

The Thaumaturge.

Evening was fading imperceptibly towards dusk as he who others had once called Kevran drew his long cloak around himself and slipped quietly and unobtrusively along the passageway that led from the stables behind the imposing stone and timber structure of The Road Inn. His young acolyte was already asleep in their chamber, exhausted by the day's hard travel. Kevran was well tired himself, for today he had pressed on, longing to reach this place; but still he felt a restlessness, a need to savour actually being here before he retired to his own bed.

At the corner of the building he paused in the shadows and glanced furtively around. He was unobserved. He drew his cloak tighter around him, his hand brushing across the hilt of his fighting dagger. He stepped out into the wide bustling market square and stretched his aching muscles luxuriantly in the last warm sunlight of a summer evening. Kevran tested his own emotions. He felt an almost sensual pleasure at this moment of solitude and anonymity. He had been too long on display. He also felt relief and satisfaction. He had all but completed his first foreign Travel successfully. His saddlebags and his purse were heavy with the silver he had accumulated as he had traversed the breadth of the western lands.

He had seen the Western Ocean, the Nuomist ports, done private homage at the birthplace of the Heroine Tria at Singlehill, travelled down the mighty Nuarine, the mother of all rivers, wintered at the Illusionists' Hall Of The Art in Aransport. Now he was back at Castle Fork, the starting point of the Ryaduran Road, and he was heading home. He had passed two winters away from the snow-capped mountains and verdant valleys of Ryadur, and the yearning to see them again was near enough painful in its intensity.

Kevran studied the scene around him. Despite the advancing hour everywhere people were still busy preparing for the epic journey, bartering for travelling fare for the arduous three month trek eastwards through the three thousand killoms of wilderness and the vast emptiness of the Central Grasslands. That was what this peculiar town did, he mused, it lived to furnish departing travelling companies with supplies and final comforts, and to welcome arriving companies with fresh food and ale and soft beds.

He thought about that. *It must be bleak and empty here, outside the travelling season,* he decided.

He strolled slowly across the square, soaking up the background wash of noise, the steady chipping of adzes, the rhythmic creaking of a lathe, the wheezing of bellows, the discordant ringing of hammers, the sharp calls of the traders, which combined together to suffuse the very atmosphere with urgency and purpose. At the same time he was imbuing the tangible undercurrent of nervousness and excitement amongst his fellow travellers preparing to launch themselves upon the perils of the trade road. The departure must be close, probably but a few days away. But when? He pondered, then angled his way towards the camping grounds, and the grazing horses and gaily painted wagons of the itinerant merchant companies who plied The Road. They would know.

As he approached, he could see that something unusual was happening. Most of the drivers and their wives and children were clustered close together before one of the nearer wagons. An entertainment perhaps? A council? Some problem? Curious, Kevran drew his cloak yet tighter around him, wrapping himself more deeply in the luxury of anonymity; then, carefully controlling his pace, he strolled casually closer. As he did so, he heard the gasp from the crowd. It was not a gasp of fear or suchlike, but a gasp of awe. There was a sudden burst of applause.

Ah, an entertainment, he decided.

'And that, good sirs and ladies, is the most magical art of thaumaturgy...'

Kevran froze, his brow furrowing. *The... what?*

He hesitated, thinking hard, then strayed across to another wagon, surreptitiously snapping a twig off the bundle of firewood already slung from the side and sliding it under his cloak.

'...the very same art which so famously decimated the wicked brigands of the grasslands at Echo

Gorge five years past.’

There was a muttering of agreement around the audience. The Battle Of Hammer Pass had already become a legend of The Road, the courageous exploits of the Heroine Tria rivalling those of the greatest heroes of ancient times. Kevran smiled a private smile at that, a warm and reflective smile, yet a smile tinged with sadness; then he eased his way amongst the crowd, and got his first clear view of the thaumaturge. He studied the man closely.

The man had the proper Digressionist accent for a thaumaturge who had journeyed from south of the Great Central Desert; and he certainly looked the part. He was dressed in the proper deep-red robes. He was less than middle years in age, lean, smoothly-shaven, with dark brown hair hanging straight to his shoulders. His eyes were bright, alert, flicking around the crowd, and Kevran saw them lock briefly upon him, sizing up the young, blond-haired newcomer, then shifting quickly away. The thaumaturge was sat cross-legged behind a portable brazier, from which rose a spiral of comfortingly magical yellow smoke. Around the brazier was a scattering of coins.

Ah! thought Kevran. *Now I understand!* He fingered the broken twig. That would be the ultimate proof.

‘Though, of course, five travelling seasons have passed since the Battle Of Hammer Pass,’ the thaumaturge continued. He looked around, his expression concerned. ‘You all make your living on The Road, so tell me, have the murderous brigands yet returned?’

‘Not that we’ve seen, magician,’ one of the drivers answered uneasily.

‘Are you travelling with us, sir?’ one of the women asked hopefully.

The thaumaturge frowned, seeming to ponder that. ‘In truth I have not yet decided,’ he confessed, sounding uncertain. ‘Thaumaturges are not much loved in Ryaduran lands, you know?’ He shrugged. ‘There is little incentive for us to travel there, little chance of earning a proper reward for our arts.’

There was a clinking noise as more coins landed before him.

‘Some Ryadurans respect your arts...’ Kevran stated loudly ‘...Learned Sir.’

The crowd all turned to look at Kevran. He struggled to keep his face straight.

‘Learned sir?’ asked one of the drivers, puzzling at the unfamiliar title.

‘I once happened to travel in company with a thaumaturge who titled himself so,’ Kevran replied casually, pressing forwards to the very front of the crowd. *Though it was, of course, a title devised upon the spur of the moment by his serving girl for him alone.*

The thaumaturge’s face remained expressionless. ‘It is indeed a lesser title, sometimes used by my fellow practitioners of the thaumaturgical arts. If you have travelled with a thaumaturge, young sir, you have perhaps seen him demonstrate his art?’

The thaumaturge was now studying him intently, gauging the threat which this outspoken young man posed. The young man’s craft was obscured by his cloak, upon which he sported no blazon, but the scar across his cheek marked him as most likely a warrior, his accent was Ryaduran, and his confidence spoke of rank - perhaps of some claim to noble breeding?

Kevran was aware of the scrutiny, and of the man’s assumptions, and was having to struggle even harder to keep his face straight now; but his voice was nonchalant as he responded: ‘He was not much into making public show of his art, lest it was needful.’

‘You saw him manipulate the Cognate Identity of all things?’ the thaumaturge pressed.

Kevran contrived to look puzzled. ‘I think not?’

‘But that is the basis of all thaumaturgy, that every example of any identical material is linked by a common identity, and can be manipulated by the art of thaumaturgy.’

‘I am familiar with the thaumaturgical Law of Cognate Identity,’ Kevran conceded.

The thaumaturge smirked. ‘Then let me demonstrate its application.’

The thaumaturge leant forwards, scooping a single tarnished silver coin up from the dirt in each hand, then lifting them high, unfolding his hands to show the coins to the crowd. Kevran watched closely.

‘By my most magical art I shall apply heat to just one of these coins, and, by the Law of Cognate Identity, enchant the other coin to melt... but without heating it, Like to Like.’

The thaumaturge set down one coin for a few moments, picked up a phial of powder, and added it to the brazier. There was a flash of light, a most magical puff of orange smoke, and the brazier flared intensely. Now the thaumaturge carefully gripped one coin with a long pair of tweezers, and held it close over the flames.

‘Watch both coins!’ he instructed his audience, grasping the edges of the second coin with his long fingernails and holding it out by the side of the brazier. He chanted determinedly.

Kevran listened closely, the enchantment sounded right... but hollow, empty.

The coin held in the flames began to glow, red, then orange, then bright yellow. Slowly it began to curve. The crowd gasped in awe. The coin held beside the brazier was also losing its shape, globules of silver dripping from it.

‘By the Skygods!’ someone muttered.

‘See how the second coin does not glow with heat, merely melts,’ the thaumaturge pointed out. ‘That is the power of Cognate Identity.’

A fresh shower of coins pattered on the ground.

The thaumaturge glanced questioningly at Kevran.

‘I never saw him do that,’ he conceded, quite honestly.

The thaumaturge removed the drooping coin from the heat, and waved it around. At the same time he pointed to the melted coin dropped beside the brazier.

‘That was the same art that destroyed the brigands of the grasslands!’ he announced.

‘Indeed, in part it was,’ Kevran agreed, rather loudly. It was getting harder and harder to keep his face straight.

The thaumaturge directed a withering glare at the arrogant young man, then he produced a slim dagger and held it up. ‘Using my art, I can influence materials in a variety of ways. I can bend even iron with my power. Watch!’

There was a crushing silence as the thaumaturge chanted vigorously over the blade, then rubbed his fingertips along the steel. There was another awed gasp from the crowd, as, slowly but surely, the blade began to curve away from his fingers.

The audience sighed in collective wonderment. There was a clinking sound again as yet more coins landed before the magician.

Kevran could maintain his composure no longer. He burst out laughing.

The thaumaturge glowered at him. ‘You find the magical arts a source of amusement, sir?’ he grated.

Kevran shook his head. ‘Indeed not, sir, all magical arts are deserving of the deepest respect... when I see them. One thaumaturgical art that did truly impress me was the conjuring of fire out of wood. I believe all thaumaturges can do that?’

Under his cloak, he carefully drew up his sleeve before he held out the piece of stick.

For an instant the thaumaturge had looked concerned. A slow smile now spread across his face. ‘Of course,’ he said.

He took the stick and held it up to the crowd, waving it around while his free hand slid unobtrusively under a fold in his gown. ‘The conjuring of fire is one of the simplest of the magical arts of thaumaturgy.’

Will you stop saying that! Kevran fumed. *The Thaumaturge Thales would have exploded with righteous indignation by now. And most like fire-bombed the idiot,* he mused. Then he concentrated on watching the thaumaturge closely.

The thaumaturge crossed hands, his fingers unobtrusively rubbing along the stick. He crossed hands again.

Aha! thought Kevran.

He watched patiently. The thaumaturge now chanted furiously, waving his free hand in complicated gestures over the stick, and the stick over the brazier. The stick burst into flames.

The crowd gasped in appropriate awe. More coins clattered onto the pile on the ground.

Triumphantly holding up the burning stick, the thaumaturge focused upon Kevran once more. ‘Does that satisfy you, sir?’ he demanded.

‘Indeed, sir,’ Kevran responded evenly, ‘I am now satisfied that you are a charlatan, and capable of naught but base deception to trick these good people of their hard earned silver.’

The entire crowd turned to stare at him agape.

‘No true thaumaturge would ever risk conjuring fire out of wood...’ he explained, pointing dramatically behind the thaumaturge ‘...not so close to a wooden wagon, for a genuine application of Cognate Identity would cause all identical wood within fifty paces to burst into flames.’ He pointed at the coins. ‘Just as a genuine Cognate Identity link would have caused all of the other silver coins within fifty paces to melt, not just the fake coin that this fraudster produced by sleight of hand.’ He smiled wryly round the crowd. ‘Oh, and that includes the coins in your purses.’ He refocused upon the thaumaturge. ‘That is why a true thaumaturge has to be most cautious about demonstrating his arts.’

The face of the fake thaumaturge was red with fury. His hand slid to his waist, and a proper dagger appeared from within his robes.

Kevran’s gaze locked firmly on the thaumaturge’s eyes. The tone and modulation of his voice were precise.

‘You will listen to me,’ he commanded. ‘You will drop your dagger.’

The thaumaturge stared disbelievingly at the dagger laying on the ground beside him. ‘Who the hell are you?’

Kevran sighed. *Oh, pox it! Here we go again. So much for my moment of anonymity!*

‘A poor choice of words, sir,’ he said. ‘I’m not exactly from hell.’ He let his cloak fall back, revealing his black and white robes.

The thaumaturge’s expression melted into sheer terror.

The Ryadurans around him made the religious gesture and bowed their heads. ‘Revered sir,’ they muttered.

‘A Ryaduran priest!’ the Nuomists and Acceptantists whispered, awed.

The few Bakkomites amongst the crowd made the warding sign and eased nervously away.

The ‘thaumaturge’ was surreptitiously shuffling back towards the wagon, mainly intent on avoiding the good kicking that was coming his way.

‘Oh, and no genuine thaumaturge would ever call his art ‘magic’,’ Kevran berated him, ‘to a thaumaturge it is pure science.’ He turned his attention to the crowd. ‘Collect your own coins,’ he prompted them.

There was a general movement forwards... and then a general hesitation as the crowd stared uncertainly at the jumble of coins.

‘Allow me to assist you,’ Kevran suggested.

He stared at the coins and chanted the prayer, weaving his hands above them.

The coins began to slide across the dusty ground, seeking out their owners.

‘Now that is magic,’ Kevran informed the fleeing fake thaumaturge.

He turned away. *Or perhaps a Cognate Identity link between the sweat on the coins and the sweat of their owners?* he mused. After all, it rather depended on which magic you were talking about.