

Vincalis the Agitator (Secret Texts Prequel)

By Holly Lisle

IMPORTANT NOTE: 1/17/17

This is first draft. Over the years, computer updates have made more and more of my old files obsolete. I discovered today that I can no longer open the finished versions of this story, but for some reason, I could open the first draft. I know it's different than the final version, but it's close.

Chapter 1

We were friends in a place that had no friendship, in a hell born of forced mindlessness and subterranean despair; and because we found our impossible friendship in the Warrens, we brought forth revolution. Thus a world died, and its death bore a new world.

*Vincalis the Agitator
The Secret Texts – Of the Falcons*

Down below, in the cages they'd been born in, Wraith's only two friends in the world starved and waited. So the boy crouched in the shadows, heart racing in his throat. Without food, he couldn't go home. Without food soon, he would have no reason to go home. The strangeness of this place frightened him, and he yearned for the familiar backways he'd left behind. But some instinct had drawn him to this rich and impossible place, and he promised himself he would not leave empty-handed.

This city in the sky terrified him, though. To his right, a fountain erupted from nothing, spraying streams of crystalline

liquid and gem-like shards of red and blue and green into the air and catching them in the air; no solid structure supported this delicate miracle, but the many people who strolled past it seemed not to even notice it. All around Wraith, buildings spun of smoke and light rose from foundations equally ephemeral, yet within them people moved easily from floor to floor, visible through lovely archways and on broad balconies. Below his feet, through roads like ribbons of stained glass, lay the other, lesser city – his city – so far away that streets looked like silken threads and buildings like beads sewn on fine cloth.

Wraith did not belong in these fine streets, in this city above the city, in this realm of men who would be gods. But because he could come here – because the city itself let him enter, no one looked at him with suspicion or with doubt. No one questioned the shabby nature of his clothes, the rough cut of his hair, his shoeless feet or gaunt child's body. If he was here, they seemed to think, then it could only be because he belonged here – for magic barred those who did not belong from the secrets of Oel Artis Travia – the Aboves.

And here, where he knew he had no business, he found the thing he had so desperately sought. In the Belows, no one would think of displaying food in the open air, where anyone might walk up to it, touch it – steal it. But here it lay, in vast and wondrous quantities and unimaginable varieties. Wraith routinely stole thrown-away food from the containers behind stores and homes in the Belows, but this was new food, right where he could get it.

His stomach rumbled; the fruits and vegetables, breads and cheeses, pastries and beverages spread like a banquet before him, and he wanted so much to eat something. Anything. He had eaten scraps of bread soaked in some sort of gravy the previous day, picking tiny maggots off before taking bites. Aside from water, he'd had nothing else.

Any bite of food at all would have been wonderful – but none of the other people wandering through the aisles ate anything while they walked. He'd watched carefully; after years of

scavenging, the knowledge that calling attention to himself would cause him trouble had become so deeply ingrained he didn't even need to think about it. The shoppers all around him carried baskets that they picked up from one corner of this odd open-air market, and they wandered through the aisles, sorting through the offered produce and putting their chosen items into their baskets. When they finished, they simply took the baskets with them and left. They never paid, as people in the Belows paid. Wraith had seen money many times, and understood that it could be traded for food; what he had never been able to discover was where he might get money of his own.

Here, however, no money appeared to be necessary.

So he took a basket, and like the other people, he began putting food into it. In one basket, he would have enough food for Jess and Smoke and himself to live on for several days – and to live well. He mainly chose breads, dried meats, and pastries, because these, from his experience, would last longest. However, he couldn't resist just a few of the beautiful, brightly-colored fruits and vegetables. He could imagine the expressions on the faces of his friends when he returned with such a bounty.

When he finished collecting the food he wanted – not letting himself be as greedy as he desperately wished to be, but still with a nice haul – he headed for the exit, following the precise route those before him had followed. But whereas no one paid any attention when those others left, when he left someone said, "Hey, that boy didn't pay!"

And then someone else said, "But he didn't set off the alarm."

And a woman shouted, "Master! A thief!"

A man of young middle age rose from the edge of the market, where he had been sitting, apparently doing nothing more important than watching the water falling in the fountain. He turned, and stared at Wraith with eyes as cold as death, and pointed a finger. "You. Stop."

His voice had an odd echo to it. Wraith didn't waste time contemplating what that echo might mean; he simply clutched

the basket of food to his belly and fled.

The man, strangely, laughed. In the next instant, blinding white light surrounded Wraith, making the air around him crackle and sing, and scaring him so badly that he dropped the food. He didn't dare stop to pick it up; the man hadn't hurt him, but the wizard's next attack might be more than fancy lights and noises.

Racing for the nearest of the little side streets that fed the square, Wraith ventured a glance over his shoulder, and got a bad shock. The square had been full of people. In just an instant, impossibly, they were gone, and only five remained – the man, the woman who had called out that he was a thief, and three gray-suited guards. The wizard's oily voice carried clearly as Wraith darted down his chosen street. "That's the one. When you catch him . . . bring him to me. I want to take him apart and see what he's made of."

Something in the wizard's voice told Wraith that if the wizard caught Wraith, he would kill him. But over a basket full of food? In this place of such plenty, where people chose what they wanted and took it freely?

"We will, Master," one of the guards said in a voice that sounded as frightened as Wraith suddenly felt.

He heard the hiss and whisper of the guards' skimmers behind him, and he looked for cover. They could fly faster than he could ever hope to run, and with three of them after him, he probably didn't have much chance.

His feet pounded over the translucent pavement, and he did not let himself look down to the ground far below. They could throw him off the road and he would die of terror long before he smashed into the pavement in the Belows.

He wished as he ran that he had not dared to chance the gate that led upward on the spiraling, spun-glass road. He wished he had stayed firmly on the ground where he belonged. There, at least, he might have found food that would keep Jess and Smoke alive a little longer. There, he would have managed, somehow, to provide for his friends the things they could not provide for themselves. But if he died here, the two of them

would be lost; they would either starve to death, or return to the hell of Sleep, from which he would never dare awaken them again.

He had to live. He had to.

The street down which he ran was a neighborhood thoroughfare. Behind the glass wall that edged the thoroughfare, houses built on clouds stood inside secondary walls blocked off by high, gracefully deadly gates. The translucent white walls of the houses gleamed with inset stones and metals, and the light that shone through them made them look as evanescent as soap bubbles, and as lovely. The inhabitants had spun their gardens of diamonds and stars that glittered and gleamed in stunning configurations. And singing fountains and streams that ran burbling and chuckling between invisible banks served as destinations for the gossamer paths that led from the gates to the houses.

Wraith thought it all very lovely, and all horrifying. He saw no place to hide, for even if he could climb a wall, he could not hide in a yard made of air and decorated by floating lights. He would be visible from any of the paths. And he didn't see an alley, an open gate, something that would let him escape from that whine that came closer and closer to him. Tears clogged his throat and the air that fought its way through the narrowed passage burned in his lungs. He thought his heart might stop on its own before the guards behind him could touch him. Everything was closed. Locked. Impenetrable. And the next intersection was so far away, it might as well have been on the moon.

Then, as he bolted toward one great house, he saw that its owners had not worried about a physical gate with bars and spikes. Instead, the archway lay open. No doubt the invisible gate would be as formidable to most people as one of the tangible ones – but not to Wraith. He put on a burst of speed and threw himself through the opening. Cool fires of a hundred hues played across him, as they had earlier when he'd entered the gate that led to the Aboves – but those fires did nothing to him.

A boy of about his own age – stocky, blond, elaborately dressed – had been entertaining himself in that yard, sitting in a comfortable chair with his feet propped up, making three gold balls and a bit of rope spin through the air. The boy jumped at the flashing lights, and stared as Wraith lunged at him and said, “Hide me.”

The boy gave one startled glance at the gate. But then he nodded and pointed Wraith to a tiny house with its own cloud-spun path that hung in the air almost against the wall.

Wraith didn’t ask questions. He didn’t let himself look down. He just ran.

The little house had, thank all the gods, a real floor. It held a table and four chairs, shelves full of books and jars and paraphernalia that Wraith couldn’t begin to identify, and on the floor dozens of dolls and brightly-colored blocks and wheels and balls. It consisted of one room, a door, and four small, round windows set a little lower than Wraith’s eye level. He crouched, and through the window that faced back the way he had come, he watched the boy, pointedly not looking at the little house, return to his activity of making all three balls hover in the air while the string braided itself between them.

The guards stopped outside the gate. Two of them stared at the little house. The third glowered at Wraith’s unexpected ally. “Where is the little bastard?” the head guard asked.

The boy rose, not yet acknowledging any of the guards, and pointed to the translucent yard. All three balls spun neatly downward, and settled into a line there. When he had summoned the rope to himself, and it had wound itself around his arm as if it were a living thing, he turned and slowly walked to the gate. “Perfann, do you know to whom you are speaking?”

The guard ignored the question. “Master Faregan told me to catch that little thief and–”

“My name is Solander Artis,” the boy interrupted. “Son of Rone Artis. Artis, perfann – which should have some meaning even to one of Faregan’s men. And this is Artis house. So . . . now that you know to whom you are speaking, would you like to

reconsider your . . . presence?"

The guard's ruddy face bleached the color of bone. He said. "My apologies. I would not bother you. But a thief escaped from the market, and Master Faregan has demanded that we —" he paused, considering his words. "That we capture him and remand him over to Master Faregan for questioning."

"A worthy thing, no doubt," the boy Solander said. "And had he come into my yard, I would without hesitation turn him over to you. But no one has come through the gate. It's armed, and since I did not wish to be disturbed at my studies, I did not unarm it. Did you notice anyone trying to cross an armed gate? That's a fairly obvious thing."

"Well, we saw the gate light up . . . but we saw the boy on the other side."

"You saw the gate light up." The boy smiled coldly. "And the gate is armed, and there is no boy. I can only reach one conclusion from that, perfann. I suggest you tell Master Faregan that the thief died trying to escape; in a fashion, perhaps, justice has been served."

The three guards stared from the little house in which Wraith hid to the boy who faced them at the gate, then back to the little house.

"I saw the gate light up," one of them said.

The other two both nodded and agreed.

"So he couldn't be alive."

"But I swear I saw him running on the other side."

The one in charge shook his head. "Can't have. He cooked in the gate."

The three of them stood there staring at each other, and Wraith sensed that they had come to an agreement before the other two spoke. When at last they said, "Yes," and "There's no other possibility," it was merely formality. The head guard nodded to the boy Solander, and said, "Then we thank you for your time, and we apologize for the disturbance. We will be on our way."

And they left. Solander stood at the gate for a moment, watching them get on their skimmers and leave. Then, a

thoughtful expression on his face, he turned and strolled down the path to the playhouse.

He came in and sat down, and for a moment said nothing.

"Thank you," Wraith said. "You saved my life. Those three had orders to kill me."

"To kill you?"

Wraith nodded.

"What did you do?"

"I'm not sure. I went through the market like the other people in the square, and put food into a basket, and left out the same gate through which they all left, but when I left, someone shouted that I was stealing food."

"Did you lose your credit amulet?"

"My what?"

The boy reached into his shirt from beneath it pulled out a small white disk on a gold chain. "This. What happened to yours?"

"I don't have one of those. What does it do?"

"Takes money from your family account to pay for whatever you purchase. The shields around each business are spelled to read your amulet and . . ." He shook his head. "You should know this. Why don't you?"

Wraith shrugged. "We have no credit amulets in the Warrens. No open markets. And what are shields?"

The boy sat down and rested his elbows on the table, and his chin on his fists. "Why would you have been in the Warrens? No one goes there."

"I live there."

"With the riots and the murders and the mind-drugs and the crime lords and the prostitutes and – I've seen the nightlies. None but criminals live there."

Wraith tried to figure out what Solander was talking about. "You must have heard of a different place. That's nothing like where I live – the Warrens are the quietest place in the city."

"If you lived in the Warrens, you wouldn't be here," the boy said. "Because the Warrens are gated to keep the criminals in;

you couldn't have gotten out. And you certainly couldn't have come to Oel Artis Travia."

"I just walked here. Walked out of the Warrens, too."

"How?"

"The same way I ran into your yard."

"The gates in the Warrens are malfunctioning, too? My father will have a fit. He's going to be upset enough that something's wrong with our gate. Lucky for you those guards didn't try it."

"The Warren gate worked the same way all gates work for me. I can walk through any of them that don't have real locks on them."

The boy shook his head. "Nonsense. I saw you go through the gate. It lit up, but it didn't do it right."

"They always look like that when I go through them."

Solander thought about this for a moment, staring down at the floor and frowning. "You mean our gate might be working? If I'd told the guard the gate was malfunctioning and he'd tried to cross, he might have been killed? Oh, hells, I would have gotten into trouble for that." The boy gave Wraith a speculative look, and then a tentative smile. "My name is Solander Artis," he said.

"I know. I heard you tell the guards."

"Now you're supposed to tell me your name."

"It's Wraith."

"Wraith what?"

"Just Wraith."

"That's a funny sort of name."

Wraith shrugged. "I liked it. That's why I picked it."

"You picked your own name?"

"Yes."

"Well, that's different. Wraith, I want you to show me how you got through our gate."

"All right." The two of them rose, walked out into the yard together, and after Solander checked to see that no one who mattered was looking, walked through the gate. The lights played over him – and then he was on the other side. So he

turned around and walked back.

The boy frowned. "That can't be. It looks like it's working, but . . . wait right here. I have to go get something. Don't go anywhere," he said, and raced to the big house.

Wraith waited, and waited, and at long last, the boy came racing back, carrying a small bag full of greenish, lumpy balls.

"You took long enough."

"It's a big house," the boy said, "and I had to get the testers out from under the master watchman's nose without him catching me."

"Testers?"

"Gates only attacks living human beings. Otherwise, they would have to be constantly raised and lowered for deliveries of supplies and other things that come via mage-carts. Pets and birds and other wildlife wouldn't be able to pass through them, either, and the families do love their deer and peacocks and griffonelles. They'd be most upset to find their expensive pets roasted by a gate. So it used to be that the only way to test a gate was to shove a prisoner through it. Only now prisoners are used in work gangs, and they're too valuable to just roast; so the wizards had to develop gate testers. You throw one through, and the gate thinks it's a person who isn't supposed to be there, and . . ."

He pulled one out of the bag. "Here. I'll show you."

He tossed the ball through the gate. The lights erupted again, but this time along with the light, Wraith heard an eerie hum, and the ball stopped dead in mid-air, turned a brilliant glowing red, and exploded into dust with a crack so loud and sudden and emphatic it made both boys jump.

Wraith closed his eyes. He'd seen the gates work on something other than testers before, and all because of his stupidity in thinking that if he could walk through them, anyone could.

"It's working," the boy whispered.

Wraith nodded. "They always are, I think. Gates just don't work on me. The man in the market who sent his guards after me pointed his finger at me, first, and the same sort of light

came out of it. But that didn't do anything, either, though I'm pretty sure he expected it to."

Solander leaned against a wall and closed his eyes. "Oh, dorfing hell-dogs! Master Faregan took a shot at you and it didn't do anything? Drowning, dorfing hell-dogs! No wonder he wanted his guards to kill you." He stared at Wraith, his expression an eloquent testimony to awe. Without another word, he traced a short series of loops in the air. To Wraith's amazement, a line of light glowed in the air in the wake of the boy's finger. "Cover," the boy said.

The loops coalesced into a thin, wavering sphere of light that bobbed through the air to Wraith, touched him . . . and popped like a soap bubble, disappearing without a trace.

"How did you do that?" Solander asked.

Wraith said, "I didn't do anything. I don't do anything when I go through the gates, I didn't do anything when that man pointed his finger at me and hit me with light. I don't ever do anything."

"Would you walk through it for me one more time? I want you to carry a tester with you, and see what happens."

Wraith nodded. Solander handed him a tester, and Wraith walked through the gate. Lights crackled and hummed around him, the tester exploded in his hand with a heat and a force that scared the breath out of him, but as before he remained unscathed. He turned around and stepped back through the gate again.

The boy looked pale. He said, "Let's go back in the playhouse to talk. I'm not due for lessons for a bit, and none of the juniors will be out in the yard until after mid-meal. Once they get out here, they'll be running and shouting and playing hops and skippers and rope-dancing, and place will be hell, but for at least a while we have it to ourselves."

They both returned to the little house, and drew up chairs, and Solander leaned his elbows on the table and said, "I'm the only child of Rone Artis, who is one of the top Dragons in the world, and Torra Field Artis, who is the daughter of one of the great wizards of all time. Qater Field – you've heard of

him?"

"No."

"Of course not." Another exasperated sigh. "No matter. According to my parents – hells-all, according to everyone – I'll become a powerful wizard when I grow up, because I already show incredible talent and aptitude, and have remarkable visual-spatial memory, and . . . I don't even remember all the things they say. But if they're right, I have a good chance of ruling Matrin. I can already build minor gates of my own. But I can't walk through a gate untouched. Neither could my father. If wizards could cross armed gates, the gates would be worthless. You have something special going on with you. And I want to find out what it is, because it has to be important."

Wraith said, "All I want to do is get food for my friends, and get back home. They have to be getting scared by now – I couldn't get there yesterday."

Solander considered that in silence for a long while. "Your parents didn't look for you when you weren't there?"

"My parents don't know who I am."

Solander's face went blank. "I don't understand – but you'll have plenty of time to tell me. If your parents don't know who you are, they won't miss you, right? So just stay here. You can live in my house."

"I can't. If I don't go back, my friends will starve to death."

"Well, are their parents as terrible as yours?"

Wraith considered that for a moment. "My parents aren't terrible. They're just . . . Sleeping."

"Doesn't matter. Are your friends' parents like yours? They must be, or they'd see that all of you had food."

"They're all the same."

"Fine. Then bring your friends with you. More than a thousand family members and friends live in our summer house here, and about twice that many staff. I won't have any trouble moving you and your friends in and creating a story for you. How many friends do you have?"

"Two. Jess and Smoke."

"That's no problem. We'll just pretend you're distant relatives from somewhere, here on the career exchange program. No one ever checks the paperwork on that very carefully." Solander shrugged.

Wraith, whose hard life had taught him that the time to be most suspicious was when anything looked too good, asked, "Why would you have us come here? Why offer rooms or food to people you don't know?"

"I could use some friends. My cousins are creeps or dullards, and if you can walk through gates, you can do things they could never do. Your friends will have a good place to live, and you can take classes with me, and I can figure out why gates don't work on you. I'm going to specialize in magical research," he added. "You'd make a perfect case study."

Wraith stared through the door of the little house up to the big house, and tried to imagine walking through those grand front doors as if he belonged there. He tried to imagine never going back to the hollow, chilling silence of the Warrens. All of his life so far had been a dare – a strange, lonely challenge. This next step made an odd sort of sense to him. He'd been leaving the Warrens a little at a time since he was born.

"We'll do it," he said.

"Bring them with you tomorrow, then," Solander said, but Wraith was already shaking his head in disagreement. "No? You won't bring your friends?"

"I can go through the gates. They can't."

Solander looked startled. "Oh. I forgot about that." He frowned thoughtfully and said, "And you and your two friends live in the Warrens."

"Yes."

"Then I have to figure out some way to get an aircar with universal clearance into the Warrens. That might take a day or two. Going through gates like that – well, that isn't the sort of thing you want to make a mistake about."

Solander thought for another minute, then said, "I'll figure

something out. In the meantime, we're going to steal some food for you and your friends."

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Wraith and Solander stood in one of the pantries of the house's enormous kitchen, loading food into a box. Wraith had a hard time believing his eyes – he could not begin to guess the purpose of all the equipment in the huge outer room, nor what most of the many people out there were doing. Cooking, obviously – the smells alone whispered every wonderful promise possible about the food being prepared – but none of them did anything that looked like drawing Way-fare out of the wall-tube. Wraith knew of no other method of food preparation, so he kept peeking over his shoulder to see just what they did.

That was how Wraith saw a hard-faced older boy coming toward the pantry where he and Solander picked out supplies for him, Smoke, and Jess. "Solander," he said, keeping his voice low, "someone's coming."

Solander looked toward the door and groaned. "Luercas – he's a distant cousin." Solander hid the box in with other boxes on the floor behind him, and turned quickly, several small pies in hand. He passed one to Wraith, and started chewing on the other one. "He's . . . awful."

Wraith said, "Oh," and then took a bite of the pie. It tasted so impossibly good tears started in the corners of his eyes – and at that moment Luercas sauntered into the pantry.

"You," he said, looking past Wraith to Solander. "What are you doing in here, you little rodent? Your parents should keep a tighter leash on you."

"I have as much right to be in the pantry as you do." He muttered something the tone of which sounded insulting to Wraith, though he couldn't make out the words.

Apparently, neither could Luercas, because he glared at Solander. "Not if I tell you that you don't, worm." Luercas then looked at Wraith, and his eyes narrowed. "And what in all the hells is this thing?"

"A . . . distant cousin from . . . Ynjarval," Wraith lied.

“Here on temporaries.”

“Looks like something you found in the street. You, street-dirt. All by yourself in the real city, eh? Let me see you bow to your superiors.” He smiled at Wraith, a most unpleasant smile.

Wraith felt sick to his stomach. But he looked Luercas in the eyes and said, “I don’t think so.”

“Don’t you, street-dirt? Disgusting black-haired stick. With mama and papa back in Ynjarval, they’re not going to be able to do much to help you. Better get used to bowing if you’re planning on transferring here.”

“No,” Wraith said, shaking his head. He felt pretty certain if he’d had more than that single bite of pie in his stomach over the last day, he would have thrown up right there, but he tried not to let it show in his face or in his voice.

Luercas pointed at Wraith, and Wraith heard Solander gasp. “I said bow,” Luercas said, and a pale line of fire sketched itself from Luercas to Wraith . . . and promptly died.

Wraith crossed his arms over his chest and tried to look confident. He said nothing. His heart was racing, and his knees were so weak he could feel them trembling. He leaned back against the shelving for support, but it apparently had the effect of making him look confident.

“I said bow!” Luercas snarled. The second bolt of radiance that leapt toward Wraith looked big.

“No, Luercas!” Solander said, but he need not have protested. This attack, too, died before it reached Wraith.

Luercas’s face went red. “Think you’re clever, do you? Think your little trick is amusing. Let’s see how funny you think real magic is. BOW, you filthy bastard!” Luercas bellowed, as outside Wraith heard running feet. Two adults burst into the pantry just as Luercas’s third – huge – attack blasted toward Wraith and died.

Both adults grabbed Luercas and dragged him out, and Wraith heard them shouting about him bothering children, about using magic attacks large enough to set off alarms all over the house to try to hurt children – about how he was suspended from his

sessions and how this incident was going to be before the reviewers and certainly going to go on his records, and how he'd find it difficult to get any sort of good posting with the Dragons after demonstrating such poor judgment and poor self-control. The adults, dragging Luercas with them, moved out of earshot then, and Wraith turned to Solander.

"I think I'm going to be sick."

"He's going to hate you forever for that," Solander said, awed. "I can't believe you didn't just . . . bow."

"I looked in his eyes. If I'd given him what he wanted that time, the next time we met, he would have tried to make me do something worse. He's . . . I don't like him at all."

Solander dragged the box out from under the shelves and sighed. "I don't think anybody likes him. Most people don't manage to get so completely on his bad side so fast, though." He handed the box to Wraith. "You'd better get out of here. I'll walk you to the gate. Will you be all right getting home?"

"I'll be fine. Nobody ever pays me much attention. I'm good at not being noticed."

Solander looked at him sadly. "Not good enough, apparently. When we move you back here, we're going to have to make sure you look different."

Wraith took the box of food, and followed Solander out the door and out of the house. Maybe I should have bowed, he thought. Maybe it would have worked out better that way.

But he didn't think so. He'd seen something in Luercas's eyes that hunted for weakness, that took pleasure in pain.

Wraith decided to make avoiding Luercas one of his big objectives in the future.

#

Solander sat in his room after Wraith left, idly balancing the three gold balls in the air, and wondered what his father would make of the boy. Wraith showed every sign of being impervious to magic. Yet Solander's father had told him many

times that magic affected everyone – that magic was the sixth force of physics, and that one might as well look for a man who wasn't affected by gravity as a man who wasn't affected by magic.

The balls spun in a neat little circle before Solander, swimming through the air like trained fish. Light from the window gleamed off of them. They were solid gold, and terribly heavy; without magic, Solander wasn't strong enough to lift one of them off the floor. But, as he'd told Wraith, he had a remarkable aptitude for magic. And, he thought, a remarkable aptitude for spotting what might be the biggest flaw in theoretical magic in the last two thousand years when it presented itself to him.

I probably should tell my father about Wraith, Solander thought. He'd want to know that such a person could exist. But visions of unveiling Wraith on his own, and with him a new theory of magic that included proofs for Laws of Exclusion – those heretofore mythical and much yearned-after laws that would permit wizards to create spells without any rebound effects, or rewhah, sang to him like the Temptresses of Calare. He wanted to earn his place in the Academy. No. He wanted to earn the highest place in the Academy, and he only had four more years to do something that would place him above all the other applicants. His father had said Solander was on his own in gaining admission – that the elder Artis would not use his influence or his position on the Council of Dragons to gain a place for his son. And his reasons seemed valid – that if Solander did not earn his way into the Academy without parental assistance, men who stood against him in later years would question his qualifications for any worthwhile position on the Council of Dragons, or for any worthwhile appointment within the sphere of influence of the Empire of the Hars Ticlarim.

If Solander could disprove one of the central tenets of current magical theory, though, and take not just a stack of papers into the exam room, but physical demonstrations of his theory, no one would ever be able to question his right to

stand among the masters – to lead the Empire – to become head of the Dragons and eventually Landimyn of the Hars. He balanced the three gold balls in the air and smiled, imagining himself carried through the underwater streets of Oel Maritias, dressed in glorious robes of state, cheered on by the thousands who lined the Triumph Road beneath the glittering arch of the ocean above. He would smile slightly. Wave his hand just . . . so . . . to let the people know that he had once been like them. One of them. Once – but not anymore.

He sent the balls spiraling to the floor, then pulled his knees up to his chest and stared out the window by his bedside, which overlooked one of the many hidden courtyards in the grand old house. In that courtyard, three young girls played a game of skippers, laughing at the patterns the skipper-stones created in the floating fountain. Watching them, Solander was reminded that he would have to create identities for Wraith and his friends if they were to be successfully hidden in plain sight within the household. He might, he thought, create them as the children of distant relatives from across the Bregian Ocean. He liked Ynjarval. It was distant and poor, and adults seemed to mostly ignore anyone from there.

Better than Benedicta – relatives there were always sending their children to Oel Artis to get a real education and to meet the right people to further their careers. But they were the sort of relatives who called their children home for holidays and made surprise visits, which wouldn't work well for Solander's needs. Or Wraith's.

Solander would have to create a couple of letters of introduction, and forge necessary identification papers. He'd heard Luercas bragging about doing that so that he could get into adults-only taverns and theaters down in the Belows. If Luercas could find a way, then Solander thought he could find a way, too. But any chance Sol had of asking Luercas how he did it was now gone. If Luercas were to get wind of Solander's searching after forged papers, he would find out why and

Solander would spend the rest of his natural life paying blackmail to the bastard. And Wraith . . . Solander didn't even want to think about what would happen to Wraith.

He flopped back on the bed and closed his eyes. Letters. Forged papers. A means of transporting three people from the Warrens to the Aboves, and some sort of excuse for going into the Warrens that wouldn't raise suspicion. A foolproof, question-proof reason for three Warreners to be in Oel Artis and staying in the Artis House more or less permanently. A good change of appearance for Wraith, so that Luercas wouldn't recognize him.

"Are you ready?" his father asked, and Solander, guilty of all sorts of disobedience in his heart, nearly jumped out of his skin.

"Sorry," he said, scrambling to his feet. Solander gathered all three balls and the cord with a single mental swoop. He began spinning the balls in the air, concentrating on their differing weights and masses, and the very different composition of the cord. "This is what I've been working on most." The balls swam like fish through the air, forming the test patterns perfectly; the cord played counterpoint, weaving its way through each of the proscribed forms.

Out of the corner of his eye, he finally saw a small smile on his father's face – the first one in a long time.

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