to accidentally or deliberately use her strange variation of

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the Talent. I was about to tell her why I ended up on board.”

“I agree,” said Virona, “but the Ship’s Council is nervous.”

Virona moved closer. “Exactly what are your intentions then if the Apprentice rules don’t apply to Maisie? Do you even remember what the rules are?”

“I don’t have any intentions,” Olef vehemently insisted. “I’m just getting to know her. I do at least remember those rules, no dating between Apprentices and Journeymen or Masters. No being alone together.” Olef softened his voice to normal volume. “She’s unusual, even without Talent, she’s odd even for a Tellurian. Ask to see her handwriting. I don’t even know our word for it. It’s art. Call Chainai too.”

“Calligraphy,” said Virona, in Karndic.

“Yes, but Maisie’s makes what I’ve seen look like a child’s first picture. We need to convince the Council that she is no danger. Also why did you drug her, completely knocked out for days. That’s abuse.”

“It was a mistake,” said Virona. “I, I shouldn’t have sedated her at all.”

“Apologise to her properly,” insisted Olef.

They went back in.

~

“Maisie, I want to apologise, I made a mistake,” said Virona. “I shouldn’t have used that sedative. I didn’t know enough about your biology or Talent.”

“Well, at least I’m fine now and missed a boring flight,” said Maisie. Maisie was a little baffled though as to why Virona had done it if that was the case. Maisie was beginning to wonder exactly how competent these aliens were, everything seemed a bit ad hoc.

4: Olef Teaching

“Can you show Juili and Virona your calligraphy?” said Olef.

“I don’t like to bore people with it,” said Maisie.

“We don’t see such outside a museum,” explained Juili.

Maisie got up and opened the folder. “The light’s a bit poor,” she apologised.

“Being the senior captain must mean something,” muttered Juili. She spoke on her Crystal. It sounded like an argument, though unlike Virona and Olef, she never raised her voice.

The lights came on and almost simultaneously Chainai arrived.

“Finally common sense,” exclaimed Olef.

“You two better come with me to the Council later,” said Juili in Karndic. “She is safe though?”

“Absolutely,” said Olef. “I’ll tell you about being here tomorrow, Maisie. Show them your art.”

“You didn’t see her trick with the kettle,” said Virona in Karndic.

“I’m safe,” said Maisie in Karndic. “Probably.”

“You are following Karndic already after one day?” Juili exclaimed in English.

“Not really,” Maisie admitted in English, “but I can fill in the blanks.”

“Tomorrow you’ll get your Crystal and Slab,” said Juili. “It will have access to the Karndic-English dictionary. Once you know more Karndic you can get access to edit it.”

They looked at her calligraphy.

“You are an artist!” exclaimed Virona.

“No, it’s just a hobby, it’s mostly copy work to relax, I’m technically poor compared to the top people. I’m no

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artist at all. I only make up the words, not the appearance, some of it is entirely a copy.”

“Now you have electricity you can work the viewscreen, at least when you get a Crystal,” said Juili. “Virona is actually our science officer and number three, so can sort power for your laptop. Goodnight.”

The girls left but Olef and Chainai hung back.

“We should still be getting CNN until we Jump though it will be getting increasingly time distorted and delayed,” said Olef. He took out his Crystal and selected CNN on the large wall mounted viewscreen. “You can change the volume or mute it with the edge of the panel.”

“So leave it on then,” said Maisie. “Only monochrome?”

“Your electronic colour is a trick,” explained Olef. “It only works for your Tellurian trichromatic eyes. Other species are tetrachromatic. Species vary too in the parts of the spectrum they see, your screens might not be sensible for other trichromatic species. Books have colour as they can use a lot of different inks, sometimes over a hundred. Most of us have better colour vision than you. I'll tell you my story tomorrow.”

Chainai spoke at length in Karndic. Maisie understood very little.

“Chainai says the priority is for you to learn Karndic,” said Olef in English, “then you can learn everything else. Also refer anyone interfering to her and don't interfere with the starship people. Pedar, Chainai, Luci and myself are passengers like you heading for the college on Caemoria. Chainai is in charge of all of us Circle College people. The starship people, such as Captain Juili, Virona, the council here and other officers can't interfere. You mustn't ask Virona or Juili for anything or

about anything, it's up to them if they want to spend any of their spare time with you. Chainai is in charge of your education till you are at college."

"Can you come and show me how to organise Molruk and breakfast now that I have power?" asked Maisie. She wondered who Lucy, or perhaps Luci or Luce as the pronunciation was a little odd, was and exactly what role they all had.

Chainai spoke again at length.

"Chainai says she trusts me to be alone with you," said Olef. "She says you must not study or experiment with talent till College. She will find then the solution why you upset Empaths and Telepaths, the Mentalist Circle. I think upset is the wrong word."

Chainai spoke again and smiled at Maisie.

"I understand," said Maisie. "I'm probably making your head sore."

Chainai spoke to Olef, then she gave a nod of her head to Maisie and left.

"I'll get your fridge stocked then," said Olef. "You've no Crystal for an alarm."

"I have an alarm. I can just set an arbitrary alarm if you convert the period from now until when I need to get up in Earth hours?"

"Hmm, let me see," said Olef. He took out his Crystal. "It's very late. Only six of your Tellurian hours left until you need to get up."

Maisie set her alarm. "Thanks."

After Olef left Maisie put the catch on the main door and put on the Caemorian night gown, the full length chemise. It was comfortable material. Then she got a bathrobe and sat to watch CNN. Eventually the aliens got a mention on the news with telescope shots of the accelerating starship. No more mention of the Earth

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away team or Maisie. Probably the Earth team would be two more months coasting back to Earth. On reflection Maisie decided that the governments wouldn't release news about her at all. She wondered how unsafe she might be with some random alien if Virona was making such a fuss about Olef being alone with her, at least Maisie thought that's what it had been about. Did different species? Maisie concentrated on something else.

* * *

In the virtual morning Maisie was watching CNN again when the doorbell chimed. This time it was a delivery on a trolley.

"I don't speak Karndic," Maisie said in Karndic.

The Karndic man smiled at her and wheeled the stuff into the kitchen and unloaded. He smiled again and left. By a process of opening all the doors, Maisie had discovered the dishwasher, oven and the fridge the previous day. No freezer or washing machine. She wasn't sure if the oven was thermal or had a microwave mode. Obviously she was going to need laundry facilities.

The kitchen even had some plants growing, but not as large as in the lounge. Maisie held her hand nearer one of the lamps in the kitchen and looked at a further off one. She opened the door and turned off the kitchen light and examined the fitting. It wasn't her imagination, there was heat and light from some sort of filament bulb surrounded by a circular tube around the edge of the fitting. Maisie turned the lights back on. There was the merest delay on the tube and it was bluer. She wondered how much UV it produced. Very wide spectrum lighting, that fitted up with what they had said about the screens.

4: Olef Teaching

There was a machine that took water and had a jug. But as to how it was loaded with Molruk or Jhai and operated, wasn't clear. Maisie put anything cold in the fridge and anything else in the cupboards. She wasn't entirely sure about the bread, buns, cake and biscuits. At least those would be the best English names for what ever they really were. Why so much food if she was fat already? Most of it didn't look like long life food. Well perhaps a bit on the puppy fat plumpness. If a twenty-three year old could have puppy fat.

The doorbell chimed.

This time it was Olef again.

"I'm not sure where everything goes," said Maisie.
"Thanks."

Olef showed her how to make Molruk and the muesli like rising meal.

"Toast?"

"I don't understand," Olef confessed.

Maisie explained.

"Seems a nasty thing to do to fresh bread," said Olef.
"I suppose if you had too much and some got stale I think it might be possible. But you have no butter, cheese or margarine, those are what you use?"

"Oil?" she suggested. "Oh well. Tell me the Karndic names of all these things."

"Yes, we use plant oils mixed with herbs to make a paste for bread," explained Olef. "After we eat, the Molruk wants to be drunk. Your grains are soaked in juice? A strange idea, though I can imagine eating it."

"Apparently not as strange as milk for adults," said Maisie, "which I used to take until a few days ago, though really only in cereals. My mum never touched it."

Olef shook his head and they went and ate.

"So tell me about our arrival before Chainai met you?"

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Maisie recounted what happened from the first newscast she noticed about aliens.

* * *

"Now your story," Maisie insisted. "Tell it all to me in Karndic and also telepathically."

"Really?" exclaimed Olef. "You've only been learning for two days!"

"Maybe it's a sort of trick I have," said Maisie, "though not the same as the one for learning lists. I'll follow your telepathy, I think it will speed my learning. Like subtitles on video, you have those?"

"Subtitles?"

"Text you can read if the language is one you don't know, or there is no sound, or you are deaf?"

"Yes, we have. I suppose that might help. I've never tried that. Though I only ever taught a language once before, to Dairig, my assistant though she already knew a little."

"Who is that?"

"A Karnd woman at Circle College. You'll meet her."

"Well, the story?" she urged. "If you can do that, I really think it will speed up my learning."

"I woke up in the woods," recounted Olef in Karndic. "Oh, I sense you as a kind of buzz, almost an echo, I've never felt before. I think I can do this. I do it for Chainai when I'm talking to Luci."

He sent to Maisie telepathically as he spoke in Karndic. "I remembered nothing at first."

Maisie found it a strange sensation to listen with her ears and mind at the same time.

5: Olef's Story

I felt uncomfortable. Dimly I was aware of the smell of cooking. I opened my eyes. The draft on my cheek was a light morning breeze. The apparent swish of curtains was the translucent green leafy branches overhead. Suddenly I was fully awake. I was starving and had no idea how I had ended up in the woods.

Wondering, I brushed the twigs and bits of moss off my jacket as I sat up. As soon as I was standing I realised that the smells of cooking had not been a dream and I was very hungry. Almost an ache. When had I last eaten? I shrugged and headed in the direction of the cooking. Soon I could hear chatter and the clatter of pots.

As I walked out of the woods into the camp-site I realised something was very wrong. The people just didn't seem right.

"Hello there!" I called. "I seem to be lost in the woods. Any chance of a bite to eat and directions back to town?"

The man carrying an urn set it down. The young women at the cooking fire stopped turning the meat. The children stopped kicking ball with the dog. They all stared at me.

There were about six or seven adults, some children and a dog like animal. The tents were rough, perhaps made from woven wool or some kind of coarse fibre. The clothes were simple tabard style tops and tied on leggings. With the fine weather bare arms were not too much of an inconvenience. Perhaps they didn't feel the cold as much with the rough bark like skin. They were more heavily built than I, but not quite as tall.

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An older man called out to me and walked over. I didn't understand a word of it.

* * *

A few weeks later a rumbling noise and an approaching cloud of dust announced the approach of a vehicle. A uniformed man stepped out.

"This is not a good place for you," he explained with a thick accent. "You do not remember how you came to be with the campers on the reservation? Or your real name?"

"No, I remember nothing from before the day I walked into the camp," I insisted. I realised for the first time I was hearing Karndic. At least I remembered that.

"You better come with me to HQ," the officer ordered. "This a reservation, a special camp, for people wanting to live close to nature. They deliberately don't learn any off world languages. So they didn't attempt to contact us either. We have been looking for you a while, but eventually a trading store owner contacted us as he had heard a stranger had wandered into this camp."

As we drove off my mind was reeling with the implications of the policeman's statements. The people round about here were some kind of Greens.

We arrived at a Security HQ. I gasped, because an unusual design of Flitter was parked under a large canopy.

"You remember something?" the Officer asked sharply.

"I have seen something like it," I said softly. "Where am I? That's a Flitter."

A ramp lowered and we went to the Flitter's flight cabin, but didn't take off.

5: Olef's Story

"I'm Hulan and I just need to use the communications systems to tell the Office of Interplanetary Affairs about you," he explained as they sat down. "You are obviously an alien. We don't have permission to fly this. A relic of the Mirror War."

Hulan powered up the communications panel and spoke briefly in his own language. We left the Flitter and in a locked shed was a sleek car. Soon the town was left far behind. Hulan didn't speak. I wondered why Hulan had used the aircraft and not the radio in the car.

"Can I ask, why you didn't use this?" I pointed at the communications console.

"Too many ears," Hulan replied, "it's not secure any more."

I woke with a start to see the sun peeping over the horizon. The road was now a multi-lane express-way, though there were few other vehicles. I didn't recognise any of them. The city was enormous. It was nearly lunch time and I was very hungry as we drew into an underground car park.

We were met by guards and whisked away to an office several levels beneath the car park.

Hulan and one of the people in the office spoke in a language I didn't know. Then Hulan got up and said goodbye.

The official sat down again.

"Well Olef Cordwainer." The official said, pausing to note the effect.

"Why do you call me Olef Cordwainer?" I said.

"So you persist in the ruse that you have no memory?" He paused. "An Adept Telepath has been in contact with the Circle College Council on Caemoria. They have been looking for you and tracked you to this planet some months ago and fortunately a starship will be passing

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shortly. Also some sort of large orb is missing, the Orb of Ghillion. We searched at the village and the woods. However they are apparently more concerned about you than the missing orb. It seems they didn't expect we would find it."

"It's not a ruse. I have no idea of my name, origin or occupation."

"All right," he said, "I'm Bev Smolsta. This is Interplanetary Affairs. For now we'll play it your way."

"You seem to know more than me," I complained. "I really don't remember."

"OK, I said I'll go along with this for now," Bev agreed. "You are an Alien, a Penthnegin, last living on Caemoria. It seems from tracking records for the time period a Klah Trader's starship is how you must have got here. Details of how or why you went missing are sketchy. The name of the missing Talent is Cordwainer. So you are Cordwainer. I don't know what your profession is supposed to be, I wasn't told, except that you have Talent."

"Can you get me a doctor, or get me home?" I asked.

"I've sent a message to the Caemorian starship that has been laying sync-sats," explained Bev, "so you will be leaving. We have organised a doctor."

Under heavy guard I was transferred to a medical facility and examined by a doctor. After several days testing I was still confined to bed with guards inside and outside the room.

Bev Smolsta came into the room.

"I want to apologise for doubting you," he said. "It seems your memory has been tampered with."

"The doctors told me nothing," I complained.

"Well, from tomorrow you can get up," said Bev. "You may take some time to recover. Only your own doctors

5: Olef's Story

would know if you will recover. You will leave tomorrow, it will take about ten days of acceleration to meet the Caemorian Flitter from the starship.

* * *

"So I got to the Intergal One via Grand Central," Olef explained. "I was starting to remember a little. The healing mage at Grand Central helped a bit. He thought that Chainai, who is perhaps the most powerful Empath, would help me. I did remember Chainai and some things of the past. Nothing very recent. I have forgotten most of my training. Chainai soon arrived at Grand Central with Pedar and Luci. She did help a bit. Chainai thinks attending some classes will help too."

"Surely you didn't steal the orb?"

"I did," insisted Olef, "though I don't remember. Obviously a powerful Telepath tampered with my mind and ensured I'd not remember who made me do it or who I gave it to. That's why I'm not arrested for the theft."

"But why you?"

"To defeat the Museum security system and biometrics. In Karndic my main talent is Silwornic, the fifth Circle of Identity, I can become any other creature of the same mass, and replicate the DNA."

"It sounds impossible," insisted Maisie. "A shape changer?"

"There are different kinds," said Olef. "It requires a suitable DNA sample and great knowledge of the subject. The real person with access was a Penthnegin."

"What is the orb?"

"That I don't remember, or don't know."

"Time to learn Karndic in the kitchen again then!" exclaimed Maisie.

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Olef groaned. “You aren’t serious? When you decide to do something there are no half measures.”

“That’s right,” agreed Maisie. “I’m convinced I did learn a lot from your story with the telepathic subtitles.”

Olef laughed.

After a while their language lesson was interrupted by the doorbell chime.

“Hi, Maisie,” said Virona. “Finally we have adapted your Crystal and Slab.”

They sat at the table and Virona got out a Crystal and a Slab. The Crystal looked like single rectangular piece of dark amber coloured quartz that could be held like a phone. The Slab wasn’t any thicker but about the size of a magazine. Both devices had black screens with white text. Any images were monochrome.

Virona showed Maisie how to use the Crystal and Slab. Particularly the hurriedly hacked English interface with its clumsy simulated QWERTY touch keyboard. The default Karndic interface simply interpreted gestures as glyphs without any keypad overlay. This was why Olef had insisted on a stroke order for handwriting. As Maisie was able to do Chinese, the significance of strokes was easy to grasp, though Karndic used an alphabet that could be transliterated to English and vice versa, in that respect it was more like one of the Indian scripts, or maybe Korean, though Maisie wasn’t sure. As part of her research on designing a computer programming language, for her Final Year Project at university, she was familiar with Noam Chomsky’s theory and work about universal grammar. A universal deep grammar and deep body language seemed to be far more universal than could ever have been imagined. Maisie realised – that with the help of their computers – the task for the Aliens to learn English reasonably

5: Olef's Story

fluently starting only with broadcasts in four months didn't now seem so unlikely.

"Don't forget," explained Virona, "that the Crystal isn't just a kind of phone and organiser, it's your Credits wallet and ID card, I suppose passport too. Are the details correct?"

"I'm not sure as they are in Karndic," said Maisie. "I'm not so far on in reading as speaking and listening."

"Can I look, Maisie?" said Olef.

"Let me select the English translation feature, though it's not very good," suggested Maisie. The black screen with white text changed to English. "It seems fine. Thank who ever put me in as Maisie rather than Mei Zhen."

"I did," said Virona, "but Chainai also insisted. Actually the other thing is that on the voyage to Caemoria you will only talk and study with Olef as he is a secondary Telepath. Juili and I will visit sometimes on our time off. The telepathy helps with him understanding your English and teaching you Karndic. But you give the primary Mentalists such as Chainai and Pedar a worse headache. Chainai is worst affected. It seems the more powerful a mentalist, the worse you affect them, which is really back to front. Pedar says it's more severe the stronger he makes a mental shield and least bad with no shield. That's back to front too."

Maisie switched it back to Karndic and selected the main Omnia-Indica index. "The information portal is using a wireless connection?"

"Yes," agreed Virona, "this is how you cache articles locally, in case you travel where there is no connection, or for other reasons. It can store approximately 80,000 Terabytes. An entire navigational database for the Galaxy would only take a fraction of it."

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"I could cache the navigational database locally?"

"You could," said Virona, "though it might take a while, perhaps up to thirty days depending on connection quality and other traffic. Such a large download would be at lowest scheduling priority. Voice and video has high priority. Highest, that's lowest latency, is very low volume interactive connections. Very often anything you access will be cached anyway. You can mark material as important reference and then it's always cached and if there is a change, the change is silently downloaded. You can navigate all historic versions of any document. Unless you have your own starship, which has a copy of Omnia-Indica anyway, you'd not want the navigation database. It's limited to authorised people."

Virona demonstrated that as well as navigating by section, scrolling, paging, hierarchy, that all documents and articles, all information had temporal navigation too.

Maisie's Crystal gave a soft chime. It was a message.

"I can't read it yet," said Maisie. Then she accessed the translation feature. "I'm de-restricted by the Ship's Council, Olef," she exclaimed. "Captain Juili managed then without Chainai and Virona. I'd like a tour. Thanks Virona."

Virona left.

"You need more sensible clothes," insisted Olef. "Have you anything flat for your feet?"

"Just an old pair of tackies, they are not very pretty." Maisie put on a pair of runners. "Now I'm short."

"You're still nearly a head taller than most Karnds!" said Olef. "You'll find at college you'll be glad to be a less than an average height Tellurian. Though I'm much

5: Olef's Story

taller than you, I'm quite short for a Penthnegin. I'm wearing flat ankle boots."

Maisie was totally exhausted by mid break time due to the extra apparent gravity caused by the nearly $1.3\ g$ acceleration.

The next day Maisie got her new clothes. Wearing a long sky blue tunic top, pants a bit like leggings and soft flat ankle boots she blended in more. The ankle boots were really comfortable, being made to measure. It was only on closer view that people didn't recognise her species at all. As she was a striking young teenage appearance Eurasian with very short page boy cut black Chinese hair and slightly sallow skin with below average height and in generic starship work clothes, she wasn't immediately recognisable as the same as Tellurians that were on the ship wide monochrome video feeds of Earth's TV stations, who were mostly European and American.

They sat in a café near the park. Maisie put her new Caemorian style shoulder bag on the table and took out her Slab.

"We don't put the bag on public tables," Olef reminded her.

* * *

Everyone continued to be amazed at Maisie's language progress. She spent some time with Juili and Virona learning Karndic Engineering, Science and Computer jargon and techniques, then figuring her own translations. She doubled the size of the Karndic-English Dictionary. Maisie was now very much more fluent in Karndic than Olef and Juili were in English after three months. The Intergal One Jumped about 50,000 light years. There was a slight shudder. Maisie

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was watching the largest viewscreen on the bridge. It was amazing. The star field just changed instantly. They were above the plane of the galaxy, it was amazing seeing the spiral arms so clearly.

"The shudder isn't anything to do with the Jump," said Juili, "it's the power distribution system. In a few days after course correction and maintenance on the Jump drive we will Jump another 50,000 light years to the way station."

Normally a ship made a single Jump, but two Jumps of over 50,000 LY each were needed to get from Earth to Grand Central, though the direct distance was 80,000 LY. Apparently two 50,000 LY Jumps while the limit for the ship, was better than two 40,000 LY Jumps, because it took them away from the galactic core. It certainly made for a fascinating viewpoint. Virona helped Maisie take a photo at a viewport. It was then closed because of cosmic radiation.

Maisie was puzzled that she hadn't seen Pedar or met Luci and Chainai seemed to be avoiding her.

"Is Chainai avoiding me, Olef?" Maisie asked in Karndic. Normally no-one used English now. "Who is Luci? Is Pedar avoiding me?"

"No," explained Olef in Karndic. "Chainai wants to discuss you with the Arch Chancellor first. Luci has no Talent. Luci might seem a little like a mother to Chainai, but is actually her Assistant. You give Chainai a worse headache than Pedar gets from you."

Maisie realised that in Karndic some people were Assistants, a kind of title, rather than assistants. This sort of vocal capitalisation simply didn't exist in most languages she knew. Also molruk, jaggery and jhai were plants and Molruk, Jhai the drinks, and Jaggery a kind

5: Olef's Story

of refined sugary syrup. There was less need to know context in spoken Karndic than in spoken English.

Maisie had coined the Latin Omnia-Indica for the English translation of the Karndic for the index to everything system. She couldn't decide if it was a search engine or a database, but Virona just said it only seemed a bit like the Tellurian Internet, that the Crystal Net worked differently. Maisie was puzzled as to why it had almost nothing on the Circle College and nothing on Talents. Then Olef explained to her that it was normal for areas to be restricted. The problem also was that Maisie didn't know what it was she didn't know!

"Almost no-one can access any information about Tellus," explained Olef, "your Earth, you can of course. There will be no distribution of images or video to the public of Tellurians, your people or you, to preserve your privacy as you are the only Tellurian in the Galactic Culture. Chainai insists you learn nothing more about Talent or the College till you get there."

Juili told Maisie stories about her life growing up on the space station and the adventure she had just before going to study on Caemoria. Maisie wasn't entirely sure she really believed the adventure, related just before they Jumped to Grand Central.

[see 'Starship Chief']

Juili explained how they could keep in touch via the Crystal Net. It was strange, because Maisie realised Juili was now more of friend than she'd ever had before, yet she might not see her again. Maisie resolved to figure out email to Jack Casey when she got to Circle College. Maybe also email Sharon. Maisie could email her at the company address if she still worked there.

No-one, especially those with Talent, would talk about the Circle College or Talent. Virona explained that the

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Arch Chancellor had decided it was best for Maisie to find out about the College and Talents first hand, it wasn't just Chainai's whim. So she concentrated on the Karndic language as well as Caemorian science, technology and culture. Everyone was quite happy to only talk to her in Karndic. Only Olef and the people involved with Tellurian contact had learned English anyway. Perhaps there were many things Maisie should have researched and didn't. She never thought it odd that there was no plan for her or anyone in charge or taking care of her till later, other than the vague at a distance supervision of Chainai. The friendship from Juili, Virona and Olef was such a novelty that she hardly realised it at the time. Maisie was amazed at the effort Virona and Juili had put in to befriend her.

* * *

Maisie didn't recognise anything at all after the second Jump. Different external cameras could be selected on her own viewscreen.

"I can't see the space station, Juili?"

"We have to match vector, it's only a speck lit from its own lighting, no nearby stars," explained Juili. "A couple more days and we will be close enough and well enough matched in vector for Flitter transport to the way station docks."

There was no time for sightseeing at Grand Central as the scheduled starship to take them to Caemoria had been especially delayed. Maisie wondered again at the costs of her journey to Circle College. The Intergal One left for its interrupted long journey to Andromeda. Pedar hadn't joined them, he was apparently going elsewhere. Maisie had by now realised that there was some sort of tension between Pedar and Chainai.

5: Olef's Story

"Isn't Pedar coming with us?" said Maisie.

"He is off on some sort of assignment," Olef explained.

The starship was Spacer owned by a Sept and the Flitters all belonged to one Clan. It was a regular commercial run. Maisie was surprised that the apartments that they had were almost identical to those on the Intergal One, even though it was an old freighter. Each had two slightly larger bedrooms with double width Penthnegin sized beds. Chainai and Luci shared an apartment. Olef and Maisie had one each. This ship was running at lower deceleration, about 1.15 g, which was pleasant after the fierce Intergal One. It had Jumped from near the Grand Central way point station to the edge of the Caemorian system.

* * *

As her Karndic was now fluent Maisie met with Chainai and sometimes had a meal prepared by Luci. Olef was always present to telepathically relay what Maisie said. The meetings were very short and Chainai said little, she'd ask one or two questions. Luci ate with them and sat beside Chainai holding her wrist at all the meetings. Then the meetings stopped.

"Why doesn't Chainai want to see me more if she is in charge?" asked Maisie.

"I think the meetings were to explore an idea," said Olef. "She says you will have plenty of her company at College."

* * *

Maisie forgot about her twenty-fourth birthday, just one month before she disembarked on the Flitter with Olef, Chainai and Luci for Laramos on Caemoria. Actually just five Caemorian days short of seventeen Caemorian

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length years old.

Maisie was packing with Olef's help and getting ready to disembark on the Flitter.

"I think you have probably broken the record for baggage for a new student at college," said Olef.

"I left the furniture, kitchen gear, bookcases, TV, some computer gear and the HiFi," said Maisie. "I liked that stuff and it's gone. I had no time to put it in storage or anything, it will all be sold if Sharon moves out before I get back to Tellus. I have a lot of stuff in storage in my own house in Belfast. It's rented out. Maybe I'll figure how to get it here."

"You're quite mad."

"Virona and Chainai said I could bring whatever would fit in the taxi, but in the end I brought half a van load."

"You seem to have collected a lot of things on the Intergal One too."

"Only a few clothes and flat boots," said Maisie.

"Glass and ceramic ornaments, new calligraphy," insisted Olef.

"Is it really a problem?"

"Likely not because of your special circumstances and being an adult. Most people starting Circle College are barely teenagers, so most wouldn't have very much anyway!"

Act II: The College

6: Arrival At College

Partially based on Maisie's emails and journal

Maisie was looking forward to College, though she thought she'd be late for the term, however that didn't seem to matter. Strangely there was no start or end of the academic year either. People start when Talent is found and can change class each term according to competence reached and subjects needed, it's always Talent with capital T, and means something special. Just like the special servants are called Assistants and not assistants. It seemed to combine ordinary Caemorian education at secondary school level with Talent related training. As it was night and Maisie was sedated, in reality oblivious, she saw nothing of her only other Flitter flight to the starship. This time Maisie sat up front so able to see out the windows rather than the monochrome viewscreen. The Clan that ran the Flitter thought her interest in seeing out the windows amusing. It seemed it wasn't normally allowed either. There really wasn't much to see, apart from stars, as the Flitter approached Caemoria stern first till it was in the atmosphere.

The spaceport was more like an airport. Actually it is an airport. Karndic doesn't even have separate words. So just like on Earth, Olef and Maisie had to go through Baggage claim, Customs and Immigration. Her Irish passport was irrelevant. Maisie's Crystal let her through. Olef organised the shipping of her baggage and so they just took the more important cases and bags. He had very little. Just the two extra changes of clothes, Slab and Crystal he had got on the starship. Maisie's arrival

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date was 3444.10.15 by the Caemorian calendar. Their years, months and days are all longer than ours. A year is about 516 Tellurian days, definitely 457 Caemorian days, but their days are just over 27 hours, though their hours are different too. They have 32 days in a month, always, and 9 extra days are holidays not in any month making up the gap between a year's worth of days and 448 as there are 14 months. The occasional correcting day is added to a holiday. They count in eights rather than tens, so our 32 is uses the Caemorian digits for 4 and 0. Maisie supposed it was because the natives Karnds have one less finger and toe on each hand and foot.

The driver was the oldest and second tallest Karnd she'd met.

Olef, Chainai, Luci and Maisie were met by the Circle College Arch Chancellor Millifore.

"Tomai is one of my two Assistants, Maisie," explained the Arch Chancellor in Karndic after being mutually introduced by Chainai.

Maisie reflected it might be a long time before she heard or spoke English again.

Tomai was almost Juili's height, but with the narrower chin often characteristic with Karnds. Karnd men don't have facial hair, it wasn't that they shaved, but just didn't have any and certainly couldn't be mistaken as human with a close examination. Wrong number and shape of ribs and one finger less on each hand. Basically like a marsupial without a pouch on men and a pouch on women high on the chest giving an almost Tellurian female shape. Maisie realised that almost all Karnds, men too, had longer hair than her own. She wondered if it was just fashion or a deep

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cultural thing. Actually any species with hair on the head or a mane tended to have it long.

Maisie sat looking out the window of the people carrier, literally Carrier in Karndic as opposed to a carrier, which might be anything but not a vehicle of any kind. Karnds barely acknowledge species, everyone is human or people, and they don't seem to even have a word for race. They do have words for tribe, nation, and something like the idea of an ethnic group. On the starship Maisie decided that Karnds fitted four ethnic groups, thinking Chainai was some sort of mutation, though not an albino, despite being so pale with white hair. She's from a rarer fifth arctic group. Maisie thought she should have realised earlier as she actually has larger darker irises to suit brighter or darker conditions. Though she's blind her irises do visibly function. Actually Chainai and Luci almost had as much baggage as Maisie because they had been living on a listening post on an isolated world.

The Arch Chancellor is a little like a dwarfish version of a stereotypical wizard but without a beard, Karnds don't grow facial hair, Maisie wondered had she written that already? The robes really, but no wide brimmed pointy hat. He wore a floppy hat almost like a beret with a large tassel. The countryside looked familiar until anything was examined closely. Like trees, bushes, plants or grass like cover might only seem odd to a botanist. They had been climbing out of town into mountains the entire journey then via a pass into a giant plateau ringed by huge mountains. Ahead was a building that bizarrely looked like it had been pinched from Eastern Europe or some place like that on a strange hill. As they came closer Maisie saw two small turreted towers at the gateway and four to eight other towers

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depending on how you counted them. The plateau was completely covered in other separate compounds with buildings, or free standing buildings. The air was noticeably thinner as they were so high up.

Arch Chancellor Millifore interrupted Maisie's reverie, "Seven larger towers. One for each kind of Talent. That part of the Circle College is the oldest, originally built over 3000 years ago, just called College or Old College. Sorry, you were practically shouting your thoughts about the towers. Didn't Chainai, Olef and Virona try to train you to block in your thoughts?"

"No," Maisie laughed. "Virona was insecure and not confident about teaching me. I gather she only graduated recently and is really more a Healer and secondarily a Telepath. Chainai said we'd sort it out here at College. Olef says Pedar is a very good Telepath indeed, I guess that's why he was on the team to find me, Chainai couldn't be near me any prolonged period of time without a headache, though Olef is fine with me. Chainai didn't want Pedar or Virona to experiment and she didn't wish to do anything herself before speaking to you. But I'm not a Mentalist?"

"I think it's not as simple as that," Millifore commented. "You are not an Empath or Telepath as you can't sense any non-Talented person and you can't send telepathically. Yet the Empaths and Telepaths hear you as if you are sending. I doubt more than one or two people I know can unravel that mystery, one is Chainai. I will suggest to Chainai what to do."

"You need to understand that the starship you were on from your homeworld to Grand Central is the first fruits after over a millennium of arguing about the idea of visiting other galaxies. Always in principle possible since the first starship but no one world had the

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resources to build such a ship, except Caemoria, which had no inclination to do so. Caemoria has always had a more structured and cautious approach to exploration. A polite way of saying we were not interested. Nations in your own history have had that view. The College Council doesn't support it either so we were lucky the Galactic Council was prepared to waste nearly a year picking you up. That ship has no especially expert Talent on board, we can't spare them, nor are most inclined to join such a city in space experiment.

"You are unique. One of a kind from your world we think, but the number of new Talents born each generation on a world is only between a few per million and a few per billion anyway. Only seven homeworlds have as high as few per million or a little more. Some worlds we have known for over 3000 years have never had a Talent detected on them. It's very rare. Hence the willingness to have the expense, apart from the fact untrained Talent is dangerous.

"Olef has serious questions to answer if Chainai can unlock all his memories. Assuming they are still there. I suspect some are probably gone forever." The Arch Chancellor rubbed his old but bright eyes. "She has made good progress with him. Partly too that's why she wasn't working with you. But she wanted to consult with me. Am I boring you? You aren't too tired from the landing?"

He produced a flask and took a sip. Then he examined Maisie closely.

"Medicine. OK, I'll go on. Ordinarily I'd not be telling this to an Apprentice student. Students start our College between age ten and fifteen – whenever Talent is detected – so you are far too old to be an Apprentice student despite how young you look, though sometimes

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the Talent affects people like that as well as a very much longer life span for all those with Talent.”

“It’s true I look very young for my age,” said Maisie. “I had to use a passport to buy alcohol. How much longer?”

“Perhaps three to five times,” he continued, “back to the point, you know the small power sources the Flitter uses?”

Maisie nodded, shocked. She’d heard about the power globes that somehow provided fusion just with ordinary hydrogen, that should be impossible without a star. She hardly heard what more he was saying, perhaps four hundred years! When would she start to look older? She was twenty four and only just looked like a teenager, because her smallish breasts were accentuated a little by her being a bit plump generally.

“There is a small early prototype, called the Orb of Ghillion, quite exhausted. The Government has had it in a museum vault for maybe 1500 years, it’s much older, maybe more than 5000 years old. The Nulest Clerics are not the regular priests, but a religious group that believe in many gods. Don’t quote me, but I believe they believe in nonsense, they think Ghillion is one of their gods, that they call Nule. We don’t actually exactly know who Ghillion was, there are College records, but little is written about him, or possibly her. Anyway, we know Olef stole it. The Government naturally blames us but has done nothing yet. Largely because they don’t have any evidence or motive. In fact if I had wanted it stolen I would have personally made an indistinguishable replica. I may still do.”

He sat back.

They had turned off the highway in through a fence with towers and a gate. To one side there was looked like

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a village, then the Carrier was climbing a steep road around a hill that looked like the plug left after the ash of a volcano had weathered away. From a distance it had looked quite like Slemish. Later Maisie discovered that actually that exactly was the case.

“So who did organise stealing it and why, if it wasn’t the College?” she asked. Maisie wondered again why he was telling her, and on the trip to the College? He obviously wasn’t worried about Chainai, Luci, Olef or the driver hearing him.

“Oh, didn’t I say?” he said, as the Carrier came to a halt beside an older woman wearing robes and a hat like Arch Chancellor Millifore’s. “This is the Dean, Shareena, she will show you to your apartment and you can come and see me straight after supper, which is at 7th hour. I always meet new students.”

Maisie got out and was introduced to Shareena. She said goodbye to the driver, the assistant, Chainai, Luci and Olef, and was about to grab a bag.

“No, you’ll have an Assistant,” Shareena interrupted. “One anyway, more if you need them. A porter will bring your bags and cases later. You seem to have accumulated a lot, come.” She strode off.

Maisie wondered what Shareena would think if she saw the bulk of her baggage that was still at the airport. Maisie could see that people were already loading baggage on to trolleys. Olef and Chainai had gone already with Arch Chancellor Millifore.

Luci turned and smiled. “See you again soon, Maisie.” Then she too headed to the main building.

“I brought a lot from Tellus, personal stuff and somehow ended up with two more trunks on the starships. Clothes mostly,” Maisie defensively explained breathlessly as she trotted to keep up with the Dean.

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Despite being smaller, with shorter legs, Karnds could walk quickly. Even after nearly eight months of acceleration and deceleration worse than Earth's gravity Maisie wasn't used to the strong gravity of Caemoria; she'd spent as much time as possible lying down during the journey. Maisie hardly had time to see anything except they were now on a second courtyard ten metres or more higher up. "Most of the stuff is being shipped from Laramos, Olef organised it."

"Not a criticism, Maisie," answered Shareena. "Just observation, it's a pity you had to leave hurriedly and haven't got more things from your homeworld, I'm sure you had to leave a lot behind. When you have unpacked your cases they will be warehoused until you need them again. Also I must say I'm delighted how perfect and natural your Karndic is. Like a native. You can leave anything you don't need in them. No-one here in College knows any English apart from Olef, so I'm glad you have progressed so well with Karndic."

"It's an odd coincidence, but it's all similar sounds to my own language and not too different grammar," Maisie mused. "Also I have a bit of gift for languages, I know one Oriental and three Western as fluently as natives as well as two dead Tellurian languages."

"No, to be expected," Shareena averred, "those of us that do believe in the Creator believe he made all humans in his own image. So we all have the same deep grammar. Where the verb is relative to noun, tenses, pronouns and genders is all window dressing details. Still, you do seem to have an amazing ability with language. Are you religious?"

Maisie was sure the Karndic word meant that in the sense of faith rather than simple observance of rituals. "Not really."

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"Well," continued Shareena, "Rationalists, the atheists, claim it's just convergent evolution. I don't mean people that are merely rational, but those that make a creed of it."

Maisie supposed her mum fitted the Karndic definition of religious as she had been a Chinese Christian. Her dad had been an atheist, perhaps in reaction to his religious ancestors. An unlikely couple, they never did tell Maisie how they met, but she knew they just agreed to differ and neither make her go nor forbid her from church. So as it was something extra that didn't seem interesting mostly she didn't go and she'd never much thought about it at all.

They had climbed up the levels from the lowest courtyard past the small middle courtyard to the highest, a larger courtyard with entrances to the very large main building ahead. On the left was a three story building and on the right a much larger building. They went up to the top floor of the building to the left. There were only two doors on opposite sides of the hall on each of the upper floors and one on the ground floor. Maisie was gasping already between the greater gravity of Caemoria and the thin air high in the mountains.

Shareena produced a key and unlocked the door on the right side of the passage, the end of the building nearer the gateway, and handed it to her. The blade of the key just had an etched pattern and wasn't serrated or dimpled. Maisie suspected it must have electronics or something, because she could easily have replicated the etched pattern.

"Olef and Chainai will have the two apartments on the floor just below. Chainai's is below yours." She pointed. "The door here is to the Personal and a small storage

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area, but please leave all your large cases to be warehoused. Don't stack them in there."

She spun round and pulled open floor length heavy velvet curtains exposing the large building opposite on the upper courtyard. "You have this large lounge, which can be divided, two bedrooms, a kitchen large enough to eat in and a washing room."

It was larger and more luxurious than Maisie's split level Dublin apartment. "Surely this isn't common for an Apprentice?"

"No, these are apartments for Masters, or a privileged Journeyman," she turned and looked up slightly at Maisie. "You are too old to share an Apprentice's dormitory with children. You are by your people's and our reckoning an adult and fully educated. I expect you to be more mature than the others. Your only lacks are in the training of your Talent and secondarily Caemorian culture, so as much as possible we will try to treat you as an adult Journeyman or Master."

Caemoria, Maisie thought, was obviously very different to the impression the Intergal folk gave Earth of the Galactic Council, which apparently met outside the capital city here. Every homeworld and Alien in the Council speaks the Karndic language of the Caemorian Karnds. Maisie belatedly realised she'd learnt nothing from Olef of his own language and homeworld. Or of Virona's either. They seemed quite adapted to Caemorian culture.

Maisie followed Shareena's example on the other side of the room and gasped. The building was right on the edge of small cliff dropping to a steep copse, then another cliff. Beyond that a meadow with what looked like two aircraft runways at right angles. The middle set of windows were full length double doors onto a large

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balcony running almost the full length of the apartment. Not a building to be seen. So Maisie suspected there must be a hanger at the base of the second cliff. Just meadows, distant mountains and the setting sun. She must be facing west. She learnt later that no matter which way a planet actually rotates the Karnd convention is to call it west where the sun sets, then north and south no matter the direction compared to the galactic plane or local star. Caemoria has similar rotation to Earth but with about 27.1 Tellurian hours, by convention divided into 25, so Maisie called them hours in her journal entries.

"What's wrong?" the Dean asked. "You seem agitated?"

"Nothing," replied Maisie, "the view is breathtaking. I'm a little out of breath and excited." There was a table with stools on the balcony. Maisie sat down and sighed. "Beautiful."

"Yes, it's quite good. The other side is just about opposite the Arch Chancellor's apartments and administrative offices. None of the other Colleges have as good a view as the west of the original College."

A thought struck Maisie. "Who is across the hall?"

"No-one," Shareena laughed. "Olef and Chainai have the two apartments below you, with Assistants on the ground floor, a large apartment for up to eight. You'll be taking all the regular basic classes to start with anyway. Everyone has to learn all the basics. You have to especially study everything relevant to the third Circle and sixth Circle. I'm advised you might get the wrong idea from the English translations of the Karndic names for the Talents. You'll only be speaking Karndic, it's good you have learned it so well on the trip, so you can forget the rather arbitrary English names. It's especially

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important that tomorrow you jump straight in to some regular classes. Most people do start in the middle of a term when they are discovered to have Talent, Searched. Then your Assistant, Kaytim, will show you around. All your classes will be in this original College, you won't need to visit the other Colleges in the complex to start with. Your Assistant Kaytim will be here shortly and take you to Matron. Try not to be irritated by her forthright or outspoken manner, normally I'd never say such a thing, but you are from outside our Culture. The Arch Chancellor says she is far the best choice. You also unfortunately need to meet with the Galactic council and Wildgrave Plonnis, I'm not sure yet when. Be careful of him as he is very powerful, a kind of deputy to the Emperor."

Her Assistant? Maisie was also puzzled by appearances. On the starship everything had seemed so scientific and technological, though more like a luxury hotel than what she'd imagined a starship, but this place seemed like out of the dark ages. Everyone was dressing in very long ceremonial or almost mediaeval dresses and robes instead of the simple outfits on the two starships. "Is there electricity and a library computer database connection here?"

"Why not?" Now it was the Dean's turn to be puzzled. "Don't try and use the electricity with your Talent. Partly this is why you are on the top floor of a separate building. Now look here at the desk."

It had plug power socket and an Ethernet data socket to match Maisie's laptop! A flexible umbilical cord went to a box at the wall.

"Our odd job boffin, Master Granis, is anxious to know if he has the data specifications and protocol gateways and emulation correct. Virona sent him and

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Laramos University everything months ago. He said the power was easy. The box on the floor converts everything. I believe you had that jury-rigged on the starship?"

"Yes. I'll let you know."

There was a knock at the slightly ajar door. Shareena held her left hand out open to Maisie. The gesture of you are in command.

A young Karnd woman entered when Maisie said, "Come in." She used Karndic now automatically.

"I'm Kaytim, your Assistant," she explained, "you must be Maisie?" Emphasising the word as if it was a title or proper noun, but not emphasis as in quotes. Unlike English, words can take a suffix or mark not just for plural but to indicate either a proper noun, emphasis, something special, intimacy and optionally gender. Sometimes a mark means an extra phoneme and in other cases a change in pitch. Extra letters may be added if there would be a difficult combination. So written Karndic has no upper and lower case, nor italic, bold or other typographical devices in the sense English has. It makes speech less ambiguous. Written speech has a speech tag word initiator and a single delimiter symbol to end it. So written or spoken assistant and Assistant are written with different marks at the ending and pronounced differently.

"I don't want to seem to be rude," explained Maisie. "I don't need or want a servant." Though she had a slight doubt about her interpretation of Assistant versus assistant. Why was it a proper noun or title?"

"She's not a servant or an assistant," insisted Shareena, "but an Assistant, it's her title. I think you'll find that because your circumstances, the complete lack of cultural knowledge, that an Assistant isn't optional.

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Anyone would be honoured to help a Talent in many different ways and be paid very well, apart from the status of being an Assistant to a Talent. Kaytim is paid about twice the average wage. I must go now that she is here. She will show you how to work everything and initially stop you getting lost. If you don't get on, please don't take it out on her. She will get re-assigned and you'll have a demerit as well as likely a less suitable Assistant. Kaytim has proven herself very capable."

"I'm sorry," said Maisie. "I didn't understand." Maisie could see Shareena was quite cross.

"I suppose you'll make a few mistakes to start with." Obviously Shareena reconsidered Maisie's comments. She laughed. "Goodbye! Take care of her, Kaytim!" Shareena swished off in her long robes.

At this Kaytim actually blushed, which given her dark complexion has to be seen to be believed. She was a much darker complexion than olive skinned Juili or Luci. Maisie supposed a more tropical variant of the Karnd, like dark Africans.

"Now what?" asked Maisie. Kaytim was dressed in, what seemed from her experience, ordinary Caemorian clothes, Maisie found later the tunic top was worn by many species, not just Karnds and was actually based on an Akasurip design, the large tunic top with lots of deep pockets. Kaytim's top was a rich blue with orange details. It overlapped her blue pants which were snug without being skin tight. The pant legs were on the outside of the soft ankle boots with low but not flat heels, they had quite thick soles. All very like what Maisie had worn on the starship.

"You may want to wash before visiting Matron. Can I speak frankly?"

"I've been told it's one of your virtues?"

“Virtues?”

“That wasn’t the word used, but I regard it as a virtue.” Maisie couldn’t remember any aliens wanting to speak frankly, if anything they were overly courteous unless something was seriously wrong. Only aliens other than Karnds had actually got cross to point of raised voices in a way she recognised.

“You aren’t what I expected,” said Kaytim. “You look like a security officer due to your hair being very short. Even some of the hairless Off-worlders wear long wigs.”

Maisie was staggered. No-one had ever commented on her appearance, except that she didn’t look Irish or even European.

“It’s not uncommon on Earth,” said Maisie. At the time her hair was a very short bob cut with a fringe. She had trimmed it herself several times on the starships.

“Maybe for very young children,” said Kaytim. “Most men here have hair a similar length to women, only the security and military operatives have it short. Maybe for helmets.”

“I suppose I can let it grow if it upsets people,” suggested Maisie.

“You can have it like that if you prefer,” said Kaytim. She laughed. “I wasn’t telling you off for having short hair. You look a little like one of us from a distance, some tall security officers, if wearing riding boots, would have hair that length and be nearly as tall as you in your socks. People might think you are security.”

“I’m not offended,” said Maisie. “What happens after my meetings?”

“The free main meal is called supper and is at 7th.” Then she pointed at the second left door in the end wall opposite the entrance. “I can explain your uniform and accessories after you wash if you just put on a robe from

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the washing room. Or we can look at them first? What on earth are you wearing?"

Maisie was wearing one of her favourite outfits that she had bought in Dublin. She'd been wearing it when she first met the aliens with Jack Casey at her Dublin apartment. She'd only worn it on the first day after waking on the starship.

"It's my favourite outfit from Tellus. I think a bath would be heaven. The starships only had rather strange showers. Tell me I have died and gone to heaven and this wonderful apartment has a bath? Shareena mentioned a washing room. Do you stay in the second bedroom?"

Kaytim laugh was unusual even for Karnds, almost like a tinkling bell. "Of course it has. But you are not dead and this assuredly not heaven! You want me to show you how it works? It might be quite different from anything on the starship! Actually I've not been on a starship. I share a much larger apartment, the whole ground floor with Luci and Dairig. Dairig is Olef's Assistant. You've met Luci."

Maisie remembered that Shareena had told her about the ground floor.

"There were no baths, only a special kind of shower," said Maisie. "Or if there were baths, I never saw one."

"So are those Tellurian clothes?" she asked. "Surely you had medium length tunic, leggings and soft ankle boots on the starship, made to measure? Those shoes would not have been safe."

"I thought I would wear my own clothes from home today," Maisie explained. "It is my favourite."

Kaytim eyed Maisie's suede effect red platform shoes, the platform making the 15 cm heels usable, purple satin skirt, pink silk blouse and the shiny turquoise leather

bomber jacket. “At least the jacket is nearly blue, but you have to wear the college uniform. You could in theory wear those shoes. I think though you might break a leg. I suppose at your home you are below average height, I studied what little information was given to me about you, and the Tellurians before accepting the position. Some of those colour combinations don’t work for me.”

“I guess I always have felt embarrassingly short. Here though I suppose flats are more sensible. I’m just a bit nostalgic today so wearing some favourite things, the colours don’t work even for me. I bought the things at different times.”

“Your Karndic is very good,” said Kaytim. “Really I’ve started badly commenting on your hair and clothes. Perhaps you need a different Assistant.”

“No,” insisted Maisie, “I have learnt your language, but unlike all other Off-worlders you know I’m totally ignorant about your culture. I need you to mention these things. The points about platform shoes and looking like a security guard are things I need to know. Chainai and Virona spoke very highly of the Arch Chancellor. If he thinks this is a good idea we should try it. Shareena also seemed to think you are best for me.”

“No-one is allowed to run here anyway,” said Kaytim. “On the other hand you might find the stairs treacherous in those. I’m curious. Can I try them?”

“While I’m washing.” Maisie was amazed. This young woman was so forward and unlike any Karnd or other Alien she’d met.

Maisie took them off and Kaytim looked at one. Coincidentally it did look like she had similar sized feet when she kicked off her soft flat ankle boots.

“Come this way.” Kaytim led Maisie into the washing room.

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Maisie needn't have worried. A bath is a bath. It's either a tub or inset to the floor. It was certainly a bathroom. They had come up steps just far enough in for the door to open so the bath could be flush to the floor. It was like a young swimming pool nearly 3 m long and about half as wide with a sloping floor. Now a bath can either have water running all the time, via a stream, spring or circulating plant, or else water turned on and off with knobs or buttons. It was already nearly full and filling. Four buttons in one group in a line: A snowflake *, fountain lines with a cloud \~/, a circle O and a U.

Kaytim pointed; "Colder, Hotter, Recycle is clean the water without empty and the last is Empty. If empty the Recycle button fills it at the last warmth. Just hold down the cooler or hotter buttons, it's quick to change it. Or both buttons together is just below blood heat. Automatic for your species."

Maisie dipped her hand in. "It's filling now and just at the temperature I like." She turned to Kaytim. "How?"

She shrugged her shoulders more than any human normally could. "I checked. As your Assistant I have access to those sort of records on the starship. I set the timer when I saw the Carrier arrive."

"How do I call you?"

"With your Crystal," said Kaytim.

Maisie took out the Crystal given to her on the starship and selected contacts. She added Kaytim to contacts and N'Lonth Kaytim appeared with a query. Maisie knew that meant Kaytim had added her but couldn't call her until Maisie confirmed by adding her, it also meant that there was only one Kaytim on the entire Crystal Net. Maisie confirmed and allow-listed the contact. The Crystals pretty much prevented unwanted

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calls and spam as every contact had to be two way verified or denied first. Allow-listed or blocked.

Kaytim had been smiling as she watched closely; "I see you are quick with the Crystal."

"I did have over seven months practice already! I'll call when I'm ready, but how much time have I?"

Kaytim glanced at her Crystal. "Perhaps fifteen minutes only here in the bath. It's quite a distance to Matron's office. Also you want time to choose clothes."

"OK," Maisie replied and Kaytim headed off. Maisie was relieved to see though that the door had a privacy catch. She put her door key in the robe on the wall and the Crystal beside the bath. She already knew it was totally waterproof. It had no charger or headphone holes for water to get in as it had no apertures at all. Maisie wasn't sure how sound got in or out. But you could feel the surface at one end vibrating on loud sounds. It never needed charged either. By now she had stripped and with a sigh slid into the bath. On the starship the shower had liquid soap. No liquid here. So Maisie examined the jars of brightly coloured crystals like small gemstones. One produced a soapy lather. Another a purely a pleasant scent, that reminded her of woodland. Maisie soaked in the glorious bath.

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The time! Maisie made a grab for the Crystal and knocked it in then scrabbled around for it. Of course it slid to the deep end. Twenty minutes gone! Aie! She hit the U and the bath started emptying. She grabbed a couple of the large fat fluffy towels. Oh, such luxury. They seemed to almost suck the water out of her hair and skin. Maisie pulled on the robe and had a quick scrub with the tooth brush and powdery almost paste.

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Like the starship the mirror hadn't steamed up. Her hair was its natural straight glossy black. Not quite as shiny as Karnd hair, which seemed to come in an unreal red, various dark shades and black as well as well as Chainai's nearly white. Maisie thought her sort of hair was closer to Karnd hair than any other kind of Tellurian human hair.

Maisie called Kaytim as she dashed toward the first right door. Right. The first one had no bedclothes. The next bedroom had faced the view. Maisie wondered what was in the left door, it had to be the kitchen. There were loads of very strange clothes. All blue with orange bits.

"OK if I come in?" Kaytim called from the main door. Maisie had not latched or locked it and obviously it wasn't self locking. At least that meant she could only lock herself out by losing the key on the outside!

"Yes, yes!" called Maisie. She looked at the large double bed baffled. No tunics or pants like on the starship. Only all sorts of complicated looking ankle length dresses and robes just like Chainai, Virona, the Dean and the Arch Chancellor had worn, though without a hat.

Kaytim came over and saw Maisie's indecision.

"Underwear first," she laughed again. She pulled out two side by side drawers. "I'll wait outside. Oh, you are amazing being able to walk in those shoes in gravity far more than you are used to. I'm native and I found those shoes frightening. Fun though."

Maisie marvelled that Kaytim thought that platforms and heels that added 6" were fun. Maisie quickly pulled on the short pants and found the seamless bras were all made to her size and shape obviously copied from what

she had brought from Earth to the starship. Maisie finished putting on the bra and shouted. "Kaytim!"

Kaytim came in and opened her eyes wide. "You find it very hot?"

She could open her eyes very wide indeed too. Maisie suspected Karnd babies must be as adorable as kittens, the adults had such inviting large eyes. As Maisie shook her head Kaytim pushed the drawers in and pulled out the next two. Maisie felt foolish. Socks. Also various kinds of vest tops, very thin, soft and stretchy with matching very thin snug pants, like footless tights but more comfy, no doubt.

"Special material," Kaytim explained. "Keeps you warm or cooled as needed. Specially designed for your metabolism. Next the uniform. During time off you can wear any clothes you want only in the apartment, but for meetings, refractory, lessons, out anywhere you have to wear the traditional uniform."

"It looks about 500 years old," muttered Maisie. "They wore sensible tunics and pants on the starship."

"Actually maybe 3000 or more years of tradition," explained Kaytim. "It's traditional as well to wear Akasurip inspired style clothes, the tunic particularly, on starships for the last 3000 years, so the starship garb you had is just as old. Some things here change slowly."

"Everything else doesn't change at all?" suggested Maisie trying to make a joke.

"Very funny," Kaytim flatly replied.

Maisie thought Kaytim didn't seem amused. Had she stepped on some taboo? Then again, Sharon had said she wasn't very amusing.

Maisie noticed she could have any colour as long as it was blue with orange accents. "Why only blue with bits of orange?"

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“Tradition, your main Talent Circle colour is blue, you have the secondary third Talent Circle, orange. Matron will explain. Novitiate is black, no totally confirmed talent. Acolytes are grey, soon colour will be chosen. No-one is white, that would mean an Adept of all Circles, such a person doesn’t exist, no-one ever has more than two Talents, most only one. Only Nobles or those with Talent may wear that specific design of outer robe, it’s a criminal offence for anyone else. The pale colour is just a Basic Talent, richer colour is Adept and Arch Talent has coppery, silvery or golden coloured edging. You are an at least an Adept in both Talents according to Chainai. Council members have a special necklace, Masters a special cap with a tassel. All clothes for the Talented are based on clothes for nobles.”

Maisie was puzzled though how Chainai had decided she was Adept and what in. Obviously on the starship Chainai had known more than had been said. Maisie resolved to accost Chainai about it later.

“So what Circle colours are there? It wasn’t in the ship library or if it was I couldn’t access it, no-one mentioned it. I didn’t even find a list of Talents. No explanations, Olef mentioned some and said there are seven. Chainai said to wait till college.”

“Perhaps you couldn’t access it for some reason decided by Chainai. The Arch Chancellor didn’t tell me everything when I accepted the job. Or you didn’t realise what to ask about. It’s not a secret. The robes must be worn outside College too, a sign of being a Talent or noble. Nobles have their sigils on them.” Kaytim closed her eyes and recited. “One is brown, Soratrin, Mentalists, comprising Telepaths, Empaths and Puppeteers, all have some mix of those abilities. Two is red, Talnarasd, the Wizards, Telekinetic powers. Three

is orange, Milrangh for Mages who can manipulate tiny things and heal. Four is yellow, Gromeric, the Alchemists, manipulators of entropy, catalysts for reactions. Five is green, Silwornic, the Sorcerers, two kinds of shape changers, an Arch Sorcerer is both kinds. Six is blue, the energy moving Talent, Wighlardh, the Warlocks. Finally seven is violet, Dulranin, the Enchanters, who can store the action of other Talents in an Artefact with the help of a Telepath. Apart from brown, it's like a rainbow, the rainbow often stands on earth, which can be brown, so easy to remember. The higher up numbered Circles have progressively very much fewer members. I added the official English names, I suppose some are a bit arbitrary.”

Kaytim opened her eyes and stared up at Maisie's face. “You are quite rare anyway as you are a Warlock. Your colours say the secondary talent is a Mage. Secondary Talents are rare, but not as rare as a Warlock. Both Warlock and Mage in one person is not something I've heard of. It's Talent, not magic, that's just fiction, a fantasy. It's a special Talent that's part of your identity. Even shape changed you have it. It's not biological or genetic or learned, but you to have to learn techniques and how to use it safely. No-one knows why some people have it.”

“Some of those English names make sense,” suggested Maisie. She finished pulling on the least obnoxious dress and Kaytim handed her its companion sleeveless robe. Maisie thought, if it's not magic it certainly sounds like it, or mythical psychic power. Especially if they don't know why people have it.

“Belt on outside of robe and normally around the stole.” Kaytim handed Maisie a very broad belt.

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Maisie thought it was almost ugly with pouches and ornaments, or maybe gadgets?

Kaytim then changed her mind and put away the blue stole with orange and grey squares. “The stole is for a Journeyman. The grey means a Journeyman that’s got no certification, like Olef. Very rare, I think it would confuse people. It’s a problem that you are too old for an Apprentice, yet obviously you have to be one first. Best not to wear the stole till the others know you better. You don’t have to wear any stole till you are actually a Journeyman.”

Then the short slip on ankle boots, flat with no heel at all. Possibly made to measure with a contoured insole and extremely comfortable. Kaytim’s boots though had a low heel. Maisie supposed she didn’t need to wear higher heels and platforms here, as Olef and now Kaytim had said, she didn’t want to be breaking a leg in this higher gravity.

Maisie thought Kaytim could see that she was less than happy. “The new boys are less happy,” Kaytim explained, confirming it. “They wear a similar outfit but flat at the top up to a neck collar all the way round. Their robes have full length sleeves, the female’s robes have no sleeves. None of your dresses will have a collar at the front.”

Why, Maisie wondered, did they do this? She started to get out her make-up to do her eyes and lips.

“You mustn’t,” said Kaytim.

“Why?”

“Younger students, less than a Journeyman, are not allowed. Not hair colouring either. Bracelets, only one per limb, but not rings. Necklaces are fine if they can’t be confused with official ones. No unapproved ear or

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nose ornaments either. You seem to have small studs in your ear lobes, likely they will be allowed.”

“What ages are we talking about?” asked Maisie.

“About ten to seventeen or younger, but younger students are rarer indeed,” explained Kaytim.

“So my nails?” Maisie extended her hand showing the violet lacquered nails.

“I don’t know,” confessed Kaytim. “Probably not, Matron will say.”

They still had a few minutes to spare so Maisie tried her laptop. There was a note on the desk to try a Crystal Net location on the laptop browser given as an HTTP URL. Amazingly a website loaded, or at least some sort of conversion of something on the Caemorian Crystal Net. She supposed three months with HTML, TCP/IP, Ethernet, DNS and HTTP specification was quite impressive work for someone on Caemoria to implement a gateway. Actually the starship had downloaded stuff from the Internet, so someone had studied it much earlier. Quickly they headed out and Maisie remembered to lock the door.

Kaytim headed quickly across the large upper courtyard into the main building. They went along a mall, down a left corridor and up a tower. Maisie could hardly keep up.

“Here we are. I’ll wait at the café we passed at the base.”

Maisie knocked and was called in.

“Hello, Maisie, I’m Matron Demy,” the Karnd woman explained. “I need to check your health, give you advice and find out if you need help with any personal issues. Have a stool.”

Her uniform was predominantly orange with brown parts and had a brown and orange stole. So a Mage and

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Empath or Telepath? Perhaps a Healer, thought Maisie. She had a strange floppy orange cap with a tassel like Shareena and Millifore had worn, so presumably she was a Master Mage, or was it Master of Magery?

“Yes, I’m a Mage expert at healing, also an Empath and Telepath,” she added. “Chainai perhaps can help you. You are not a Telepath or Empath, not a Mentalist at all, yet all Mentalists can hear you as if you are shouting, though intermittently, which gives us hope that Chainai can stop it. I suppose they had good Medical people on the starship? I taught Virona most of what she knows. Nevertheless, this is important. Now lie down there. Everything ought to be very strange to you, but at least you know Olef and your Mentor, Chainai, already.”

Maisie lay down on the low couch. She was puzzled, Chainai was to be her Mentor, what did that mean?

Matron Demy looked at Maisie. “Can you relax and let me feel your mind? Your thoughts are awfully bright.”

“So every Mentalist tells me,” said Maisie.

Demy brought over a stool and sat putting her hand, in turn, on Maisie’s forehead, chest and finally her abdomen just below the belt.

“Strange, you have no Mentalist Talent at all. Perhaps Chainai can figure you out. OK, you can get up and sit at the desk with me.”

“Every Empath and Telepath tells me that too. Chainai seemed to be avoiding me on the starship though.”

“No doubt she’ll explain about that later.” Demy sat down at the desk.

“You know about my biology already?”

“I’ve been studying all the data for months. It was a bonus that Tellus’s away team was able to visit the

starship and had two women. I'm glad they agreed to our diagnostic scans. We got data from ESA, NASA, the UN and the Internet too before they got upset about you leaving." She made some notes on her Slab. "Your medical records, sparse as they are." Demy flipped the display so Maisie could read it. "Any mistakes? Or missing bits you can fill. If something is too personal leave it blank, unless it's important."

Maisie blushed as she remembered. She didn't feel like asking what was important and personal. It was just after her first period that she realised she was very odd. "Caemorian years?" She got out her own Crystal and checked some numbers. Then blushed a bit more as she filled in some blanks and pushed the Slab back.

"Probably your Mage talent is very active. Over eight years is a long time to have it without training, I think the record is two years. A little experiment just to see how your self healing has progressed. It won't really hurt and I will heal it without a blemish if needed."

She took out a packet and tore it open. It looked very like a scalpel. "Relax while I cut your arm."

Demy pulled up Maisie's sleeve and deeply slashed her arm. A red line appeared and then vanished. It only stung for a moment, the skin was unblemished. Maisie had known about this curious ability and had long ago decided it was best kept secret.

"That was rather fast," exclaimed Demy, "certainly you are an Adept Mage. I'm amazed you didn't emphasise this to Virona, Chainai, Olef or anyone on the starship. You surely must have cut yourself in the last eight years?"

"Yes," admitted Maisie, "I just didn't want to worry them. I've got used to keeping secrets. I didn't need much persuasion from Virona in Dublin to come."

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“Chainai and Virona had reported that you are a Mage, they thought maybe an adept. It wouldn’t have worried them, quite the reverse, any Adept Healing Mage can do it. Though no food here is actually poisonous to Tellurians, some of it would certainly make any of you feel unwell if you were not a Mage. I suspect nothing has upset your tummy for over eight years?”

Maisie thought about this. “No, I don’t believe anything has upset me. I’ve never been ill or bruised since then either.”

“That also shows you are an Adept Mage. An Adept Mage can’t be poisoned, certainly not easily. The only reason Virona was able to sedate you was that you were a willing subject. It went so badly, I doubt the same drug will ever work again on you. Frankly I’m baffled that she offered the option at all as she knew then that you have Mage Talent. I expect your strange interaction with Mentalists confused her. You do need some more specialist training, especially some all the girls get, though as you seem to have interfered in that area already, the training is urgent. Please don’t experiment further without training, but perhaps it was an unconscious reaction. Master Mage Fathris gives some extra classes to the boys. You’ve noticed, I hope, that boys and girls are built differently?”

“Yes. I am old enough to know where babies come from. My mummy explained it before I needed to know. I didn’t consciously do anything, sometimes I thought of going to the doctor when I had no more periods after the first one. The pain was unpleasant.”

“Good, probably an unconscious reaction,” explained Demy. “The daylight here has seriously more UVA and UVB than you are used to on Tellus. You don’t sunburn easily?”

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"I don't sunburn at all, that's unnatural. I suspect Virona checked me in the Intergal One as they seemed unconcerned about the lighting. I figured it had a lot of ultraviolet, though I can't see it."

"No, she didn't, or I'd have a report. There is a report about the UN team, they wore sunblock, perhaps she just didn't think it important. The Intergal One is only meant to survey, not contact and take strange species on board. Likely with your Mage talent and your natural skin pigments you'll be fine," said Demy. "Do come at once if your eyes itch or your skin gets sore or discolours. Now, you are taking supplements?"

"I have various tablets I have to take on different days made on the starship for missing amino acids and vitamins."

"Stop taking all the amino acid tablets, vitamin D and B vitamins. Plenty of UV here, a bit much for Tellurians. But you will be fine. As an Adept Mage you'll be able to adapt the amino acids in Caemorian fats and proteins. I'll check up on vitamins A, C and K, because no-one here uses anything like them, I just haven't had time yet. Then I'll teach you how to replace them. Have you healed cuts on anyone else?"

"No," confirmed Maisie. She was too nervous to ask if she'd actually be able to heal people.

"Don't try until you have had some training. The regular classes with Master Mage Fathris do cover basic healing. When you have done those I'll give you some more advanced medical training. Relax, Maisie, we are nearly done."

Demy was staring at her. "What?" said Maisie.

"I need to weigh you without your clothes. I have your height and all other vital statistics from the starship body scan used for clothes measurements. I have some

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information about Tellurians from the Intergal One. You can keep the bottom layer of underclothes on.”

Maisie stripped and stood on the weighing plate.

Demy stared at her again. “Get dressed.”

As Maisie sat again Demy made some more notes. Maisie had an idea what she was going to say.

“There isn’t an easy way to say this. Please don’t take it personally.”

“I know I’m a bit overweight,” admitted Maisie. “I’m not actually fat though. I have sedentary life style, eat well and too many take-outs. I think I lost a little weight on the starship.”

“You need to lose more and get more muscle tone,” insisted Demy. “I’ll review the situation. I’m not sure about the Tellurian definition of fat, but you are seriously overweight by my definition. Mages need to be fit otherwise you could die trying to heal a major illness or injury. Now your finger nails, what have you done to them?”

“It’s make-up, a paint,” explained Maisie. “Kaytim stopped me decorating my face.”

“I know that,” mused Demy, “common enough for parties. You actually are eight to fourteen years older than any other new Apprentices you’re likely to meet. Karnd children aren’t allowed make-up in school. Ordinary adults can be rather more decorated than nobles.”

“Then I suppose I should keep the same rules as the rest of the class?”

“I’m glad you see it that way,” said Demy. “May I?”

Demy lifted Maisie’s hand and then set it down and got a bottle from a cupboard. Soon she had the varnish cleaned off. As the liquid smelled like acetone, it probably was.

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“You can use make-up any way at all for any official function that’s on a Rest Day or evening once the others realise how old you are, though perhaps ask Kaytim’s advice. I hope you enjoy College. Do call me if you have any personal or medical issue.”

“The ear studs are permitted?”

“Yes, I imagine you can’t leave them out for long?”

“I discovered that, minutes at best.”

“Off you go, I hope you soon get to make friends.”

Deny got up and opened the door.

“Thanks.”

Maisie went down and met Kaytim at the Café.

“Molruk and a bun?” asked Kaytim.

“Maybe just the drink,” replied Maisie. “Matron’s a bit intimidating, is she odd or typical?”

“Maybe a little odd. Matron Demy mentioned you are overweight?”

“That’s very personal.”

“You said I’m supposed to be very personal,” argued Kaytim, “though I’m perhaps not very diplomatic.” She lowered her voice to a whisper. “I didn’t mention it, though it seemed likely when I saw you in your underwear. Did she do her bloodthirsty slash test for healing skill?”

“It must have been a very sharp blade as I hardly felt it,” said Maisie. “It was gone in a moment. She says I’m an Adept Mage.”

Kaytim fetched two mugs and two buns. “I’m not eating on my own,” she insisted. “It’s handy to be a good healer and not just a Mage. I see she took off the nail paint too.”

“It seemed for the best right now,” agreed Maisie. “It will be very strange to be back at school with young kids.”

“I can’t imagine how everything won’t be very strange,” said Kaytim. “The starships would hardly have been typical of here or like anything you ever experienced, but it’s my responsibility to support you and Chainai is responsible for you. That’s new for her. I suspect she wanted to discuss it in person with Arch Chancellor Millifore before finally committing herself. Being with kids will be the least of it, I imagine. Caemorian culture is pervasive on over 3000 homeworlds, for thousands of years. Your world didn’t know anyone else even existed.”

“You are right about the platform shoes,” said Maisie. “I’d be mad to ever wear them again, I’m taller than Karnds and one trip here and I’d have a broken leg, arms or ribs. You have them and I won’t be tempted. Hardly worn, I never wore them to work and I never went out anywhere.”

“I suppose it’s better than recycling them,” she said, sounding doubtful. “Perhaps I might wear them at a party that has no other Karnds. Who’d have thought we would have the same size feet? Your hands are only a little larger too despite having four fingers instead of three. Karnd toes are mostly fatter and longer than yours, that explains it.”

It was a very tasty bun. The top had Jaggery which is very like honey in consistency, colour and sweetness, but is from a tree, or something that looks like a tree.

Kaytim’s Crystal chimed. She spoke softly.

“You don’t need to visit the Galactic Council. Wildgrave Plonnis is on his way, he says that’s cancelled. So we need to get back to your apartment.”

Maisie quickly checked her Crystal. “What exactly is a Wildgrave or guo-hou?”

"A special kind of Margrave or fan-hou, there is only one. He is the Emperor's Envoy to the Galactic Council and in charge of diplomatic relations to other homeworlds," explained Kaytim. "He is a sort of Foreign Minster, a specialist security Minister, effectively the Deputy or Assistant Emperor. Don't agree to anything; you are under college protection. He's a bit tricky."

They headed to the apartment and a little later the doorbell chimed. Kaytim's comment seemed more ominous than the Dean's comment about his power.

Kaytim opened the door and established that it was indeed Wildgrave Plonnis.

"Wildgrave Plonnis," Kaytim announced, "meet Maisie Kelly, Tellurian. Well you didn't waste any time. Her Karndic is as good as likely your spies have said, so you won't have any difficulty interrogating her."

Maisie thought this an odd introduction. Kaytim closed the front door and went off to the kitchen leaving its door open. There was no doubt that Kaytim's manner was unlike any Karnd she'd met. Maisie thought she had met the full spectrum of them over the last seven months. Maisie invited Wildgrave Plonnis to sit with her at the low table in the large lounge area. He glanced at the laptop.

"So?" asked Maisie.

"I'm here just to ask a couple of questions," explained Plonnis. "We have had a complaint from the UN via Jack Casey on the sync-sats relating to you. I represent the Emperor and the Galactic council."

"I can't imagine the UN even knows I exist."

"I think Jack Casey was obliged to tell them. Tell me what happened exactly best you can remember about the news of the arrival of the starship and all their contact with you."

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“My first real job was programming,” explained Maisie. “I was over three years in it, living in an apartment in Dublin. I had rented out my house in Belfast after my parents died while I was at University. You know where those places are?”

“Pretend I’m from Europe,” said Plonnis. “I’ll stop you if I want something explained.”

“I couldn’t bear to live in the house or sell it, besides all the better jobs were in the South. I remember the time the news was that the strange light at the edge of the Solar system beyond the Kuiper Belt was really a starship as my flatmate, Sharon, decided to leave that morning. She is the receptionist where I worked. I’d done work experience there twice while I was at university, so I was quickly a team leader as the company was expanding rapidly.”

Maisie then told Plonnis about all that happened to her till she woke in the starship. Maisie recounted it as best she could, occasionally checking her journal on the laptop. Plonnis rarely interrupted and only to have idioms explained that Maisie had translated direct from English to Karndic.

7: Plonnis Responds

"Your Karndic is absolutely remarkable. Even down to a weak Karleen accent, rather than any obvious Off-worlder accent. Obviously you don't appear to have been unduly pressurised or abducted, best perhaps not to mention about the sedation that went wrong. You have also left behind three local witnesses, five if we count the taxi driver and neighbour, apart from random people in the supermarket."

"It seems that something went badly wrong with the sedation," added Maisie. "I was out for days, rather than just sedated. Plonnis, I thought it sounded very like Jack Casey was recommending I leave secretly and as soon as possible to avoid government agencies. Perhaps that's why I had the bad dream before waking in the Integal One starship." Maisie realised that Kaytim had certainly followed the entire story as she had been speaking in Karndic and wasn't far from the kitchen. Maisie knew by this stage that generally Karnds have better hearing, which is why floors or ceilings and doors are universally sound proofed. Maisie thought the windows of her college apartment might be sound and heat insulated.

"Strange," agreed Plonnis.

"Virona was most upset about it. The UK and US jet aircraft did try to intercept, but we had too much of a head start. They couldn't match our rate of climb and quickly we were above their ceiling."

"Now I have two questions. One, did you leave totally of your own volition? It sounds like you did."

"Yes, I had little to keep me there. No relatives, no real friends, boring job. I only really pretended to need

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convincing. It seemed a good idea anyway as well as a big adventure. I knew other odd things about myself I only discussed today with Matron. Cuts heal instantly. Do you want a demonstration?"

"No, I know a lot about Adept Mages and Adept Warlocks," said Plonnis. "I've heard of Matron Demy's test too. Actually I also gather you've been rather kept in the dark about Talent, because there is none on Tellus, so I probably know more about your Talent than you do. Two, does Ireland, Europe or Tellus have any exit regulations?"

"There are no Irish exit regulations, no Western European exit restrictions and I never heard of any global one, if there is one it's been invented since I left. What exactly is the complaint?"

"That you were coerced or abducted and that you left without permission, it's a resolution of the UN Security Council with six abstentions."

"Six abstentions?" exclaimed Maisie. "I think there only are fifteen members! I can't believe Ireland or Europe would back such a daft claim, though neither the EU or Ireland is likely to have a security council seat. The number of abstentions tells you something. The idea that permission is needed to leave goes against all the principles of the UN and isn't applicable to Ireland. A few members have vetoes."

"That's what we thought. Someone making mischief. It seems very like the Galactic Council," he laughed. "So let me know if you change your mind. How are you finding the change?"

"Everything seems fine, though I've only arrived here in college today. The starships were OK. I get tired with the extra gravity, but I've had that for over seven months now on the starships. I'm a bit short of breath as we are

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very high up here so it's thinner air and I'm not very fit. I expect I'll acclimatise. I don't know what college is like, but the starship was starting to get a bit dull. I did lie down most of the time on the starship."

"Yes, early days," he said. "It's likely it will be some time before you can leave the College."

This puzzled Maisie till later.

Kaytim came in with a tray. "Do have some Jhai and biscuits before you go, your Highness. Is your private discussion over?"

"Thank you Kaytim, yes," confirmed Plonnis. "Of course as an Assistant it's not really private or secret from you. From my study of Tellus I suspect, Maisie, you don't quite understand Kaytim's role. There isn't exactly a comparable Tellurian relationship. The linguists teaching you and compiling the English-Karndic Dictionary had difficulty with some of our concepts so they say some choices are a little arbitrary, like titles of Talents and Assistant. Did you interview her?"

"No, I believe you were interviewed by the Arch Chancellor and accepted the job before I arrived, Kaytim?"

"Yes," she explained, "he explained your background and I accepted. He knows all about me already, so really he didn't ask me much more than if I'd accept. He said you wouldn't be able to choose."

"How curious, Maisie," said Plonnis slowly. "Kaytim is very highly qualified, better educated too than most of the Masters of Talent. Though perhaps unusually forthright for a Karnd. We've met before as you may guess. Can you show me your computer?"

Maisie showed him her HP laptop. Obviously Kaytim had been specially chosen for her role, which as yet she didn't understand at all. Maisie smiled as she thought

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about her on-site extended warranty that had not yet expired.

“The screen is supposed to be a realistic, natural colour?” asked Plonnis. “It’s strangely vivid and unrealistic.”

“It is for me. The three colours used match the peaks of my trichromatic eye sensitivity. I understand that hardly two species have the same spectral response and most are tetrachromatic. Perhaps the only other common trichromatic species are Akasurip and Malthin and they haven’t the same spectral response.”

“I see. Obviously you must have researched this on the starship.”

“I was curious because every electronic display was monochrome,” explained Maisie. “That seemed very odd for a civilisation supposedly more than 5000 to 7000 years more advanced than my own.”

They chatted for a while about how little culture on other homeworlds differed from Caemoria because of Telepathy in the past and over 4000 years of starship Jump travel. Occasionally Kaytim would contribute. She didn’t seem to think it wasn’t appropriate or to be overawed by such an important person.

“I have enjoyed my visit. I advise you to rely on Kaytim,” he concluded. “She perfectly understands our culture. Being good at the Karndic language and well educated doesn’t make you culturally aware. May I visit again?”

“Yes, sure,” agreed Maisie. “Thanks for coming and do give my point of view.”

“Oh, here are the instructions as how to email Jack Casey, You’ll have to pay for his incoming messages though. Bye.” He passed Maisie what looked like a

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rectangle of brown quartz. "It's a Wafer. Just touch it to your Crystal and follow the instructions."

Kaytim cleared the table as soon as he left. "We need to head to supper now. I wonder what Plonnis is up to. Very odd that he wants to come again. Also I'm quite sure he knew the answer to every question. He just wanted to meet you. Only the Emperor is more powerful. Perhaps Plonnis is the most powerful person in 2500 worlds."

Maisie pondered that such person could be so powerful and seem so approachable and friendly, though Kaytim had seemed less than friendly to Plonnis.

Maisie followed Kaytim across the large upper courtyard quickly into the very large arch in the building that had the Arch Chancellor's apartments. Then they went down a wide stairwell, left along a broad passage with windows in the eastern outer wall. Back toward the courtyard down a longer broad stairwell along a large hallway and left again into an enormous hall, certainly it could seat many thousands. It had no windows as it was certainly well under the courtyard. Maisie guessed it must be large enough to accommodate everyone from the other colleges. Though later she discovered that while it's 80 m x 150 m approximately according to the Library database, it can only accommodate a fraction of the all the people in the colleges. Only one end was in use with what Maisie guessed was some hundreds of people. A variety of species but the outfits made this less obvious. The few black robed youngsters sat at separate table but everyone else was mixed around. There were only a few grey robes sprinkled around the tables. Maisie supposed that people didn't remain Novices or Acolytes for long. The most common was brown and red. Orange, yellow and green were progressively less

common. Only the Arch Chancellor was in violet and only person in blue apart from Maisie and Kaytim was a Master. Maisie was the only other person wearing blue robes! No wonder people stopped talking and stared at her. Then the buzz of conversation restarted louder. She heard the old Latin based word, Tellurian, several times. What the starship experts had imported into Karndic to describe Earth humans as both those words are really too generic of any homeworld and sentient species, at least according to the Karndic linguists.

Kaytim led Maisie to a table. She had expected that they would be at tables by Circle but from the riot of colour at each table that was obviously not the case.

“How are the tables organised Kaytim?” asked Maisie.

“Apart from the Novices you sit anywhere,” she said, “except the large dais, it’s for the College Council.”

Maisie realised that Olef and Chainai sat opposite with assistants on either side as they had tunics, she realised that perhaps tunics are only for workers. She’d still hardly spoken to Luci. The other one was probably Dairig. Olef had green and brown robes with a long green, brown and grey chequered stole. Chainai had a completely brown outfit in a rich earthy tone with the same tone of stole, as she had worn on the starships. They both smiled at Maisie as Kaytim sat beside her. Assistants appeared to have the same colour schemes as their Talented person. So the Karnd woman beside Olef must be his assistant.

“Hi!” said Olef. “This is Dairig, my Assistant.”

“Hello, Dairig,” said Maisie absently, wondering why Olef had never mentioned her before, then she remembered he had once. She wondered where Pedar had gone when he left them at Grand Central.

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“Um,” Olef flushed. “We don’t know how you do it Maisie, but you are broadcasting thoughts again. It’s not that you are a Telepath either, as only Empaths and Telepaths are affected by you. It’s very odd. Anyone can hear a Telepath that wants to be heard.”

“I don’t—” started Maisie.

“Pedar is not a student,” interrupted Chainai, “nor on the teaching staff, so there is no reason for him to be here. There is something the Arch Chancellor and the Wildgrave want done.”

A gong sounded.

Kaytim got up. “I have to bring yours.”

Trays of food were passed down tables from trolleys. Chainai deftly picked a tray that was being passed down the table and put it at Kaytim’s place. The hubbub of chat died as people ate. Kaytim passed a tray to Maisie without comment. It was like one of the recipes Maisie had had on the starship but with better texture and flavour.

“Are you Maisie?” a voice beside asked. It was a young very dark furred Akasurip, male because of the braided mane and full length sleeves on the grey robes. The slight lithe build coupled with the long braids made the males look girlish and awkwardly the females looked identical, though usually a little larger, so the braids and robes were an important distinction!

“I knew a woman on the starship looking very like you called Virona,” replied Maisie.

“My aunt,” he proudly explained. “I’m Timot of the High Fastness. Tomorrow I get orange robes. Today they finally officially confirmed what was known when I was Searched. I’m a Mage, that’s the third Circle Talent. Or I will be eventually after training, perhaps I’ll be a Healer.”

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“Congratulations. Isn’t very rare for two relatives to have Talent?” asked Maisie.

“Yes, it would be very rare indeed. I’m the only Akasurip in this part of College right now,” he explained. “Though other parts of Circle College have Akasurip.”

Maisie felt kind of sorry for the kid. He had a funny accent too. She thought she knew how he felt. “I’m the only one like me here at the College now too,” said Maisie. “Actually I’m the only Tellurian outside the homeworld, Earth in English, ever and the only one anywhere with Talent.” Maisie felt a little lonely. Actually very lonely. She worried she was going to cry.

Maisie then noticed Olef was listening carefully. Chainai was resting her finger tips of one hand on his exposed wrist and had her eyes closed. Why did her eyes seem so natural if she’s blind and how come the amazing Talent and technology couldn’t heal her? Maisie wondered had Olef remembered what had happened to the orb. Chainai and Olef looked incongruous as Olef was tall, though not for a Penthnegin, with slightly sparkly almost scaly skin, nearly like mica and Chainai a Karnd, so a good bit shorter than herself, though she was taller than Kaytim who seemed to be at the shorter end of Karnd sizes. Chainai having the strange extremely long white hair and very pale skin typical of the very northern Karns from the Arctic Circle, but yet very large dark brown irises. All Karns have fairly dark brown eyes no matter what hair or skin colour. Yes, she’d figured out how to look up geographic origins of Karns by appearance.

“You have been here some weeks, Timot?” asked Maisie.

“Nearly three weeks,” he said quietly.

“You didn’t make any friends yet?”

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"I've not made any special friends yet, Maisie. I'm older and a bit different."

Suddenly Chainai spoke in a flat voice, though decisively. "Maisie, you need help, quite quickly," she looked at Olef. "Yes, Olef is recovered enough to help too. We need him because he is the only person on the whole planet that knows you. It wasn't such an issue on the starship, but I should have dealt with it then, I kept finding excuses to wait. Here with so many Mentalists it's a disaster. Can you come to my apartment after you meet the Arch Chancellor? Timot, we need you too. You are having a special effect on Maisie, perhaps because she knows Virona your aunt. You were blasting me with emotion so hard I could nearly hear Timot with your ears, without Olef telepathically sending!"

"No problem." Maisie got up. "I guess I better go. Kaytim, I see the Arch Chancellor has gone. I can figure how to get to the Arch Chancellor's office. Thanks for everything so far. When do I need to see you?"

"I will call at 4th bn."

"B-N?"

"Before noon."

"Ah, the starships didn't work like that," responded Maisie.

Maisie headed for the office. Now she figured Chainai could listen to conversations easily if touching Olef with less effort for Olef. That's why he seemed distracted, relaying to Chainai. Maisie easily found the Arch Chancellor's office and knocked. Then pressed a button. Somehow it seemed so ordinary people having doorbells; they had had them on the starship too.

The Arch Chancellor Millifore himself answered the door.

7: Plonnis Responds

The floor to ceiling curtains were closed, but Maisie thought that probably the window did face her apartment. The desk was cluttered with papers, books, Slabs and some jars. Some shelves had ornaments, or perhaps the mortar and pestle was used for something. There were a lot of books. Maisie had expected everything to be electronic, digital on the Slabs. There were a lot of cupboards too but without any obvious locks, knobs or handles. The room had a number of stools and chairs, one just right for Maisie was already pulled up facing the desk. Millifore ushered her in and locked the very heavy thick door.

“We don’t want to be disturbed,” he explained as he sat behind the desk. “Do sit down. I don’t bite,” he laughed. “It’s certainly curious how Telepaths and Empaths can hear your thoughts without wanting to. I trust Chainai to help you with that later after we meet. We spoke telepathically while you were on the way here,” he explained. “I’ve suggested a solution to Chainai.”

They looked at each other in silence for a moment.

“I’ve been doing this, meeting a new student, for hundreds of years, but you are something I have not encountered before.”

“Because I’m from Earth, a Tellurian?”

“No, not that, though your people are beyond anything the culture in this part of the Galaxy has yet encountered. Your people have seriously shaken the complacency of the Galactic Council, which is good. The nuclear missile attack on the starship was unexpected. They should have had contingency plans. I did warn them long ago.”

“I didn’t know about that.”

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"It was when the Earth Shuttle had docked, before Juili and her team went to look for you."

"Obviously it failed and wasn't reported."

"All parties agreed that it would be best not to make it public."

"Who fired it?"

"We don't know. Either a sea launch, by nation unknown, China, North Korea or Russia. Close enough to have been any of those. Some seem less likely candidates according to Plonnis."

He poured two beakers of Jhai.

"We never had anyone so old start as a student. Of course we won't tell them you are twenty-four. I won't actually lie, but it's best if the students initially think you are a bit younger than Timot, say twelve to fourteen, and then gradually discover you are an adult. None of them knows what a Tellurian is like. They'd have no idea if you are typical for a ten or sixteen year old. You're ignorant of much culture. You perhaps might not even be the most socially or emotionally mature for your age. I have the reports of the tests you took from the starship and the data from NASA, ESA, the Internet and broadcasts. For a few very specialist aspects of engineering Tellus is ahead of our entire civilisation, everything else very far behind, even generally in engineering and biology, hardly a surprise when we have had electricity for nearly 7000 years. We downloaded most of your college courses and public data, fiction, news, everything accessible. So we know overall Tellus is quite far behind in every field. The UN and others gave us some additional restricted material. The Masters here have evaluated your Tellurian education versus our Circle College requirements. You personally appear to be beyond what is needed in most of mathematics,

programming, physics and much of Alchemy even for a Master because traditionally we only do ordinary education to your high school level and concentrate on Talent. Even on your world many educated people have little beyond basic numeracy and literacy and no science. You are a little weak in biology and totally lacking in all aspects of Talent, history, politics, law and culture compared to any Apprentice. Each Master will each interview you in person. This term is well under way, you'll go into a basic generic Apprentice class and then next term more specially chosen groups. Classes change pretty much every term based on performance anyway, not age, so classes can have age ten to sixteen together. The priority must be education relating to your Talents and secondarily to Caemorian culture. Actual academic performance isn't really important. Social integration and skills is most important when you have Talent."

He drank some Jhai. Then stared at Maisie for a while. She said nothing, assuming that this was some sort of lecture and she'd be asked if expected to comment or question.

"Chainai has agreed to be your Mentor, such arrangements are private, so don't go around telling people. Also some others will meet with you and Chainai, such as Timot and Olef. Such private groups are often formed for study purposes, it will serve well if people think that. You should absolutely tell Kaytim anything and everything. Chainai and her little group will double check your Talents. But no-one has ever had more than a secondary Talent. It was policy on the starship not to mention your Mage talent as being a Warlock, an energy Talent was enough to cope with. Officially I will not yet notice Chainai's group. I suggest

you tell anyone asking that it's just a convenient study group. It's not unknown. Any questions so far?"

"Why have I got an apartment and an assistant?" asked Maisie. She thought she'd ask Kaytim or Chainai about mentoring.

"An Assistant, not assistant. Partly because you will shortly be a Journeyman studying to be a Master, as fast as is possible. Partly because you are the only one with your Talent right now in training, also you are an adult, so sharing with young teenage girls wouldn't be appropriate. Since you are from outside our culture you need an Assistant just like Kaytim. You'll find she's not a typical Karnd. I have other reasons too, I don't want to explain right now. You are obviously far more educated and older than any Apprentice and even some Journeymen, apart from Talent. There is a University at Laramos, the best for science and technology, you can visit it eventually, you'll find you are under-educated compared to them. You are far older than any other Apprentice ever. It's always been a possibility at the Arch Chancellor's discretion. There may be some foolish and very young Apprentices that may resent it. I think they will realise they are wrong. Anyone above Apprentice usually has at least one Assistant. You are technically above the regular Apprentice and far older than any Apprentice has ever started, but you can't be confirmed as a Journeyman until certain exams relating to your Talent are passed, that's the law. However you'll notice many Karnd Novices, Acolytes and Apprentices have a special necklace or bracelet. This gives an alert if they leave the campus or tamper with it. That's not required for you either. The tracker is fitted to many that have any relatives or contacts on Caemoria." He

replenished the Jhai from a flask and produced biscuits.
“Help yourself.”

“Thanks,” replied Maisie, slightly dazed by the amount of lecturing.

“Now the other matter. It’s important you only speak of the Orb and Olef’s experience to Olef, Chainai and Timot. Well, Kaytim too I suppose. Also that you get Chainai to help stop you broadcasting your thoughts, or whatever strange thing it is. It can’t actually be broadcasting. There is a rogue Telepath. So here is a herbal potion you can all take daily, this is enough for some days, this is the medicine you saw me take. You can help Timot make more,” he passed over a paper with a recipe. “Please memorise this and destroy it. I know already you are exceptionally well educated by your own standards, you have an unusual ability to memorise material and totally uncanny ability with language. Look, and then repeat this,”

He turned a large Crystal Slab to Maisie. It had a list of the circles, the colours, gems recommended for ornamentation or jewellery, names of Talents, attributes and strangely a set of English equivalents.

“Are not the English names a trifle arbitrary?” asked Maisie. “Kaytim told me them in Karndic and English, but I’ve not memorised them yet.”

“The first is the only really appropriate one,” Millifore seemed apologetic, “possibly also the last one. It’s not important as for many years you’ll only be speaking Karndic.”

Maisie studied them closely while they both drank several cups Jhai. At last she passed the Slab back. “I think I can remember them now.”

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“Good. Now show me your amazing memory, what are the colours and arbitrary English names of the Seven Talents,”

Maisie closed her eyes for a moment and thought of a rainbow.

“Yes, a rainbow is just the same here,” Millifore agreed. “I suppose it’s physics.”

“The Circles or Talents in order with English names are:

Brown: Soratrin, Mentalist; Empath, Telepath, Puppetry.

Red: Talnarasd, Wizard; a bit like Telekinesis, single large objects can be moved without touching them.

Orange: Milrangh, Mage; able to manipulate very many minuscule things simultaneously.

Yellow: Gromeric, Alchemist; able to change or influence chemical reactions, like a Catalyst or the reverse, they seem to affect entropy.

Green: Silwornic, Sorcerer; either changes shape, or another’s shape, species I think. Or an Arch Sorcerer can do both.

Blue: Wighlardh, Warlock; can move energy or control energy.

Violet: Dulranin, Enchanter; somehow traps Talent to make objects that can operate on their own. Can use Talents of others in the object.

Can I make some comments?”

“All exactly correct. I apologise too that this information was hidden from you and people advised to be very oblique about it on the starship. Given the lack of Talent and amount of magic in Tellurian fiction, or myth and legend it was thought best by the Committee that run the starship as we don’t regard this as magic. You may comment or ask?”

7: Plonnis Responds

"Warlock seems very ill suited," she complained. "Have you read the connotations in English, or a translation, you don't read English?"

"It's usually up to the contact team to decide on translations. I don't have your amazing language skills, which I think are unparalleled in our written records going back almost 10,000 years, but you told Chainai your memory is a trick you have learned? I've heard of memory tricks. I don't know more than a handful of English words. There is something very odd about how quickly you have become natively fluent in Karndic. Do you have alternate English suggestions?"

Maisie thought about it. "No, as both Wizard and Mage are used. Mage is short for Magician anyway, which more often implies an entertainer. I can see that other than mentalists and shape-shifters there is no good match between Talent and our Earth terms in English, French, German and Chinese which I'm extremely fluent in. I also know some Hindi, Japanese, Spanish, Portuguese, Russian and Italian. Oddly almost no Irish. That's complicated politics."

"So we will stick with Warlock for English. You'll be using the Karndic word anyway, who would you be speaking English with? I suppose you may write to people on Tellus, what you call Earth, occasionally, I hope you do. I know Olef learnt a little. You'll want to speak Karndic or even learn his own language. You have also summarised the Talents well.

"Now the other special matter. I think a rogue Arch Telepath able to exercise Puppetry controlled Olef to steal the Orb. The only people that could possibly want it are the Higest Schism of the Nulest Clerics. The Clerics are united in regarding all Talent as an Abomination, but also are all opposed to theft or

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violence of any kind. So it's quite a puzzle. Officially Nikos, our Deputy Chancellor and Arch Telepath is in charge of the investigation in the College and Captain Lin of Laramos City is in charge for the Government. But you, or Chainai, Olef or Timot, should not discuss it with either of them. Think only of your studies if you are near any Empaths or Telepaths.

"I think now you had better go to Chainai. Her doorbell alert signals to her locator, so she can answer the door even if she is alone. Do call on me if you any problems that Kaytim, Chainai or Matron Demy can't solve. Kaytim has no Talent, but she is a very wise and educated young woman. I hope you do trust her as friend, almost like a sister."

"Well thanks," said Maisie as she got up. "Yes, on Tellus there is no such thing as a photographic memory. I studied and learned tricks to help my memory. I'm sure I don't have an especially amazing memory. I like intellectual tricks."

Arch Chancellor Millifore got up and unlocked the door.

"One more thing, Maisie, the reports suggest you have left no real friends behind. In a sense you now have a clean page, part of qualifying as a Journeyman is demonstrating social responsibility. Friendships are an evidence of that. The academic work is less important."

"Yes," said Maisie. But Maisie didn't quite understand, at least not immediately. He'd said that several times, so somehow it was important. Somehow even as a child she'd never made friends. She realised that Sharon was practically the only acquaintance. Though they had had nothing in common at all.

Maisie still didn't know why Millifore was telling her this stuff about the Orb. Maisie thought about it as she headed across the moonlit courtyard. Why no outdoor lights she wondered? She stopped and looked at the unfamiliar stars. The moon was the wrong size, perhaps it seemed larger, and obviously differently cratered. The Milky Way was more obvious though than on Earth, but a different shape. The Karndic literally translated as foaming river.

So he thought a Telepath had manipulated Olef to Steal the Orb of Ghillion. The main Nulest Clerics and the Government both thought the College had done it, but couldn't figure why. The Arch Chancellor had thought some faction of the Nulest Clerics called the Hingest was most likely. Who was the strong telepath that had messed up Olef? That was worrying. He'd also given her a pep talk and thanked her for coming to the College. As if she had a choice really. It would have been gross stupidity not to come. Maisie suspected though that a return trip even after three to eight years of college wasn't too likely, never mind breaking of training which would be stupid. She just couldn't see who would foot the bill. The Search is what they called finding Talent with teams on two barren planets doing nothing else apart from Talent Searching on unknown worlds. Maisie couldn't see the economic argument for anyone to throw away Talent when it is so rare and expensive to find and train.

She pressed the button beside the door on the apartment under her own. Maisie was sure that was what Dean Shareena meant.

It was well furnished, it transpired it had been Chainai's before she went to the Listening post

assignment. There was a low table surrounded by low backless couches and higher pouffes. Maisie could see how that would suit many races including Akasurip. Indeed the young cat creature was already there with Olef and Chainai. Chainai sat down after bringing Maisie in and poured a hot cup of Jhai from the flask. Maisie thought of a dancing pink elephant to avoid thinking of what she started to think about Chainai and her locator accuracy.

Olef laughed.

“Well?” said Maisie to break the ice, though she supposed Olef had, then sipped the tea like drink. Maisie wondered again what was in it.

“At least you are aware now of your broadcasting,” *At least you are aware now of your broadcasting*, Olef said and sent telepathically for Chainai’s benefit. Maisie got a faint echo of everything he said.

Chainai explained in her flat voice. “You will be starting classes tomorrow, but no-one will do more than mention your broadcasting, which isn’t broadcasting, once as a curiosity. It only affects true telepaths that have unlocked their talent and apparently a few Empaths. The normal procedure is that if you have any kind of problem you want attention for you contact Matron, she’s a Karnd called Demy. She then deals with it herself, she is an Empathic Telepath and primarily a healer Mage, or she sends you to an appropriate specialist. This is for health, Talent, personal, relationship issues and your accommodation.”

Maisie nodded. “I saw Matron Demy not long after I arrived, she said you would help. She also says I’m an Adept Mage. Though I don’t really know what that means. Or indeed at all what a Warlock is.” Maisie felt

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the slight echo of Olef repeating what she said telepathically.

“I agree,” continued Chainai. “I will also give some lectures and training classes as I’m a Master in training level and at least Adept in Empath and Mentalist Talent.”

“Remind me again of the training levels?” asked Maisie.

“Anyone found by Search suspected to have Talent is a Novice, a black robe,” explained Chainai. “When Talent is confirmed they are an Acolyte, a grey robe. If it happens that they have none, or too little to ever be significant they then leave at the Novitiate stage. Some stay as personal practical Assistants to Journeymen and Masters, we don’t call them servants, nor is the fact their Talent didn’t develop ever alluded to. But I’m getting ahead. Then when exact Talents are completely clear, the Circle they are in, some have a secondary Circle, they become Apprentices. They get the pale coloured robes signifying Basic Talent, but never a stole. The Journeyman, a qualified Apprentice gets a stole. If a Journeyman would wish to teach or learn more, they study to be a Master. The strength or quality of Talent is Basic, Adept or Arch level, separate to the levels of learning.”

“There is another thing the Arch Chancellor spoke of, the Orb of Ghillion!” exclaimed Maisie. “Also this.” Maisie put the packet of powder and a recipe on the table. “I’m to help Timot make more, I didn’t quite understand but we four have to take this once daily.”

Olef groaned and Chainai shook her head sadly. Chainai sniffed the powder, then put some into the flask of Jhai and emptied it into all their cups.

"Drink it up, I'm sure it's morglin, it blocks Telepaths from reading your mind," she explained. "It certainly smells like it."

Timot lifted the recipe.

"Why is the Arch Chancellor Millifore telling me this stuff," asked Maisie, "did you really take the Orb, Olef?"

"Yes," said Olef, "I'm afraid I do remember that now, not that there was any doubt it was me, the question was why. I've spoken with Millifore, Dean Shareena and Arch Mentalist Telepath Nikos, with Chainai in the meeting too, I don't remember what happened after or before though. My shape shifting power was used to defeat the vault security. Also I can't begin to imagine why Millifore has told you. All he has told me is that he doesn't think I was responsible, Chainai agrees.

"Chainai is one of the strongest ever Empaths and really should be recognised as Arch Empath. Some think that might be what blocks her vision and hearing leaving her blind and deaf, the snag with that theory is that there is no record of such a condition. The senses are physically functional. That's why they haven't fitted any prosthetics or grown replacements. We can't fix Chainai, as we don't understand what is broken. I'm actually primarily a shape shifter, a Sorcerer and secondarily a Telepath. The memories of all the training of my secondary Talent, Telepathy is back, or mostly, but I still have no memory or understanding of shape shifting and other memories are missing. I've had one relapse which Chainai quickly undid, so I can't really do without her for a while. I have graduated but have to re-sit some college exams to prove I have reliable memories of all the training—"

Chainai interrupted. "We need to try and teach Maisie to block her intermittent broadcast effect to Mentalists.

Then we can discuss this too. I was wary of trying on the starship. Timot we need you too, the Arch Chancellor explained some things to me. Are you willing Maisie?"

"Yes, but why you three?"

"The Arch Chancellor thinks it's a good idea." Chainai reached over and tapped Timot on the shoulder. "He doesn't always explain, but mostly he's right. Timot, don't try to actively engage your healing talent, as you are not trained but release it emotionally by thinking of Maisie being disturbed and as if you imagine her watching Virona your aunt. Maisie isn't sick, Millifore says this ability to upset Mentalists is likely an interaction of Mage and Warlock talent. He thinks we've not encountered it because it's a very rare combination, especially at adept level of secondary Talent. He has a theory as to why it's erratic, but won't tell me. He wants us to form our own conclusions.

"Olef and I can then push the flow of yours and Maisie's emotions together and Olef mentally show Maisie how telepaths block telepaths, though that may not be relevant, it can't be really," Chainai mused. "I hope Maisie will see herself what she is doing as it's not constant. We will sit on the floor after we get the martial arts practice mat. Then I will initiate a deep Empathic link for us all."

Chainai opened a chest with a mat in it and then Timot and Olef rolled it out. They sat, Timot kneeling and the rest of them cross-legged. They held hands in the middle. Then Olef got up and turned off the table lamp. There was now very little light.

"The dark will help," suggested Olef, "relax Maisie."

Maisie felt the strange mental touches she'd first felt in her starship apartment from Virona and Chainai. She relaxed and mentally listened. It's hard to explain.

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After a very long time Chainai spoke.

“What did you sense, Timot?” said Chainai.

“I sensed a strong Mage Talent clearly,” said Timot, “probably with healing ability.”

“Yes, Olef, what did you sense?” Chainai intoned like a chant.

“I can’t really sense the kind of Talent clearly other than my own, like most Talents, Maisie,” Olef explained. “Though each circle is slightly linked to the one on either side so I can sense very strong Talent of Mages or Enchanters, either side of Mentalists, or quite strong Alchemists or Warlock Talents, either side of my Sorcery Talent, and sense Talent in a general way without knowing the kind. Similarly later when trained Timot will be able to sense Wizards and Alchemists as well as Mages, as he is a Mage. Maisie, Chainai can sense average Mages or Enchanters Talents as well as Mentalist Talent, specifically as well as any kind of Talent at all. Also any Talent is sensitive to Talent nearby in use. Mentalists can often sense any Talent near by or at long range without knowing which Talent it is. So you have no Mentalist, Wizard, Alchemist, Sorcerer or Enchanter Talent, but I sense very strong Mage and Warlock—”

“What exactly is an Enchanter?” Maisie interrupted. She raised a faint glow on her hands.

“The Arch Chancellor has to be one,” explained Olef, “as an Enchanter stores the Talents of others in specially made objects called Artefacts. The Orb of Ghillion, a golem or a fusion orb power source containment are enchanted objects – Artefacts. Often by linking with other Talents so all significant Enchanters have Mentalism, Telepathy, as a secondary Talent or they are very limited, well a Telepath can help. Anyway obviously

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you are really in the Sixth Circle, a Warlock, and secondary Mage, Third Circle, Talents. The Dean Shareena, Arch Chancellor Millifore and Arch Mentalist Telepath Nikos, Librarian Ashrit and Matron Demy should know. That's the entire inner cabinet of the Circle College Council. You must be a very powerful Adept Warlock as it's your primary Talent and your secondary Mage Talent is at Adept strength." Olef put on the light. "That's amazing, that was nearly two hours though I've not done this in a group before."

"I think I understand now how to avoid broadcasting," said Maisie, "but it's not really how you suggested. I can't explain it really, almost the opposite. Certainly I think it's actually really the Mentalist Talent of other people thinking about me that causes it. That's obviously the main reason why it was erratic. It's not me broadcasting."

"That's good. We should go to bed now," Chainai urged. "You three have lessons tomorrow. One last thing, your name isn't really Maisie? The meeting in your Dublin apartment seems so long ago!"

"No, my mum wanted Mei Zhen, it's my official name. Maisie is a Western name. It's not even a translation, though it means pearl and Mei Zhen is beautiful treasure or pretty pearl. Really only my mum ever called me Mei Zhen, so I prefer Maisie if you don't mind, even though it's only a nickname."

"I understand," said Chainai. "I am an Empath, so I do know how you feel about it. If you ever change your mind do say."

"When can we meet again, when are we free?" asked Maisie. "Also what do I do in the morning?"

"Perhaps after supper at seventh?" Timot suggested.

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"Yes, after supper is fine Timot," Chainai replied. "Maisie, in the morning Kaytim will show you where to go. Timot and Olef will be in the same class. You don't have me for any classes, but I will be lecturing some Journeymen students. I will give you some private Mentalist tuition, Maisie."

Timot hurried off to beat his dorm curfew.

"Thanks for everything," said Maisie as she headed for the door. "I never felt so relaxed before. Always I feel like a wound up clock."

"I don't understand the idiom," said Olef.

"Yes," said Maisie, "that will take me the longest time, appropriate local metaphor, simile, idiom." Maisie thought about it. Belfast and Dublin seemed unreal now after nearly eight months away. Sharon was probably married now, she and Frank hadn't said much about the peppercorn rent, probably embarrassed. Maisie wondered would they start a family at once as she was no spring chicken. Yet the only part of Caemoria Maisie had seen was the airport outside Laramos and the mountain highway to the College. She'd not even seen this part of it never mind the whole complex. Yet she felt more at home and relaxed than she ever had after the deep empathic healing session. Olef was already a friend, She was sure now the others would be real friends too. Something she'd never experienced before.

Kaytim was standing at Maisie's door.

"You're waiting for me?" Maisie winced, it sounded aggressive.

"You didn't give me a key, so I had to wait outside. Luci told me you were breaking up, so I wasn't waiting long."

"Come in then for a minute," said Maisie, "though I'm tired and going to bed. All this extra gravity."

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“Yes, that was explained to me,” said Kaytim. “There should be a spare key in the kitchen.”

They went to the kitchen and Kaytim found the key.

“You don’t want the second bedroom?”

“No, we Assistants prefer sharing the larger apartment taking the entire ground floor. If you were living in your own place it would be different. Perhaps you can get the bed taken out and use it as a study. The desk in the lounge is a bit strange. Do you need anything now?”

“No, I’ll go to bed.”

“You don’t need to talk about anything?” insisted Kaytim.

“Maybe we can talk tomorrow, I’m tired.”

“Goodnight then.” Kaytim locked the door behind her.

Then Maisie wondered was she expecting to hear what the meeting at Chainai’s was about. Certainly she had been very keen to talk. Maisie wondered was she very anxious that they be friends. Maisie realised she’d be mad to try and change Kaytim for someone else.

Maisie studied the instructions on her Crystal from the Wafer for emailing people on Earth that Plonnis had given her. Something about sync-sats and the Crystal Net made it possible, there was some sort of communications agreed between the LEO satellites the Intergal One had left. An agreement between the UN and the Galactic Council. Maisie re-read Chainai’s and Pedar’s very detailed official reports about how she was searched. She finished her composite partially imagined version based on the detailed reports of Pedar, Chainai and Virona and emailed it to Jack Casey, after encrypting it, as well as putting it in her journal on her laptop. Maisie sent a clear message to Sharon at the office email as she was sure Sharon could only use

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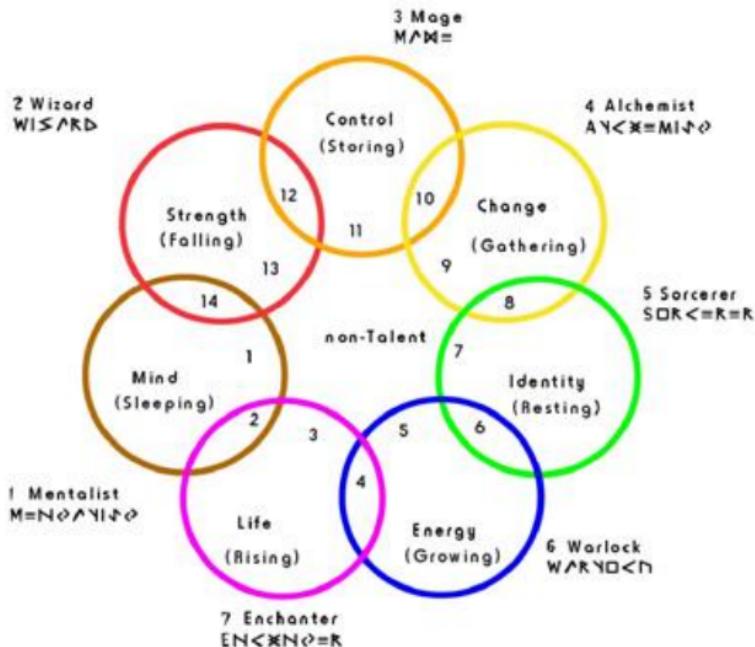
encryption if she and Frank had their own PC. Maisie resolved to write her experiences as it happened and then see later how her perceptions changed, even if she didn't email more. Maisie had given Jack an encryption program and five keys, private ones for him and Sharon and public ones for the three of them.

8: First Classes

Maisie had learnt a lot on the starships and now here on Caemoria in the College it started to make more sense. Unfortunately she didn't make notes on it all, so at times the narrative is unreliable. Maisie knew already there are things about Talent she mustn't explain to non-Talents. Like the starship, it's hard to accept this is a 5000 to 7000 years more advanced civilisation than Earth's. Very little on the surface seems different. Voice control exists but little used. Doors and lights are quite ordinary, though lights can be set to go off automatically if no-one is in the room, or if no-one is in nearby rooms, or pre-programmed. Heating controls don't seem to be accessible. Maisie found the heating was set less than she'd like. There was nothing obvious in the apartment to change it.

Such a change in the weather. Yesterday it was bright and sharp. She woke very early, because the day is longer here and not the same as starship time, but quite stiff so she had another bath. Maisie was reminded again that the gravity is a bit more than 30% stronger on Caemoria than Earth. A storm has arrived with rain lashing the windows. So it's the end of late autumn, called Falling, the fourteenth month.

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Seasons, Months and Talents

Maisie looked out at the weather now that the dawn had broken and examined the wardrobe. She picked a dress with a hood and its matching robes were more substantial with a tall rear collar. A matching cloak with an outer hood completed the set. She found thicker leggings and heavier, longer socks to go over the tights. There was a clearly labelled box for soiled clothes in the storage area. Maisie went to the kitchen-dinette, on the left of the washroom, which had plenty of space for four to eat. She had quickly glanced at it the previous night and now started examining the cupboards and drawers. Then the front doorbell alert chimed. Maisie opened the door and it was Kaytim in a very wet and voluminous, for her, blue hooded cloak. The water was rolling off

quickly, as obviously it was hydrophobic.

"Hi come in," said Maisie, "sorry about chasing you off last night. I'm not a naturally social person. I thought it was a bad idea when I was so tired."

Kaytim shook the cloak in the stone flagged hallway and then closed the door. "How did you sleep?" she asked as she hung the now almost dry cloak in the alcove behind the door. "I didn't want to use my key till you are more used to me."

"Oh, grand. Like a log," explained Maisie. "I think my body clock is still on ship time though as I woke before dawn." Maisie walked toward the kitchen with Kaytim tagging behind. Though not very tall, short really, Maisie felt a little like she was being followed by a child. Maisie was quickly disabused of that thought.

"I'd never heard of logs sleeping?" Kaytim mused. "I suppose an English idiom."

"Yes, it will take me a while to drop those and learn local ones. Do we eat here or somewhere else for breakfast?"

"Here or anywhere else," Kaytim explained, "such as the cafés or restaurants. A few are open all night. Only supper in the big hall, which is free. There is fresh food and other things to eat here as well as Jhai, Molruk and juices to drink. Here is cheaper and private."

"Uh," Maisie pointed at the open cupboards. "On ship mostly Olef made meals or I ate out. I don't really know how to make anything except Jhai and Molruk, well I can do Tellurian cooking."

"What do you like for Rising?" Kaytim asked.

"Fruit chopped into the mixed grains and nuts?" suggested Maisie. "I did try to make that, but I can't find the fresh fruit or fruit juice here, I don't like it dry. Also

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a big mug of Molruk." Maisie fetched the containers of grains and nuts.

Kaytim fetched a second bowl and spoon. "Suits me too, though I find it fine dry. Did you check the chiller?"

Maisie looked dumbly at her.

"Over there." She pointed behind Maisie. Maisie realised that Kaytim took it for granted they she would eat together. Perhaps she was also like a paid companion.

Maisie opened a cupboard not yet checked, obviously, and in a chilled drawer indeed was a mix of whole Caemorian fresh fruit. Basically a hidden built in fridge like in the starship, except larger and better disguised. Kaytim had fetched a knife and board. They each chopped their own choice of fruit. Maisie poured the mugs as she had started the brew before Kaytim arrived. She felt stupid.

"The Bursar's office is inconveniently up the tower on top of the Energy building, so I brought a printed copy of the timetable and book list from it," explained Kaytim. "If the Wildgrave hadn't come we would have got them yesterday. I hope he's not going to be a pest."

"Books?" squeaked Maisie. "Not on the Crystals?" Maisie was amazed at Kaytim's choice of phrase as literally she was calling Wildgrave Plonnis vermin. Maisie wondered what Caemorian vermin looked like and what they spoiled. Anyway pest seems a fairer translation, surely vermin people didn't have the same connotations here as in English. Still, she'd been told several times that Kaytim was unusually forthright.

"Well, the timetable and some other material is on it," Kaytim explained. "There is no colour on the Slabs so you need books too, which is why the Library will lend you copies. Printers can use many ink colours, up to

hundreds, to make it look fine for all species. The Crystal is too small, you do have a Slab? You have printed books on Earth even though you have colour electronics as well. So you don't have any books already?"

Maisie shook her head and studied the list. "No Caemorian books, I have a load I brought from my Dublin apartment. I don't know when the rest of my baggage arrives. I do have a Slab, Virona got it for me shortly after I woke up on the Intergal One starship. It sort of does English badly, I only use Karndic on it now. How do you know about Tellurian electronics, and you used the English word Earth?"

"I have full unrestricted access to all the information the Intergal One collected or was given," she said, "it's on a need to know basis and I need to know. I've been studying it for three months now, since I accepted the role with you. Have you a bag suitable for books?"

"Maybe, hold on." Maisie rushed to her room and got her strong Tellurian backpack she used to stick the computer, lunch, books and sundries in for her last job. Maisie put her Slab in it.

"This do?" she asked. Maisie wondered exactly why Kaytim's position as an assistant meant she had to learn all about Earth.

Kaytim looked at it. "From Earth? It'll be fine, unusual style."

"Mmm," Maisie nodded, "from Earth, Tellus."

"OK let's head," Kaytim took Maisie's bag and book-list and got up.

"What?"

"Classes!" Kaytim was nearly at the door and donning her cloak. "I'll show you to the Herbology class in the first tower."

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Maisie grabbed her outer robes and cloak. Kaytim sure could move quickly on those little legs.

As they headed up the upper courtyard through the rain to the main building Kaytim explained, "I'll get the books and meet you at first break, follow the others in the class. Olef and Timot you know?"

Maisie was already too breathless to answer. The first tower was the tallest but at the extreme north east corner of the main building. Herbology on the ninth floor, no lift. She began to wonder about Karnds, did they deliberately ignore technology? Kaytim left her at the large door clearly marked Herbology One in large Karndic glyphs. At least they used an alphabet and not ideograms like the Tellurian Orientals or the Lorm. Maisie wondered about learning the Lorm language. Also why only one language per world? She'd not bothered yet trying to learn anything other than Karndic as everyone spoke it. Fortunately she was early and only a couple of people were already there. It was an intimate class room with maybe eighteen large desks with stools. The desks, with two section legs for adjustable height, and stools with a screw pillar under the seat for adjustable height. Maisie assumed they had decided stools with an adjustable seat was the best solution for arbitrary anatomy of the different species. Though all were approximately humanoid. No-one exotic like in the Sector General series of books by James White she'd read as a teenager.

A couple of Apprentices turned and looked, stared really. Maisie moved to the side of the doorway and wondered where to sit. An elderly Lorm came in via door at the front. Obvious from his ribbed skin like the pattern on those smaller tasty melons. The Lorm have bark like ridges on their skin and thin fingers with

harder wider tips but no nails. They are also very strict Vegans.

“You are obviously Maisie,” he stated in strongly accented Karndic. “Come and sit up here at this desk, it’s not taken, I’m Kliidan your Herbology Master.” He pointed with an outstretched gnarled hand in the formal host style. Maisie had learnt all the Karnd hand gestures on the voyage. He was a little taller than Maisie. Maisie wondered who had pre-adjusted her chair. She felt like Goldilocks, not that she looked remotely like Goldilocks, though she’d wanted to look like Goldilocks when she was a child in the prep school for Victoria College in Belfast.

Olef came in and was pointed to a desk at the back. Maisie wasn’t going to block any views either being at the edge. Actually apart from her skin, coarse raven hair, by European standards, and Tellurian human finger tips she could nearly pass as a Lorm in size and shape. All she needed was some fake bark like ridges and something slid over her nails and a wig, she mused. Her mixed ethnic Irish and Chinese background even gave her the right build and almost the complexion, rather odder looking on Caemoria than Earth due to the bluer light. In general Lorms are roughly the same size range and shape as Earth humans, Tellurians, but otherwise not at all similar.

Timot came in and gave Maisie a wave. He was on the desk behind her, also at the wall edge. He was a little taller than Maisie. A soft chatter built up as people rapidly arrived. Kliidan fetched a book from a drawer in his desk. He coughed and everyone was silent. Maisie had heard a sort of polite telepathic cough in her head. Of course he would be a Telepath, probably an Adept. The similar body language of the Aliens was unlikely but

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helpful. No doubt something would catch her out, like her use of English idioms, Maisie thought.

"I know you are all here," he explained, no doubt for Maisie's benefit, "but it will help our mature student Olef, a past student with us a short while, and our new student, Maisie Kelly from Tellus if I take the roll out loud in the traditional fashion. You can talk to Maisie at the next break."

He called the names:

Olef
Joran
Kantric
Timot
Maisie
Ulana
Joiseen
Hammale
Pasra
Mortat
Dynra
Taite
Nortan
Loucant
Fari Netat
Renit
Sollyam

Only one desk was empty. Each student, all very young as Maisie knew Timot was oldest at sixteen apart from Olef and herself, got up repeated their name and bowed to the Master and sat. Maisie tried to memorise them using the moving through rooms visualisation memory

trick and some memorable aspect of each of them. One other Penthnegin, Pasra, a young girl but already taller than Olef, three Karnds, a very young girl Dynra, she found out later was only ten, a boy Taite and a girl Renit. A Lorm girl and boy; Joiseen and Hammale. One of two Kelfari, the boy Joran. Boy twins Loucant and Nortan, Hoti, who are vaguely like flightless avians, very unusual for any relative to have Talent. Maisie didn't know if they were somehow from one egg or from two eggs at the same time. Kantric a male Malthin, they don't look remotely human, but are the most similar biologically. Mortat a Karnd boy but Fari Netat a Kelfari, who are closer in biology to a cephalopod than anything else and Sollyam another Hoti, girls.

All the rest got out Herbals, and various bits of equipment from drawers. Kliidan came over and showed Maisie what to get out.

"Take my Herbal until tomorrow," he offered. "I know you didn't have time to get your books yet. You studied this on the ship?"

"Er, actually no I didn't," admitted Maisie. "I didn't think it was important and thought maybe it was a bit outdated." Somehow Maisie felt she was saying exactly the wrong things. She grimaced. "No-one gave me any study program. I concentrated on learning Karndic and my own selection of culture and technology."

"Hmph," he grunted. "Well your teachers, apart from Olef and Chainai, are beyond reach now to complain to. Also I hear Olef didn't really know his own name when they found him. Every Talent needs to learn all the basics of Herbology, which on Caemoria also includes what you might regard as non-Talented medicine and plant biology as we all need to know how the body and herbs work to be effective Mages at healing."

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"I think people were not sure what to do with me till meeting the Arch Chancellor, so I mostly decided myself what to study, no-one on Tellus even knew anyone else existed. It was all a surprise."

"Well, you've learnt Karndic well, so I just assumed people on Tellus must have known it already."

Maisie wondered. Were Virona and Juili officially her teachers on the ship? She was realising too that some of the Karndic-English dictionary was a bit misleading, partly due to her own preconceived ideas. Maisie also wondered how much the Masters had been told.

He turned to the class. "Listen up. Olef should get the respect of a Journeyman. He has literally forgotten more than some of you will learn, so he has to repeat to fill the gaps." He pointed to Olef at the back, who obviously looked much older than any of them. He pointed at Maisie. "Maisie here has done some study on the starship in the last year and in her own world was very highly trained and competent," he paused as she blushed.

Maisie thought he just must have missed the aspect of isolation and first contact.

"She does probably already know more than some of you will ever learn, but almost nothing of Herbology. Please give her the respect due a Journeyman as on her own world she has completed college already, but remember in college work here she is a raw apprentice in many things. She knows little of our culture and is very far from home, the other side of the Galaxy, so do be sensitive."

Maisie realised on the starship, while learning Karndic, that here college really was just high school, or secondary school and that third level colleges and universities used the Karndic word always translated to

university in English. Did Kliidan know she'd completed university too? Ah, but that would give away her age. Though people here without Talent started junior school and high school when ready rather than at a particular age. They also finished when they needed to, rather than a particular age.

Maisie made no note of Kliidan's lecturing that night in her journal as nothing exciting or particularly interesting happened though she suspected already that Sollyam was unusually clumsy, not helped by Fari Netat whispering to her and making her giggle occasionally. Probably Kantric and Hammale thought they were jokers but seemed to her to be merely trouble makers. Certainly Kliidan gave them sharp glances. They must be daft, Maisie thought, to think of acting up when an Adept Telepath is the Master. Ulana, the Klah girl wasn't particularly insectoid looking, though she knew the Klah did have an exoskeleton, but they are a pale colour with velvet down and don't look like giant beetles. Also they do breath with a lung, or something like one, like coconut crabs Maisie supposed. Nor did Ulana seem like part of a hive mind, Maisie had read that their politics and to a lesser extent social interaction is hive like.

Maisie trailed out with Olef and Timot. They both knew the destination, a little café with fragrant Jhai, rich earthy Molruk, pure and carbonated fruit drinks, pastries and buns. It was in the basement of the second tower, wizardry, half way down the western side of the main building.

Kaytim was there and indicated Maisie's bag and got Maisie to sign a form on Kaytim's Crystal in lieu of Maisie being there in person with her own Crystal. Maisie used a Karndic transliteration of her name for the purpose. Maisie's Crystal was needed to confirm it.

"Thanks," said Maisie.

"Don't thank me until you feel the weight! See you at supper." She laughed and tripped off to wherever she lurked when not assisting.

Maisie considered that despite being smaller and a different species, Kaytim certainly looked older than herself or Chainai, but younger than Luci or the Karnd Masters she'd seen. Chainai seemed young for a Master, but Maisie supposed she had the Talent keeps you young thing, which suggested old looking Masters are ancient.

Apparently there was hardly time to do more than have a quick cuppa. Olef and Timot had naturally sat with her. The others had already had weeks to months to form their little cliques so there was no-one wanting the fourth stool that Kaytim had just abandoned. They got glances but curiously no-one was in a hurry to come and talk to them as Kliidan had suggested they do.

"I think," Timot whispered, "because you are a Warlock, probably Adept, and an unknown species people are just a little cautious, also we have to go shortly. Later will be better."

Maisie was positively wheezing when they reached the eighth floor, ten above the café. Really this place was mediaeval. Kaytim was right about the books too. At least it was a back pack and not a shoulder bag like everyone else had! So this was the Tower of Strength also called the Wizards Tower, the place to study wizardry, or witchery she supposed. At least Maisie now knew where the Dean had an office as they had passed it. There was plenty of sane ordinary five story buildings covering the hilltop without towers. So what was it used for? Why have classes in these daft towers? Maisie suspected now her Mage Talent was why a lot of exertion only exhausted her, she was only ever aching or

sore for a very short time in the past, though she could be stiff enough. No bruises if she banged something.

The room filled all the floor except the space in the tower needed for stairs. When the last student was in a large armoured trap door came down on pistons flush with the floor covering the stairwell. Benches were placed all around the wall. The middle of the roof was open to the sky.

“Do you remember me?” A wizened old Karnd woman asked Olef. She looked about a hundred years old. Maisie discovered later actually nearly five hundred.

“I do, Master Dhramini,” Olef replied softly.

The title puzzled Maisie for a moment, but she remembered that gender styled titles are very archaic or unknown on Caemoria except for nobles or government officials or other special cases. Chainai was Master Chainai too, no Mistresses of Talent.

Dhramini padded softly but surely around the loose rocks and boulders on the floor between the central pool and the benches.

“Ha! The Tellurian girl,” she chortled, placing her hand under Maisie’s chin and looking up into her dark brown eyes. “Woman really, you don’t look twenty-four,” she whispered.

“I err,” stammered Maisie, “have always looked very young for my age.”

“That would be the Talent,” she explained very softly. “By the time you are forty, if you didn’t blow yourself up, people would be seriously wondering about you as likely you will look much as you do now. Been there and done that. I’ve only aged much in the last fifty years really. Doesn’t last forever dearie.” Dhramini carefully studied Maisie’s face.

This had all been too quiet for the chattering class to hear. She let go, grunted and padded towards a book on the bench.

"No Wizard anyway," she commented loudly, obviously for the benefit of everyone. "You're a Warlock and a Mage. Or will be if you graduate without blowing your pretty head off. Now roll call!" Karndic uses the same word for Witch as Wizard according to the Karndic-English dictionary. Maisie thought then that Witch would have been appropriate for Dhramini.

Dhramini marked off the names as each person replied to her call. She called Maisie last.

"Maisie, Master." She bowed like the others.

"I presume Master Kliidan introduced you all to Maisie, so I'll proceed now with my lesson."

The lesson was practical demonstrations with a commentary of theory by Dhramini. A water spout in the pool, a mini dust devil brought through the roof and juggling rocks. Some more theory from the Adept Wizard. They took notes on their Crystals rather than Slabs as there were no desks. Finally some supervised practice for those with Wizard Talent. Presumably it was more practice than a lesson. Oddly the previously clumsy Sollyam was deft and already able to juggle large pebbles and roll a boulder along a marked out course. Just sitting on the bench. With arms folded. But Kantric and Hammale obviously had no Wizard talent, which is all about moving stuff without touching it. Wizards in reality can only move one thing at a time, so 'juggling' is an important skill as they can even hover many objects at once by changing which is the one thing at a time very quickly. Kantric and Hammale however whispered to each other a lot. Maisie wondered why people with no Wizard Talent took the class. Perhaps to understand

what a Wizard can do? Of course all these people had only recently joined the College.

Sollyam could manage three objects with quite a wobble. It was obvious she was very quickly switching between them. Fari Netat appeared to move a rock by moving her hand, but she was a trickster. She had talked Sollyam into doing it. In reality she is a Mentalist. Dhramini was obviously an Adept as it seemed as if she could levitate ten boulders at once. But according to her theory taught earlier only Mages could really do that, but only very small objects. Sand, air and even molecules or electrons, but thousands to millions depending how small. Maisie pondered again the mystery of how she moved energy from wires carrying electricity to something else to heat it? Why did that make her a Warlock, Sixth Circle and not a Mage, Third Circle? But apparently one had to learn the basic theories and see the practice of every Circle, every Talent, allegedly not magic, no matter what special stuff you had yourself. Perhaps messing with electrons generally was imagery but moving energy between groups of electrons was warlockery.

The trap door creaked open, time for another break. At least going down wasn't as tiring as climbing up. The café was crowded with older students who obviously didn't have a class shortly.

"There is another café near the library," Timot explained. "We won't have to attend Wizard classes for very long."

Maisie queued at the library entrance café and got a Jhai paying with her Crystal. She resolved to find out about Credits, like how to get some! The Credits they gave her on the Intergal One starship were very low last time she checked. Again Olef, Timot and Maisie sat

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together with the last fourth stool empty. She noticed though that Kantric and Hammale had not come with the rest of them.

Timot noticed too. "Kantric and Hammale are skiving off again. Up to something I think, no roll call at the Library."

"Won't they get in trouble?" asked Maisie.

This seemed to provoke Olef; "There are always a couple of idiots." He shook his head. "I remember in my first term I got led into trouble by an older guy very like Kantric!"

"What happened to the other guy?" asked Maisie. "Did he get expelled?"

"He got a very hard talking to from Arch Telepath Nikos, the Deputy Chancellor," Olef laughed. "Gantras, the ringleader of the trouble, was flinching at his own shadow for weeks."

"Not expelled?" she insisted.

"No-one is ever expelled," Olef explained. "That would be daft. If the Search made a mistake and there is no real talent, then obviously you'd not proceed from being a Novice and would leave. I thought you understood, no-one leaves the College till they are a Journeyman if they have proven Talent. The poorer your behaviour, the longer you have to stay. We got to go. I forgot to tell you that the Head Librarian Master Ashrit and Master Granis the boffin want to meet us."

"No Novice, Acolyte or Apprentice can leave the College until becoming a Journeyman," Timot emphasised, "unless there is a mistake and they have no Talent."

Maisie considered this, did that mean she couldn't change her mind and leave? How did Olef know about the meeting and she didn't? Ah, the Crystals, or

telepathy. Maybe they wouldn't know the glyphs in Karndic for her name unless someone told them, though Kaytim had known her glyphs, odd. Maisie suspected the Crystals were part technology and part magic as they never needed charged, later she learnt that while there is no magic that an Enchanted Artefact seems magical.

Timot went off with the others to learn more about accessing the library. Maisie was sure that she did know all about that from accessing the large library on the starships, basically an off-line copy of everything. Starships synchronised the entire data of all the worlds in the culture. She'd been boggled at the data storage a starship has. Actually even the Crystal could store more than many data-centres.

Olef pointed; "Head Librarian Master Ashrit, odd job man and boffin par-excellence Master Granis, Maisie."

[boffin is the nearest English equivalent of the Karndic nickname]

"Thanks Granis for the data and power and whatever amazing interface you cooked up for my computer." Maisie bowed to him. "Pleased to meet you Master Librarian Ashrit."

Granis looked at Ashrit who held his left palm out. Granis gave a quick curt bow to him.

"Maisie, it was a privilege and interesting challenge," he said as he nervously fingered a large slim package. "As you know the starships start uploading and downloading with a way station or a homeworld as soon as they Jump. I'm just a Journeyman Mage with a bit of engineering expertise—"

Ashrit interrupted, "As usual Granis is too modest. He's a technical genius and a very special Adept Mage, shortly to be a Master. Let's sit and have some Jhai while we talk."

They moved over to a round table in a panelled study and Granis closed the door. He put the package on the table and joined them. Already on it were four mugs and a flask of very fragrant Jhai beside a plate of very dark, thin, elongated biscuits.

"Have a finger biscuit and some Jhai while I talk," Ashrit gestured.

Olef – despite his usual diffidence – and Granis grabbed one each without hesitation. So Maisie did too; she wondered was Olef shy? She assumed it was safe for her to eat, actually if what Matron said was correct, even poison might be safe. Maisie had been assured that no generally eaten food would do her actual harm!

Mmm! A new taste, very nice indeed. Maisie concentrated on Ashrit.

"... reviewing the records," he continued. "I can see you not only know how to do every kind of Library access, possibly some never intended, but are also nearly as expert as our college programmers, well technically they are librarians, in our Karndic based communications and data scripting," he paused. "So for now all library periods are erased from your timetable. Honestly you could nearly give those classes, they are only for beginners, kids really. The Arch Chancellor agrees."

"Oh, I've been programming for over ten years, loads of systems, since I was just a kid," Maisie explained airily. "It seems to be just a natural talent," She suddenly realised she'd made a mistake as in Karndic that word always means Talent, you know what seems like magic, she should have said skill.

But Ashrit and Granis glanced at each other. "That raises an interesting idea we will look at another day. Your natural languages skills are quite remarkable too. I

think you mean skill, but I'm reluctant to... No matter, I must also complement you on your Karndic, you speak like any native Caemorian Karnd, perhaps with a trace of accent from your teachers, Olef the Penthnegin, perhaps also Captain Juili and Virona the Akasurip?"

"It's a natural ability, I mean skill," she stumbled. "I speak four Tellurian languages at a native level of fluency and can get by in several others, spoken and written. I can do five different alphabetic Tellurian scripts and two ideographic scripts. I've not started on any language here though other than Karndic and the main communications and data scripting or programming in Karndic."

He lifted the package and passed it to Maisie. "Open it, the Arch Chancellor thinks you should have this."

Maisie carefully unwrapped it and set it down. She'd learnt already how the Karnds loved to reuse stuff. She could use the wrapper some day for a present. It was larger than the usual Crystal based Slab.

Granis explained. "It's a less common model, very powerful." He tapped it on. "I got it modified over the last couple of months from the starship data and with help from Laramos University."

Ashrit cleared his throat.

"Actually really they did most of it. It was the Arch Chancellor's idea."

Maisie wasn't sure what he meant about modifications. It looked standard, though larger and twice as thick. She also wondered was he trying to take credit for someone else's idea and work. She brought up the library search portal and very quickly stroked and gestured in a string of Karndic. OK, yes, she was trying to show off. Succeeding too. Olef had seen her at this before so wasn't surprised. Granis and Ashrit though

looked suitably awe struck. Maisie refined the search of Granis's projects and quickly listed all the work he had done on the Crystal Slab. Now it was her turn to be surprised. Maisie spun it around to Ashrit and Granis.

"Ah!" Ashrit laughed. "I hope you haven't wasted your time after all Granis, you seem competent in Karndic on the usual interface."

"No, I appreciate it," explained Maisie. "I like to keep a diary, a journal in the Tellurian style, in English. I do have gaps in my Karndic vocabulary and also there is no direct Karndic for some Tellurian things, though Karndic uses loan words from other languages." She tapped and gestured and a physical panel popped out which was a standard English keyboard. She typed a little. Proper tactile keys too, though with no obvious gap. The screen opened an overlay tile with the previous results in passable English. She cleared the top tile and selected journal. The European journal interface appeared. Maisie experimentally typed a sentence with English and Mandarin Chinese using pinyin, the Roman-Latin alphabet. She saved it locally, whatever that emulation meant! Then sent it to her library account. She shut it off and pushed in the keyboard.

Maisie took out her Crystal and called up the account. The text was shown in Roman characters correctly, rather than Karndic glyphs.

"Hmm," she mused, "why does that work?"

Grenis showed his Crystal and put in his administration over-ride to access a student account. The contents were gibberish.

"You have a customised Crystal," he explained. "No one else has English interfaces, except on the starship and the scholars at ordinary universities studying Tellus, but they are using converted data, not native Tellurian

format files. Everyone else can only get English display of Karndic information by using the library translator, but you have the only three here, the Crystal and Slab Virona configured and the larger Slab we configured. Your native format files from your PC are gibberish on anything else, karndic systems that can even display Roman text can't do your ASCII or Unicode. Even on the starships. Yes, we have many loan words from the Akasurip, Lorm, Hoti, Penthnegin and Kelfari. To a lesser extent Klah, Malthin, Oriobani and Jayn. I imagine in time we will import some more Tellurian words. Of course 'Tellus', 'English', and 'Tellurian' are loan words now in Karndic."

"You have now Tellus and Tellurian which are English based on Latin because our more common word Earth is too generic and Human would be misleading," said Maisie warmly. "Thanks, it's not a waste of time. I do appreciate it. The Tellurian computer can't last too long and is too fragile to cart about. This is a complete emulated environment? I could ghost an exact copy of the storage and the applications would run?"

He nodded. "I think so, we may have to work on it together to fine tune it if you didn't mind? The University did most of the work. They have been analysing Tellurian information for nearly six months now as they got information via sync-sat, even before the Intergal One Jumped back to Grand Central."

"Mmm, be wonderful," agreed Maisie. She noticed only one delicious biscuit was left. *Olef!* She thought hard.

Have the last biscuit, he sent.

Granis and Ashrit laughed. Ashrit explained. "Now don't misunderstand, the big Crystal Slab is really a gift from the Arch Chancellor, no strings, really I was just

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the liaison between here and the University. Actually we are short of good programmers, because we only have clerical people really, so if eventually you do have some spare time for the odd programming project? You'd get paid of course."

"Excuse me," Olef apologised. "I need to go somewhere. See you supper time?"

Ashrit waved at him; "See you soon."

Maisie laughed. "I apparently have a lot of studying and socialising to do. I'll not forget the offer as I don't have any income right now. Is that the Arch Chancellor's idea that I should help here?"

"No, he never suggested it," confirmed Ashrit. "Grantis is keen that you should help here, but do check it with your Mentor or the Arch Chancellor. They may have other ideas for your spare time. I'm not sure why you'd have no income. We have increased your access too from the normal apprentice level at Virona's and Chainai's suggestion and the Arch Chancellor's agreement. You can now access anything a Journeyman can access. Please don't try out any practicals without Master supervision. You should have quite a substantial income by the way, based on your status here."

"Yes, I know not to experiment," Maisie considered. "You don't want the college demolished, I've never experimented. Look I'm quite safe." To demonstrate Maisie lit up her finger nails bright blue. Strangely they both flinched. The light did seem a lot brighter than last time; bright enough to cast harsh shadows.

"I think you should warn people before you do that trick," Ashrit urged. He turned to Grantis. "Well?"

"Er, yes," Grantis chewed his fingers nervously. "Can you do it a bit gentler and hold it on?"

Maisie did and found she could indeed tone it down. Curious it was more effortless. “Can’t feel any strain at all doing it at this brightness.”

Maisie concentrated on the colour to see if she could change it. She thought hard about electron energy levels and how a green LED worked. Gradually the colour was drifting more violet. Ah, she thought, and there was a definite cyan change instead. Granis was now gently touching her left index finger tip. Maisie concentrated and the light changed to green and started spreading on her hands and down Granis’s finger. He jerked slightly away and at once his finger was normal.

“Interesting,” he muttered.

Maisie stopped thinking about it and everything was normal.

“Well Granis?” Ashrit demanded.

“Something about that all right. You are definitely modulating the Sixth Circle energy discharge with Third Circle Mage Talent, I’ve read about it as a theoretical idea. Never seen it. I’m not sure exactly what that kind of Warlock Talent is good for, but then again most people don’t see any everyday use for Warlock powers like fireballs, blasts and force shields, only for helping to make Fusion Orbs. Or for shape-changing at all. I suppose if another Warlock is attacking, which is hard to imagine, the force shields are good. I guess though you can’t do force shields yet?”

Maisie shook her head sadly. “I only have three tricks, I had them on Earth, though now they are easier to do. I can make anything conductive be the load on a nearby electricity power cable, and even transform the voltage a bit up or down, I can light my fingertips up and sprinkle tiny ball lightnings that float to the ceiling. I don’t think I have the traditional blow stuff up Warlock Talent that

makes people frightened of the Sixth Circle. After a few days on the starship everyone's nerves quite calmed."

"Interesting," said Ashrit. He looked at his beautiful wood panelling which was on the ceiling too. "I'm glad you didn't give a demonstration of the ball lightning here! Well I think you will have time to take the big Slab to your apartment before next class. Normally primary and secondary Talents are quite separate. I'm curious as to how you combine them."

"I've no idea about how I use Talent yet as it's only my second day! Thanks again both of you, thank the Arch Chancellor and the Laramos folk too." Maisie tucked the big Slab into her backpack, with difficulty, and headed off. She supposed Olef had been bored or felt the meeting with Ashrit and Granis was nothing to do with him.

The door was blocked with packages! Maisie climbed over and opened the door, then hauled in the packages from the Laramos airport. She'd need bookshelves or bookcases now. She'd repacked all the stuff tossed hurriedly into black bin bags that night in Dublin during the first week on the Intergal One starship. Maisie realised now she'd probably never wear most of the clothes and footwear ever again. Still, the books were important to have. Apart from the college uniform being strange, the Caemorian clothes and footwear were simply a better quality and fit. Seamless made to measure bras that supported without wires!

Maisie played with her new toy in the apartment for a while and suddenly remembered the kitchen. All tidy! Maisie checked the washroom and bedroom too. The room service was good, wet towels gone, bed made. Maisie wondered was it Kaytim and what tasks was she expected to do herself? It seemed strange after so many

years of doing everything now having Kaytim looking after her. Also how was she supposed to ask Chainai's advice without Olef or some other Telepath? Chainai's reception of her thoughts was too erratic. Or perhaps Luci, how did Luci communicate with Chainai?

One last class before supper. A practical session in the Energy building with Warlock Hornitar. That would maybe be interesting as so far she'd not met another Warlock. It was a separate tower like building with a round tower on top. The class was above the Bursar's office on the fourth floor. It was on the lower courtyard with the first floor of the tower proper as the ninth floor. So the top floor was the twelfth! Maisie was gasping like a dying fish. At least she only had her new Slab and the Alchemy second text. There were no other apprentices with Sixth Circle talent so any practical must be to do with alchemy, chemistry, physics and electronics all in the Alchemy second book.

Maisie wasn't wrong. Except no actual Alchemy at all. It was all schoolboy level beginner physics. Basic mechanics. Maisie could imagine it needed to be learnt, but she had learnt it about twelve years ago and hadn't forgotten. Master Hornitar was impressed with her breadth of physics knowledge. Maisie thought there seemed to be an assumption that because Earth didn't have starships that we were very primitive. Well, this was like first year at high school, so perhaps it wasn't so strange that she wasn't too backward on physics. Teenagers only doing science as a secondary subject were hardly likely to be at the leading edge of physics. Master Kliidan though had found many large gaps in her biology as it was her weakest science subject. Most of Maisie's extensive education was surprisingly relevant. Of course these students were only equivalent to people

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starting high school or secondary school. Certainly at apprentice level. Maisie began to think she wasn't going to encounter anything as advanced in ordinary science as university level at home. No doubt the university folk would make her look really primitive. But Master Hornitar wasn't impressed with her Talent. Maisie did her three party tricks, rather the best she had. He positively laughed at her ball lightning and blew a piece off a rock to show what proper fireballs are. He admitted Maisie's electrical trick and glowing fingertips was interesting and a bit different but pointed out that it was pretty feeble stuff for a Warlock. He claimed it was just enough to qualify. The lowest level he'd seen, he thought, though admitted he had never even heard of a Warlock moving power from an electrical power cable to a conductor somewhere else. This puzzled Maisie as her Magery had already been described as very strong, adept level, yet a secondary talent.

"Master Hornitar isn't very flexible," Timot explained on the way down the stairs. "He just doesn't understand you yet. Don't worry. You must be at least an Adept Warlock."

Actually Maisie wasn't worried. She thought she'd rather be a Mage with a secondary Warlock talent. Mages, especially with a good healing talent, seemed more useful. But a Warlock was very much rarer. What exactly was any kind of Warlock good for? Well, helping to make Fusion Orbs, she supposed. That sounded tedious.

Time for supper. Though Maisie thought of it as dinner. She was really tired and intermittently aching again. She was very breathless going up stairs. Maisie wished she'd just gone straight to the Hall and not taken her bag back to the apartment.

9: The Cabal Meets

After supper Maisie cleared an aisle through her packages. Then she went back down to Chainai's door and went in.

Olef came in almost immediately afterwards. "How was your day, Chainai?"

"Today was peaceful for me so I had time to think. Also Millifore came to me rather than calling for me. A rare privilege. I gather, Olef, you already told him everything last night." She sat on the mat, cross-legged. It had been moved under the low table and Akasuripian style seats. Olef and Maisie sat with legs stretched out and their backs to the seats. Timot sat on a seat near the back with his tail over the back.

"The cat likes the seats," Maisie commented in English.

"Really, Maisie," Olef explained in English, "that is quite rude. You are not an ape?"

"Sorry Timot," she muttered in Karndic.

"For?" said Timot.

"I was rude about you in English."

Timot produced a bag and put it on the table.
"Accepted. These are for later."

The contents smelled a bit like cinnamon.

Chainai broke the silence; "Good, I sense we are all calm now. I will tell you all later what I think. Olef, I need you to send me everything people say as they speak?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Good." Chainai took off her locator and belt. "Tiring," she explained. "I can concentrate and explain better.

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Speech needs my concentration.” She moved a bit closer to Olef and touched his wrist. “Now I can listen better to Olef’s telepathic sending. How was your first day, Maisie? Did you get to know anyone else?”

“Tiring going up all those towers. I also met Master Ashrit and Journeyman Granis in the Library. They gave me a nice Slab.”

“Yes, but that wasn’t quite what I was thinking of,” explained Chainai.

For moment they all just sat silently thinking, Maisie supposed. She waited for Chainai to elaborate, perhaps Chainai expected her to say something more.

“I didn’t get to talk to any students yet apart from Timot,” explained Maisie. “I know Timot a little better now. There wasn’t really time for anyone else to talk to me yet.”

“Obviously the Arch Chancellor has something definite in mind explaining to Maisie about the Orb of Ghillion,” Chainai continued. “Olef can hardly be more central to the issue. I’m needed because Olef’s memories have been damaged and his mind, emotions tampered with by a powerful Telepath. Maybe for other reasons too. The drug is because the Arch Chancellor believes there is a renegade telepath in the College, or was trained by the College, that normal and Talented investigations have not revealed. Why was Olef sent to Yaram rather than either killed or set loose here? So I think we four should investigate the mystery, recover the Orb, clear the reputation of the College and Olef? That is the desire of the Arch Chancellor, though he won’t say so officially. It’s a secret.”

“Chainai,” Olef dissented, “Timot is young and only an Apprentice since today.”

“I started college at eight, I was a Journeyman well before his age of sixteen, most Apprentices are much younger than Timot. Oh, I admit I was the youngest ever, but age isn’t all. You are about a year older than Maisie and few years older than I. Soon he and Maisie will use Mage Talent to make some more of the powdered potion. Arch Chancellor Millifore obviously expects Timot to be involved with us. What age does the class think Maisie is? What impression do you have?”

“Last first Chainai. Maisie, do you mind?” Olef asked.

“No, go ahead.” Maisie was curious.

“I think people are a little confused about you, Maisie,” Olef explained. “The Masters have said nothing much except implying that you are educated to Journeyman or higher level except in aspects to do with Talent, the culture and history here, basically what you might call junior high school for regular education, your fifth year of secondary school, I think from studying the material. No-one has had an opportunity to talk to you yet. I guess you went to your own apartment after the Library. I think they are waiting for Maisie to make the first move, Chainai. Most new students join during a term, so it’s normal.”

“So our group, Olef?” asked Chainai.

“Chainai, if I’m not mistaken you’re nearly four years younger than I. There is no question, I’m not recovered and even if I was you knock spots off people twice your age for skill, wisdom, maturity in general. I’m not very outgoing either. Perhaps you have one failing if I may mention it?” Olef gabbled.

“Two, I’m blind and deaf!” she laughed. “I know what you mean, you can explain to the others. Yes, I’m only just past my majority year, which is age twenty. I’m not

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long turned twenty-one, Maisie." Chainai waved generally in Maisie's direction.

"I'm afraid Chainai's accomplishments have a flaw," Olef explained. "Sometimes her pride can interfere with her good judgement."

"Well I can't lead us. I'm all foot and mouth disease." Maisie realised they wouldn't get it. "I mean I talk first and think second. I open my mouth and put my foot in it. I haven't been here long enough, so I'm clueless. I really only know Olef on the entire planet, so I guess I'll go with whatever you think, Olef."

"I guess you are not being literal but giving a humorous illustration. Is there also a disease of the feet and mouth?" Timot asked.

"Yes, quite serious for grazing animals," explained Maisie. "Chainai, I like Timot, but why should he be involved? Though technically I'm only an Apprentice too I think?"

"Perhaps intuition," she stated vaguely. "I think he is important. Also he relaxes your self-inflicted taboo or inhibition on using your Talent. That even is enough. You need him as Olef needs me, but in a different way. Finally, because the Arch Chancellor asked."

Again no-one spoke for a while.

"Kaytim says they gave you a stole but with grey?" said Chainai. "You are on the list of uncertified Journeymen, which admittedly is odd, but it's because you are too old for an Apprentice. Olef was certified, but is now uncertified so can't leave college without a Master."

"I do," admitted Maisie. "Kaytim told me not to wear it at all, just wait till the other Apprentices know me better or I pass the exams."

“When they think about the fact you are not in the dormitory and have an Assistant they will realise you are somehow more than an Apprentice,” suggested Chainai. “Your dress and robes are those of an Adept? Rich colours, not pale, Maisie?”

“Yes, they are the much richer Adept shades for the blue and orange. The orange is smaller parts as it’s secondary?”

“The Arch Chancellor agrees with the preliminary assessments, there is no doubt,” said Chainai, “look at ID on the Crystal. None of the class will know you are twenty-four unless you tell them. I don’t think Timot or Olef will gossip.”

“Adept Warlock, provisional. Adept Mage. Uncertified Journeyman,” read Maisie. “Why is Adept Warlock provisional?”

“In this case only because there is a small chance you are more than an Adept Warlock, an Arch Warlock, not less,” explained Chainai. “You are really already classed as Journeyman due to age and the seven or eight years you have had Talent, but not certified until you have passed some exams and assessments. They must be expecting to do it before the next Emperor’s Ball, end of 7th Month. That’s partly why you have Kaytim as an Assistant. Though being largely ignorant of Caemorian culture you need her anyway. Apprentices don’t have an Assistant. I’m quite sure Kaytim has been given a complete briefing on your background before she would have accepted the job. Usually the Noble or Talented person mutually chooses an Assistant. It’s important to her to work with the right person. Especially as Kaytim is hardly typical, if it doesn’t work out she might have to give up the idea of being an Assistant at all.

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“Don’t bother with the stole with grey squares. Kaytim won’t tell me anything private. It’s very rare and usually for Journeymen that have lost their previous certification, like Olef. Adepts are rarely recognised officially till they are Journeymen or at least not any longer in a junior class. Are any others with Adept dress and robe?”

“No,” agreed Maisie, “Olef was the only other person with Adept colours in class. Could my main talent really be Mage? Many people were very worried initially that I would blow up or damage the starship.”

“You could and would have,” Olef stated. “Perhaps only saved by your own inhibitions, or having Mage Talent. But Chainai and Virona convinced Juili it was nonsense. There isn’t any doubt at all, your Adept Mage Talent is only secondary. I guess in practical the Warlock Hornitar thought you are pretty feeble and only just qualify as a Talent?”

“Yes.” Maisie sighed. “You heard what he said, but Timot said to not take too much notice?”

“I sense you still smart from his acerbic comments,” Chainai laughed. “He’s also wrong. You have very strong Talent, perhaps an Arch Warlock.” Chainai reconsidered. “Please though don’t any of you repeat my opinion though! That’s why your Warlock rating is provisional. There is no question that your Mage Talent is secondary and Adept. Definitely the Warlock Talent the primary and probably is stronger than it seems. Others in your class will likely have Adept robes in the coming months.”

“Well?” asked Timot.

“You’re in as far as I’m concerned,” Olef confirmed. “What about you Maisie?”

“Yes, I agree. I think Arch Chancellor Millifore wants Chainai to lead us? Timot and I need to be careful to do what Chainai decides, but we need a plan!”

“Yes, I accept Chainai as leader,” said Timot.

“I agree too,” said Olef. “She is one of those prodigal genius types and would be worth having as a leader even if she wasn’t a massive Talent too.”

Chainai let go and gave Olef a punch on the shoulder and then rolled on the mat laughing.

Maisie was amused. It seemed so strange a reaction. She seemed so far such a reserved person.

Chainai sat up gasping. “I can sense your worry like an explosion Timot!” She laughed again. “It’s OK. I have been very tense and the thought of my head exploding with Olef’s unconscious thoughts and Maisie’s emotion was all a bit much. I just had to let go! I sense I surprise you Maisie. Before you always made my head hurt. You seem to have stopped doing it since last night.”

“I thought I was the extrovert!” exclaimed Maisie.

“But you’re not!” Chainai explained. “It’s self defence! You don’t fool me for a minute, you have been in reality introvert and self-sufficient in the past. As you learn to be yourself and accept also that Talent is real you will unlock your Talent and control of it. You won’t blow up yourself or us!”

Maisie thought about why she had no real friends. The crazy clothes she bought that she’d only ever worn to the office for the Christmas parties.

Chainai grabbed Olef’s wrist again.

“Olef,” said Chainai. “Can you make some good hot strong Jhai for with Timot’s buns, bring a big plate. Put about a third of the morglin powder in. Timot and Maisie will have to make more next rest day.” She held out the packet.

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"Olef," Maisie interrupted before he left, "all the rest of my stuff came from Laramos. Thanks. Now I need bookshelves!"

"I have been learning Martial Arts for some years, Maisie," Chainai explained after Olef went out. "It helps hone my skills with the locator. This is a practice mat we are sitting on. Now, Timot, we connected earlier, write on your Crystal to me about your skills using the real time scribing." She adjusted her locator.

They set-up a three way connection. Timot didn't scribe very quickly. Maisie guessed he wasn't confident being a lot younger.

Chainai nodded. "OK now you Maisie, as fast as you can. Test my use of the locator interface to the Crystal."

So she did. Maisie furiously scribed a summary of all her life, physical and technical skills as best as they translated to Karndic. She glanced at Timot. His eyes were like saucers.

Olef set the tray down gently and sat quietly between Timot and Chainai.

Maisie set down her Crystal.

"Well that was amazing," said Chainai in her flat monotone, not sounding amazed at all. "Also having done those Chinese sword exercises you should join the marital arts for exercise."

"Yes," Timot agreed, "you have only been studying and learning Karndic for about eight months. No exercise."

"Chainai, how do you read a Crystal?" asked Olef.

"I got an upgrade." She pulled off her locator and passed it to Olef to examine. "It solves the problem we discussed."

He passed it back. "Well it's actually slimmer, more like a hair band, but that doesn't explain it."

“It synthesises a fake environment to replace normal locator physical signals so I can read machine generated writing. It uses a visual form of the embossed symbols in touch books for the blind. The normal locator environment jitters to tell me there is Crystal message.”

They tucked into the buns and Jhai.

“So what is next?” Olef asked shortly.

“I explained already to Maisie and Timot,” Chainai replied, “that we can’t know yet who the renegade or traitor Telepath is, there may even be allies in the college. Perhaps the Nulests are involved, that might explain why you are alive. If the Dark Guild was involved you’d be dead—”

“That’s two horrible thoughts,” Olef interrupted, “though at least they are mutually exclusive.”

“Millifore is up against a stone wall,” continued Chainai, “maybe that’s why he is unofficially and secretly encouraging us. He suggested including Timot and Maisie, which frankly makes no sense, other than that neither of you were on the planet then so can’t be involved. I have a blank tile and his personal authority to do anything, though he insists that we don’t do anything stupid or illegal. He suggested that the starting point is to look at the Higest schism of the Nulest Clerics. So after more training, mostly for Maisie’s benefit, we will have credentials and Credits for an open ended field trip, Archaeology of Talent Artefacts! There are supposed to be some at the old library repository found underground near Gaolang, but the non-Talented archaeologists haven’t found any. The Orb might be there at the Higest Temple. We can’t investigate much from here. Meanwhile not a squeak and ears open for any unusual meetings or rumours in the College.”

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Timot was excited. “The field trip sounds fantastic even if we don’t solve anything!”

Maisie was sceptical. “How can Timot and I be justified on such a project?”

“Easily,” Chainai laughed, “you, Maisie are unique, also you will be project librarian with your data analysis and computer skills. It’s best you take a large Crystal Slab and not your irreplaceable Tellurian computer.”

“I got one on the starship and Granis gave me a more powerful larger one late this afternoon after library class,” Maisie explained, though she’d mentioned it earlier. Maisie decided Chainai might be excited. Really life must have been pretty dull, especially at the listening station.

“Good,” Chainai continued, “Timot can be justified several ways. He is old for a new Apprentice and we can say we need a junior but with confirmed Talent to help. Also people can think it’s a spot of nepotism. His Aunt Virona!”

“Really?” protested Maisie.

“I’m afraid a bit of nepotism is common,” Olef confirmed. “So we can meet here to study and plot, people will think that reasonable as none of us are ordinary students, except for Timot, it’s not so odd if we are a clique, people will soon call us Chainai’s Cabal, it’s a common enough study arrangement. Also the field trip research is good cover too.”

“All agreed then?” Chainai asked.

“Sure, fine,” agreed Maisie as the others agreed too. “What is the Dark Guild?”

“Organised crime,” said Olef, “but they claim to have religious motivations, helping poor against rich oppressors. They are rumoured to hire out assassins. I can’t see how they would get the co-operation of a

suitably powerful telepath. The Nulests would have nothing to do with people like that.”

“Gantras is a very powerful telepath,” suggested Chainai. “He’s really an Arch Telepath.”

“I’ve known Gantras since I came to college,” insisted Olef. “It couldn’t be him. I should ask him was there any truth to the idea of a Dark College for rogue Talent he suggested years ago.”

“Blackmail,” suggested Timot.

“I can’t imagine it,” said Olef.

“Right then, we are getting nowhere,” Chainai insisted. “Time for bed. Early start in the morning! Classes! I want good reports from you all! Maisie, you stay.”

Boing! thought Maisie. Are we like Zebedee, Dougal, Florence and Dylan?

Surprisingly Chainai locked the door.

“I sense your surprise, but Luci has a key,” said Chainai. “Now because you are new here, it’s more important that you take advantage of me being your Mentor. Tell me anything worrying you, confusing or anything out of the ordinary. Use the Crystal.”

I should err on telling you too much at first?

“Yes, Maisie,” replied Chainai.

The Wildgrave came and saw me the day I arrived, and today Granis gave me a bigger more powerful Slab. They’d like me to do work in the Library.

“Don’t agree to anything with anyone. You don’t know the consequences. You don’t have time for working part

The Apprentice's Talent

time on anything, especially the Library. Your social life is more important.”

Well, Ashrit said the Slab was from the Arch Chancellor. I shouldn't do library work because I will have too much studying to do?

Chainai laughed; “Study and Education here isn’t important apart from using Talent safely,” she explained. “You need to prove you are trustworthy, social, caring, law abiding, moral. A loner or sociopath would never graduate to Journeyman here. I suppose it’s too early or maybe too late to ask and I did deliberately keep away from you on the starships, but how do you feel about having me as Mentor and Kaytim as Assistant? I’ve never been a Mentor before and Kaytim isn’t long qualified for the Assistant role, she trained as something else originally, Physics Scientist I think is what you would call it.”

I don’t know. I don’t understand exactly what an Assistant is.

Maisie had wondered how they would communicate as she couldn’t consistently use her thoughts in a conversation to an empath, but this seemed to work.

“That’s fine,” replied Chainai. “Kaytim will explain. Understanding Caemoria society and Culture is the important thing. Making friends is the most important thing. I must go to bed now.”

Thanks and goodnight.

Maisie was very tired too.

9: The Cabal Meets

* * *

Again Maisie woke early and really stiff, though not actually sore. So she had another long bath. She opened the curtains and peered out. She stared over the trees for a while. She put on the Molruk and went to the chiller. Mysteriously it was full again. Maisie suspected Kaytim rather than magic or general college staff. The weather had turned fine again, so she took breakfast for herself and Kaytim out to the balcony. Maisie fetched the insulated flask of Molruk. She pulled up her hood as it was chilly.

Maisie got out the timetable on her Crystal and examined it. She crossed off the library sessions. None today anyway. She listed the classes and added comments on locations.

1: Control / Medicine /Herbology
2 in Mage's Tower, also called
the Third Tower, South West
corner main building.

Break.

2: Changes / Alchemy I in
Alchemist's Tower the Fourth,
left of gate lodge.

Longer break. Yesterday's
Alchemy 2 was basic physics.

3: Shapes and Identity in
Sorcerer's Tower the Fifth.

Short break.

4: Life Sciences. Tower of
Enchanter, the Seventh Tower,

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behind the Arch Chancellor's building.

Some free time then supper. Biology maybe? Perhaps too the arrangement of classes is a clever scheme to get new students fit?

The door alert chimed.

"Come in," said Maisie using the intercom feature of her Crystal when she saw it was Kaytim, "use your key any time."

Shortly Kaytim was on the balcony. "Oh, you made my rising meal! You shouldn't."

"Maybe," Maisie hedged, "who is the elf that cleaned and restocked here yesterday?"

"Those don't," she started to say. "I see, no it was me. It's what I'm paid well to do, perhaps not really. Well, there are cleaning staff for proper cleaning once a week, also a daily help to tidy and restock apartments. I banned them. The regular Apprentices have not as much pressure and share accommodation and chores. I'm paid to help you as well as everything else. So then you can concentrate on your work and socialising, I do hope we can be good friends too."

"Well, thanks. I hope we can be friends, but in the past I have a bad track record. On the starship they thought it might be my Talent unconsciously making people uneasy," said Maisie. "I suspect I'm just rubbish at making friends. Do I affect you? Would you or Chainai know?"

"No, I'd guess it was just some sort of Tellurian thing," argued Kaytim, "or whatever it was that gave all the Mentalists headaches. Chainai says you stopped doing what ever it was. This is my first permanent assignment and I know you are not used to our culture, so I'm quite relaxed. I do tend to speak my mind though, but the

Arch Chancellor told me you would appreciate that, so not to worry. Um. I might talk a bit loud if I think you are being really stupid.”

Maisie stared at her. Karnds didn’t shout at each other when cross. “You mean you get cross and shout? Common where I come from, I didn’t think any Karnd did. Virona and Olef did raise their voices in argument over me once, but neither of them are Karnds, in over seven months I’ve never heard a Karnd raise their voice. I won’t chuck you out for getting cross with me. We probably should avoid shouting at each other though. People might get the wrong idea.”

“Olef raising his voice?” she sounded surprised.

“Virona thought he shouldn’t be alone with me because I’d be an apprentice, I think. He thought it didn’t apply because I’m an adult and wasn’t yet at college. Also that it was none of her business. At least that’s the sense of it that I got from them later. They didn’t really fall out and Virona told me she spoke to Chainai and realised Olef was correct.”

Maisie was suddenly concerned. Who was paying her? Also while Karnds have a lively sense of humour, Kaytim seemed a little out of phase with her on that. Though Sharon had always complained that her jokes were feeble. Perhaps this was Kaytim’s honesty. It seemed strange to Maisie that the Arch Chancellor was involved in assigning workers. Maisie resolved to find out more. It seemed an Assistant wasn’t expected to be just a worker, though Kaytim seemed to think she shouldn’t be restocking. She obviously had authority over the normal staff.

“You’ll tell me if I start boring you with technical stuff?” insisted Maisie. “I don’t have much in light conversation.”

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"Less likely with me than most other people here," explained Kaytim. "I was educated at Laramos university as well as the Guild as an Assistant. I'll certainly warn you if you are boring me. Most of the Masters have no real third level education, not at University anyway. Fathris would be an exception."

Maisie called up her Credits account on the Crystal, she'd meant to do it yesterday. She was gob smacked. She was massively in positive. Maisie looked at the detailed statement. Apparently she was paying for food, laundry, new clothes, an Assistant, library book loans. However it was all covered and to spare by her status.

"OK?" Kaytim asked.

"Fine," said Maisie taking a spoon of chopped fruit and cereal then a drink. "I seem to have more income than I imagined."

OK, a big lodgement from the Bursar's Office.

A special gift for our only Tellurian student. For use however you want, but we hope with wisdom. It's because your Tellurian money is useless here. All other students have Credits from home.

Yours Bilantros.

Maisie sent off a message of thanks to the Dean, the Arch Chancellor and the Bursar; writing no need as the regular allowance was good.

Maisie grinned, so regards buns, pastries and biscuits she thought she only had to worry about her figure! "Thanks Kaytim. It's great to have company for meals, I've lived alone most of the time since my parents died

about six years ago. Though I had a lot of company on the Intergal One starship especially from Olef, Juili, and Virona. I missed Juili and Virona on the second part of the journey.”

Maisie headed to class. She was panting and wheezing like a steam engine when she got to the top of the Mage’s Tower, though it wasn’t as far as some of the other towers. She’d passed Matron’s door. Only Kantric and Hammale were already at the alcove, the class door locked.

“Look it’s the feeble Tellurian, hardly a Warlock,” Kantric called out. “She can hardly climb the stairs!”

Hammale moved behind and snatched Maisie’s backpack that she’d just set down.

“This is too heavy for her as she is so feeble,” Hammale agreed. He tossed her bag to Kantric who took out her newer bigger Crystal Slab.

“This is too good for a feeble creature like you,” he exclaimed.

“Give it back, it’s mine!” she shouted. Maisie lunged to grab it but was far to slow and instead knocked it out of his hand. It tumbled down the stairwell. Maisie leaned over and groaned. She heard a clatter far below. “You are despicable!” she screamed.

“Best toss you after it, you feeble,” Kantric suggested.

Maisie called up fire. This time the lights flickered as a big fireball formed on each hand. She hadn’t any intention of doing anything to them. She was cross and upset, rather than actually losing her temper. Maisie just didn’t want to be attacked. Surely though they wouldn’t actually attack her?

“Don’t be stupid!” Hammale shouted, turned and ran off.

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Maisie wondered was he shouting at her or advising Kantric?

Kantric still looked defiant as he edged around her slowly against the wall and dashed down the stairs. The lights had stopped flickering. Now what, Maisie wondered, looking at her pair of serious fireballs like tame ball lightning. She tossed them at the window which shattered with a bang. She supposed safer and less expensive out of her Credits than a wall.

Act III: Socialising

10: Timot Investigates

"Master Gantras," called Timot, "have you a moment?"

"Sure," he said, "you're Timot, one of Olef's friends?"

"Well, yes. He mentioned the Dark College and Chainai mentioned the Dark Guild. I got the idea you knew something."

"They are quite unrelated," said Gantras. "You better come with me to my apartment." Granis was worried. He'd not anticipated being questioned by Timot.

11: Quick Tour

The weather was still clear, so it was bright and sharp as Maisie and Kaytim headed out of the apartment block. They were both dressed warmly with long hooded cloaks as it was quite chilly. Kaytim had given Maisie a printed plan of the hilltop campus.

“We’ll go on the roof of the First Tower, the Mentalist’s Tower, first for the view,” Kaytim explained. “I’ll go slowly.”

At the top of the tower the roof was flat with a crenulated wall.

12: Unexpected Visitors

Maisie was interrupted as she was going to bed by the doorbell. Long pale red and brown cloaks. Sollyam and Fari Netat. Fari Netat was carrying her shoulder bag in front and Sollyam put her hand in front of her face in the universal silence gesture.

Maisie waved them in, closed the door and raised the lounge light. Sollyam immediately turned it back down low. She was getting to know them more since the first chat some days ago in the Rim Restaurant, still it was unexpected.

“So what’s this?” said Maisie. “Aren’t you breaking curfew?”

13: More Visitors

“So in summary,” explained Timot as Maisie leafed through the catalogues of the two biggest Moguls, or Houses in Communications, “just order the size of screen you want for the kitchen or lounge area or both.”

It was just after supper.

“This catalogue is from the people that market the big Slab the College gave me.” Maisie pointed. “So I think I’ll order from them. It was only cosmetically cracked after falling down the stairs and Granis was able to customise it too.”

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Intermission I

14: Messages

Maisie thought about the past year. She couldn't get to sleep. She wondered belatedly how Jack Casey was managing and what sort of grilling he had got. She supposed he'd shrug it off. Perhaps send another message, Maisie thought. The sync-sat messages would not be private, at the Earth end anyway, and no assurance that any message she sent, if approved here, would be delivered and that any reply would be genuine and not a production of America or the UN. That's why she and Jack Casey had exchanged keys. Maybe she'd hear from Sharon soon?

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Act IV Discipline

15: Discipline & Development

“Arch Chancellor,” said Deputy Chancellor Nikos, “can I have a moment?”

“Certainly, Nikos,” said Millifore.

They went into the Arch Chancellor’s study.

“It’s about Sollyam and Maisie,” said Nikos. “I inadvertently picked up some thoughts from Dynra. She seemed to think she was keeping a secret.”

“Well?”

16: Plonnis Plots

Plonnis was frustrated that he had no direct agent on Tellus. His senior Assistant Aryladni, certainly couldn't go, though he had her learning English too. She'd likely be on Yaram next. He'd better send messages to Jack Casey as the Galactic Council. Time to visit Maisie again. Only a Tellurian would do. At least Maisie so far was being co-operative, though that minx Kaytim was tricky. He had no illusions about her seeing through any regular subterfuge.

17: New Year 3444 CU

It was nearly the end of the fourteenth Month; soon it would be New Year 3444 CU, in the new Caemoria Union dating. Known history is over 24,000 years old as Caemoria is a very old civilisation that liked writing things on clay tablets.

The parcels for New Year's day had started arriving. Today would have the last exams which along with previous personal interviews and ongoing assessment would decide which classes each student would be in during the next term. Some people had opened their parcels and spoiled the anticipation. Some people hadn't studied hard enough, but it was too late now. If they failed a mandatory subject for their Talent they'd have to do it again and again till they passed.

"Nikos," explained Chainai, "I made an appointment as I wanted to explain in person."

18: Chainai and Maisie

They finished up eating but Nikos seemed distracted again.

Act V: Beware Geeks Bearing Gifts

19: More New Year 3444

The door banged open as Timot came in and poked Chainai.

“New Year Day!” Timot called. “Come on, sleepy heads! Olef and Master Nikos are up!”

20: Starting a New Term

“You’ve had quite an adventure,” commented Kaytim after Maisie recounted it all.

“Yes.” Then Maisie couldn’t hold back. She cried.

Kaytim took her hand. “What’s wrong?”

“I’ve got friends. You’re a friend.”

“So why are you crying?” said Kaytim. “Don’t your people only cry when very upset?”

21: Just Relax

So, anyway, I know I have been stupid, Maisie apologised to Chainai. I'm sorry, really.

“It’s best not to speak of it and it will be forgotten,” Chainai suggested.

22: The Hunt and Dance

The day was crisp and sharp. The breath of fints and especially riders looked like little puffs of smoke. The pralurgs, a bit like wolves, had left earlier, before dawn. The mountains took most of the snow and a lot blew off the meadows and woods they'd use.

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Intermission II

23: Plonnis at Night

Maisie was roused from sleep by the doorbell chiming incessantly. She put on a robe and slippers, then answered the door. She rubbed her eyes in disbelief. It was Wildgrave Plonnis. Again. This was crazy though as it was the middle of the night.

24: An Unexpected Party

Excitement had died down but both Caemorian security and college security had been crawling over the campus for days. There had been demands that Chainai should have guards and the trip to Gaolang should be cancelled, because soon the truth was officially admitted. The Arch Chancellor overruled this arguing that Maisie was obviously adequate security.

Act VI: Answers

25: Gaolang

The train had several well outfitted stable cars and was very comfortable being a wider gauge than any current Tellurian system. It was about 14,000 km distance or about two and a half days if the train was non-stop, naturally it would stop at major towns and cities. Most of the staff are for ensuring comfort of passengers, sentient or the merely maliciously intelligent flits, because the train is automated. Maisie was disappointed that there wasn't time to get out and visit any intermediate town, however Kaytim pointed out that most of the intermediate towns and cities would be quite similar to Laramos.

26: Results

They were meeting again in Chainai's room to discuss what to bring on the next trip to the lower level. Their assistants, Luci, Kaytim and Dairig, had got the day off again to visit more of the city sights and shops. Chainai still hadn't had a chance yet to talk privately to Maisie about her ideas regarding mind links as Luci had wakened them.

27: In the City

Due to being in the tropics the sun seemed to set suddenly just after they stabled the fints at a hotel in town. They checked in for an overnight stay and left some baggage. The hotel itself had a selection of tourist guides they bought.

“We'll eat in the Desert Tower restaurant,” said Olef. “It has a good view of the temple compound, which is all well lit up until late.”

28: The Circle Council

The Hingest Nulests were delighted

29: Endings

Nikos sat

THE END

The Celtic Otherworld

Contemporary travel to Otherworlds is mentioned in Celtic myth and legend. Meet the Tuath Dé, Sióg, Aés Sidhe, Elves and Faerie. The series is set in Limerick, Ireland and Wychavon, England as well as the Otherworlds.



Court Grave, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick

Unlike Greek and Roman myth there are many Celtic Otherworlds that appear to be magical and often inhabited by the Fair Folk – Fay, Fairy, Elves, Sióg – or sometimes the Tuath Dé who were later called the Tuatha Dé Danann. They are not realms of the dead.

The Apprentice's Talent

Manannán Mac Lir led the Tuath Dé away to the Otherworld over 2500 years ago. Except for them it's been more like 600 due to the time-slip. The Portals were often at Court Graves, Raths and other ancient Irish sites. Today Tuath Dé culture is a crazy mix of Mediaeval to Nineteenth Century styles. Now the Magi Council and the Druids of Ollathair have wakened the Sleepers, the Morríagna, – Badb, Macha and Neamhain – and the rest of Manannán Mac Lir's Aés Sidhe Warband.

Under the Stone of Destiny

Celtic Otherworld I

Under the Stone of Destiny



Corvids press Ray McCarthy

Four teenagers are trying to end the ruinous war. They are a human, a runaway Elf Princess, a Dryad Mage and Dwarf Wizard. Or at least that's what Kevin, the student magus thinks they are.

Most of the action is on a legendary Celtic Otherworld, in Magh Meall where all the Tuath Dé live. Out of food and close to despair in the mountains they are told to wait for another companion by Corbie, the rook Familiar of Dean David, from the Magi College.

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The cover is edited from a detail of Miranda, The Tempest, by John William Waterhouse.

Carrying the Shining Sword

Celtic Otherworld II

Carrying the Shining Sword



Corvids press Ray McCarthy

Who has poisoned Megra and her father, the Emperor? The five learn about Skandi culture and the forbidden Skand magic. Then they take ship to another continent in search of an antidote and answers.

Eilis (also called Alice) accepts she is different and reveals why to her four friends.

The cover is an edited detail from The Love Potion by Evelyn De Morgan.

Seeking the Flaming Spear

Celtic Otherworld III

Seeking the Flaming Spear



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Megra must decide how to deal with Morien, who is Fay, so she contacts Queen Oonagh of the Aés Sidhe for help by throwing a Ball. Alice (Eilis) decides it's time to do more matchmaking. Alice (Eilis) meets her adoptive grandmother (Queen Oonagh) and makes some friends in the Otherworld of the true Elves.

Alice gets to show off some warrior training that Neamhain, formerly of the Morríagna, has taught her.

The Celtic Otherworld

She finally figures how to stop Kevin having a crush on her.

The cover is an edited detail from Morgan Le Fay by Frederick Sandys.

Hero Genesis

Celtic Otherworld IV

Hero Genesis



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

An urban fantasy set mostly in the Worcestershire-Wychavon area of England.

Four teenagers doing A Levels get sucked into a strange situation with Superheroes and Aliens. They are rescued by the High Queen of the Aés Sidhe.

The cover image is an edited detail from Freya by Doyle.

No Silver Lining

Celtic Otherworld V

No Silver Lining



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

An urban fantasy set mostly in Limerick. Alice (Eilis) joins the four English teenagers going to the University of Limerick, but senses a Horseman of the Apocalypse.

Kate finds that Eilis is a strange friend with many surprises.

The sequel to *Hero Genesis*, though the books can be read as pair or even on their own. The first three books of the Celtic Otherworld series are a trilogy covering

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Alice's magical development for her most critical three years.

"If an in-house system fails, only one bank, or one retailer or one supplier is affected," insisted Louise. "If everything is outsourced to the Cloud, even if it's a hundred times more reliable it's an apocalyptically bad event because you lose everything at once. There are too few cloud providers, who are too similar and too big."

The cover shows a detail of *Apocalypse* by Vasnetsov.

Exiles and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld VI

Exiles and Rooks



corvids press Ray McCarthy

The action is parallel to Hero Genesis, No Silver Lining and Fairy Godmothers in the partially Steam Punk world where the Tuath Dé live.

Alice's half sister Catherine's two children (met briefly in Seeking the Flaming Spear) are exiled from Ireland because they too have magic.

The cover is edited from On the Threshold by Edmund Blair Leighton.

Fairy Godmothers

Celtic Otherworld VII

Fairy Godmothers



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Alice (Eilis) had previously agreed to be a godmother for Órlaith. Now the baby has quickened and a geas is triggered. You can't invoke a Fay blessing for a baby without invoking a Fay curse first!

The cover is a detail from Lady of Shalott by John William Waterhouse.

Conspiracies and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld VIII

Conspiracies and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion is now a Student Guard. Tony and Sorcha settle into the town house and make friends. Why does the shop-keeper not want the Guards to catch the thieves?

The cover is based on the portrait of May Sarton by Frederic Leighton.

The Fay Child

Celtic Otherworld IX

The Fay Child



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Flinn, Manannán and the war-band are still off doing something and it's time to do the godmother bit for Órlaith's child, Daniel Og, again as he is a year old.

Why do Danu and Freyja have such an interest in Alice?

Is Danu the mother of the twins Áine and Grian? Certainly Alice's great-grandfather, Manannán Mac Lir is their father.

The Celtic Otherworld

The cover is a detail edited from The Kiss by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

Artists and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld X

Artists and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion is now a successful private detective. But why is the visitor anonymous and waiting till after hours?

The cover is based on Artists Sketching in the White Mountains by Homer Winslow.

Dwarves and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XI

Dwarves and Rooks



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Marion gets a contract from the Aés Sidhe to investigate the murder of a Dwarf Chief.

The cover is based on Freyja and the Dwarves by Patten Wilson, an illustration. Freyja is receiving the Brísingamen, which was probably a torc rather the modern conception of a necklace. Perhaps to fasten on her falcon feather cloak used for shape-shifting.

Goths and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XII

Goths and Rooks



corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion has been secretly visiting Hy Brasil. Who is the mysterious Marianne that's started in Sixth form after the Christmas holidays? What killed the two girls last term?

The cover is based on The Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog by Caspar David Friedrich.

Jewels and Rooks

Celtic Otherworld XIII

Jewels and Rooks



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion is concerned about the agency that has opened across the street, yet Marion decides to do an investigation without charging for it! Neamhain wasn't always the third member of the Morrínga. In this case it's not móir meaning big, but mor meaning terror, so Morrínga means Terror Queens. Morrígan is the singular meaning Terror Queen.

The cover is based on *The Valkyrie's Vigil* by Edward Robert Hughes.

The Wooing of Marion

Celtic Otherworld XIV

The Wooing of Marion



Corvids press Ray McCarthy

Marion takes a holiday but gets another Aés Sidhe job.
Princesses have obligations as well as Balls.

The cover is based on At the First Touch of Winter
Summer Fades Away by Valentine Cameron Prinsep.

The Ensorcelled Maid

Celtic Otherworld

The Ensorcelled Maid



 corvids press Ray McCarthy

A sequel to The Fay Child

From the beginning everyone is very suspicious as to the identity of the ensorcelled girl. Marion decides she needs the help of Alex Dunne. Several times.

The cover is based on The Crystal Ball by John William Waterhouse.

Four Kids, One Foxe

Celtic Otherworld

Four Kids, One Foxe



Corvids press Ray McCarthy

The Next Generation

It's just after the Faerie Midsummer's night Ball. Leodith, Angus, Port and Star decide on one last game before going home. Unfortunately it goes badly wrong.

The cover is based on Midsummer Eve by Edward Robert Hughes.

The Talents Universe

The Talents Universe series feature characters with the mysterious Talent, of which there are seven kinds, or with some involvement of the Caemorian Empire, a world 80,000 light years away from Earth (Tellus) on the other side of the Milky Way. Apart from Jump Drive for the starships and the psychic like Talent, the Science Fiction attempts to be compatible with known science.



Circle College campus, Caemoria.

Mostly involving the activities of the Caemorian Empire, a single planet 80,000 light years from Earth. They are about 5000 years more advanced. Their culture dominates nearly a third of the Milky Way. Anyone developing Talent, always at puberty, must be trained in

The Apprentice's Talent

the Circle College on Caemoria.

Many of the stories involve Maisie Kelly from Ireland the only person from Earth with the special Talent. The time scale is contemporary, and as we didn't notice any giant starship visiting, it must be an alternate reality?

The Apprentice's Talent

Talents Universe 1



Part 1 of trilogy

Mei Zhen Kelly is a twenty-three year old computer programmer from Belfast working in Dublin for nearly three years. She's talented and very dedicated to her work. People think she'll go far now that she's had her second major promotion. Only her Chinese mother called her Mei Zhen, her official name. Her parents died while she was at university and now everyone calls her Maisie.

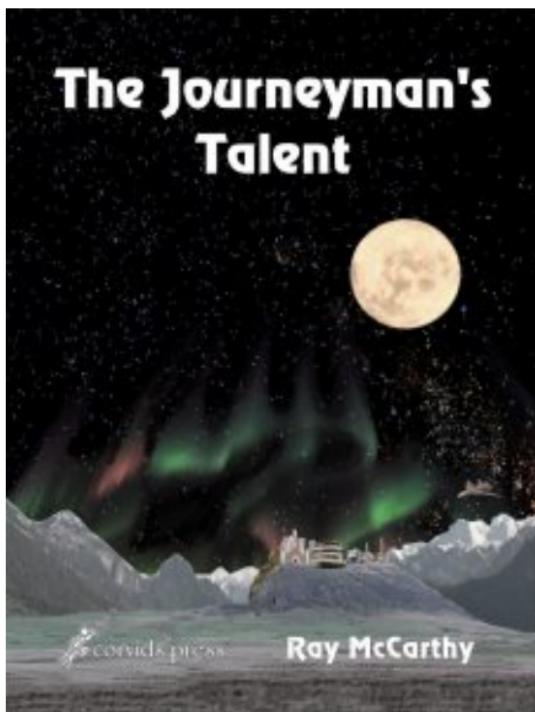
The Apprentice's Talent

The UN and world governments are confused. While it's wonderful that the aliens hope to explain how the interstellar Jump Drive works, they aren't even going to orbit. They want to send a team to talk to an unspecified European woman and leave. Some other group will do a proper First Contact now that they know Earth exists.

The aliens want Maisie to attend a special college about 80,000 light years away.

The Journeyman's Talent

Talents Universe 2



Part 2 of trilogy. Sequel to The Apprentice's Talent

Maisie is no longer an Apprentice, but a Journeyman studying to be a Master, three times over, at the Circle College for Talent, 80,000 light years from Earth, on Caemoria. But on a visit to Laramos city to sign a contract for her full spectrum colour system she narrowly escapes being murdered. Why does she want to own a flitter? Why was the Mogul of House Funathim

assassinated?

What will she spend her rapidly growing quantity of credits on? How has Earth managed to build a fusion powered starship without Talent? Maisie thinks it's a bad sign that Earth has named them the Valkyrie Class and that Russia, China, Europe and USA have all switched their military budgets to co-operate and build Valkyries, all managed by the Solar Alliance. The Wildgrave Plonnis seeks to understand by questioning Maisie while helping her to spend her new found wealth. She's still the only Tellurian to ever leave the Solar System till the first Valkyrie jumps from just beyond the Kuiper belt.

The Solar Alliance

Talents Universe 3



A parallel story to The Apprentice's Talent and The Journeyman's Talent, mostly in Mid West of Ireland. Earth has cracked the problem of Fusion power and has the secret of how a Jump Drive for a starship works. But what does the shadowy New World Order conspiracy want?

Starship chief

Talents Universe 4



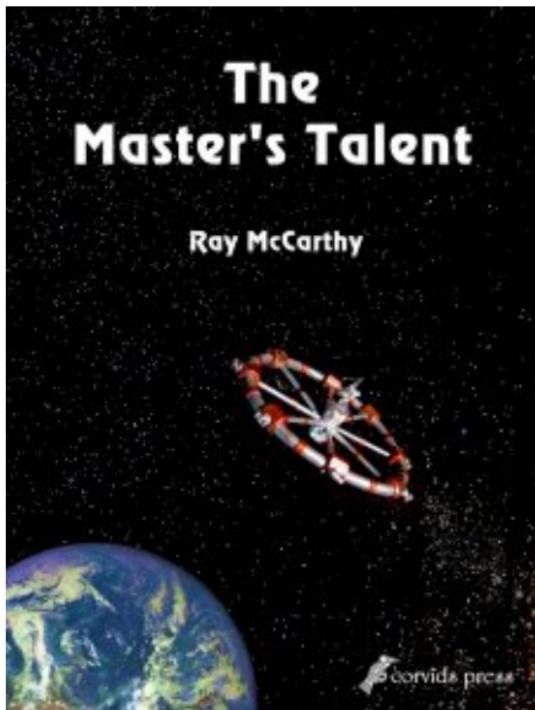
A prequel to the entire Talent series best read any time before The Master's Talent. Set many years before first contact with Earth, three Karnd teenagers are on the way point station's starship to retrieve a valuable hidden artefact on a planet that's never been contacted.

Juili was born on the station and Kordina on a starship. Neither have ever been on a planet.

But how many of the crew are really criminals, the next generation from the people that stole the artefact?

The Master's Talent

Talents Universe 5



Part 3 of Trilogy

Maisie is reaping the results of her foolishness. How can she teach her classes and be the Emperor's Emissary on a First Contact Mission?

The Legal Talent

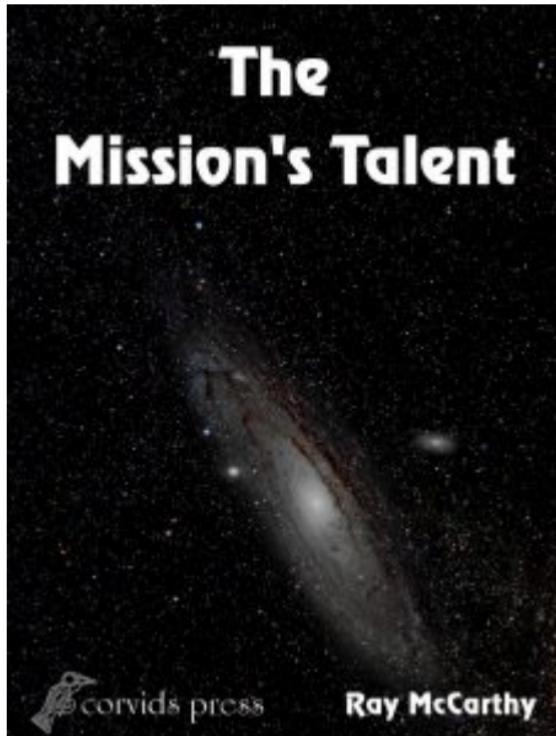
Talents Universe 6



It's three years since the events of The Master's Talent. Maisie has to work with a famous retired detective who is now a Master Lawyer to learn legal aspects of treaties, contracts and civil rights. But someone is shooting at diplomats!

The Mission's Talent

Talents Universe 7



This is the last in the Talent's Universe series. A lot of endings and beginnings. It is a fairly close sequel to The Legal Talent and covers many years of Maisie's experiences including visiting Andromeda and a last stay on Earth also called Tellus.

Trader's Isle

The Trader's Isle series is set in mediaeval like world without Black Powder. The massive world wars and loss of much technology a thousand years earlier was bad, but the rise of the Sorcerers called the Silver Wolf Heads using the Arinopean Barons as puppet leaders was a disaster for the Isle of Amrat and the people curiously called Traveller Folk, even though they are not nomadic.

Trader's Isle



The painting is a detail from *Le Jardin de Maubuisson* by Camille Pissarro (1830-1903).

The Seven Talismans

Trader's Isle 1

The Seven Talismans



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Jorath is hardly adult but hopes to find the Talismans of the High Lords. They must do something to fight the people that want to eradicate their tribe.

Set in a mediaeval style fantasy world with no ship's clocks or black powder, this story is based on a novelization completed in 1992. The sequel was nearly completed in 1996 and now is called *The White Fire Stones*. Both stories can be read on their own.

The cover is based on *Pauvre Fauvette* (1881) by Jules Bastien-Lepage.

The White Fire Stones

Trader's Isle 2

The White Fire Stones



corvids press

Ray McCarthy

Sequel to The Seven Talismans

Amrat is free but needs trade deals for protection from Arinopa and to earn hard cash.

What exactly are the White Fire Stones and can they help to fight the Silver Wolves, the humans that have sold their souls in Arinopa?

The cover is based on a detail of Hardanger fjord by Hans Gude (d. 1903).