

THE SIGNS OF MAGIC

#1

- JENNA -

Don't be lucky.

When it came to mottos, she had to admit that this was rather a good one. Not as snappy as '?' by the Philosopher's League, and '*Bloody dragons!*' by the Dark Knights of the Realm had much the better ring to it. But as a guiding torch of wisdom through the mysteries of life, the code of the Black Guild had precision in its favour – it was hard, it was ruthless and it was short.

It also happened to be the greatest friend a young assassin could wish for. A constant reminder that the dark arts of the Citadel were the only thing standing between her and certain doom. Relying on luck was for amateurs and halfwits. It always ran out and the results were always unpleasant. Being imprisoned in the Soulless Tower, cast into the bottomless pits of Sark or turned into nibbles for a shoal of hungry razorfish were just a few of the better ones.

Don't be lucky.

It was extremely useful advice.

But as Jenna's amber cat's eyes crept over the cheerless walls of the courtroom, she couldn't help feeling that a drop of the stuff might have been handy after all.

A dozen suspicious faces were staring in her direction.

"I take it that this is your full account of what happened?" The frost-tongued woman in the stern iron chair made a steeple out of her fingers.

"Yes, Crow Aolin", Jenna said.

"You've left nothing out?"

"Nothing whatsoever".

"And you're aware that lying is a level ten offence?"

"I am".

An uneasy murmur chased its tail around the half-moon marble table. It was followed by the kind of silence in which everyone knew what everyone else was thinking.

Given the thoughts in Jenna's head, this was probably not a good sign.

Crow Aolin's ancient features were as inscrutable as a maze. "I must confess, I did not expect your mission to end like this".

“I was following my orders”.

“Your *orders* were to follow Crow Zemini”.

“That is what I did”.

“And at what point did he tell you to eliminate the Chief of the Q’ush?”

Jenna felt the room spin 360 degrees. Hard miles on horseback and long nights lacking in proper sleep caught up with her all at once in a dizzying woozy rush.

Her first appearance before the court was turning out to be even worse than she had expected. The hooded cloaks and the endless questions were like something from the Orgish Inquisition. All they needed now was a red-hot poker and a set of thumbscrews for the scene to be complete.

Crow Emerus, the Master of Deceptions, had a face that belonged on a mountain. Black granite crags framed a stony glint in his eyes. “Perhaps it might help”, he growled, knotting his arms, “if you went over your story again”.

“But I have already told you – ”

“From the beginning”.

Jenna tried to force her thoughts into some sort of workable order, tucking a lock of ash-grey hair behind an ear that was slightly on the pointy side. “We left the city by the Unseen Bridge, travelled south on the Way of Sighs, crossed the stones of the Frozen Marsh and went through Deadwitch Pass”.

“Where you were attacked?”

“Yes”.

“By Cassidian bandits?”

“That is what they looked like”.

There was a crude, guttural snort, like a pig backfiring.

“Must we continue to suffer this farce?” hissed the skeletal face in the pearl-white robes worn by all High Priests of the Celestene.

Up until now, Jenna had been straining to ignore the old man, and not just because his clammy, pale rock of a head made her want to hurl her guts into the nearest available bucket.

Scarlas was the one person she longed to see strung up on the city walls, preferably in separate pieces. And even that was far too good for him. A plate of poisoned slugworms would be lavishly deserved.

“You must take us all for fools”, he sneered. “Do you expect this court to believe that Crow Zemini, the Master of Assassins, would fall prey to an ambush that you, a mere *Raven*, somehow managed to survive? Or that you then made your own way to the Broken Hills, single-handedly putting an end to a siege that has vexed the wisest and holiest minds in the Realm?”

“Why not?” shrugged Jenna. “You expect people to believe in a thousand-year-old goat”.

The priest glowered, his hollow eyes burning like a pair of miniature suns. “Then it’s insolence *and* lies! Still, we should know better than to hope for anything less from your kind!”

Jenna flared the colour of smouldering embers. Her hand instinctively slipped inside her robe. If she hadn’t been forced to leave her moonblade outside then there was a quite excellent chance of her having done something with it that she might have lived to regret.

Even if Scarlas didn’t.

Crow Aolin’s eyebrows flashed a deadly warning sign. “Do I need to remind you that the girl is not on trial? Jenorah is a Raven of sixteen summers. She is *not* a Magieri”.

“Pah! We all know what she is. It’s unnatural ... even for a *skinshifter*”.

Scarlas pulled a face like he was chewing a mouthful of spiders. “That girl is a danger to us all. And as the Mistress of the Black Guild, you must see that she is punished. She should be demoted to the rank of Starling at the least. If I had *my* way she would be – ”

“Languishing in one of your prisons?” Crow Aolin’s tone made it clear that the matter was closed and that further discussion would be as welcome as a sneeze in a soup bowl. “I know the Celestene have a reputation to uphold but the Lords of the Sanctum have placed you on this court as an *observer*. Only Crows have a say in Black Guild affairs. And right now, we have more pressing concerns than your obsession with magic”.

Crow Aolin turned to Jenna with an ice-cold, withering glare. “You realise that your actions are in clear breach of the Guildlaw? Ravens on a mission beyond the city walls *must* return to the Citadel if anything should happen to their Crow”.

“I thought I was protecting the Realm!” protested Jenna.

Crow Emerus’ lips curled into a bulldog snarl. “I always said it was a bad idea putting her in the assassins. We would all have been better off if she had trained to be an elchamist. At least then she wouldn’t have – ”

Snurrrrrrrfle!

Jenna traced the yawn-snore back to where Crow Valgor had been snoozing in his chair. To judge by his dazed expression, the Master of Elchamy did not wish to be awake. Although ‘awake’ was pushing it in his case because Crow Valgor was forever lost inside a dream. The faraway look in his milky eyes was a sign that only half the wheels were turning. The brightly coloured sparkling robes were a bit of a giveaway too.

And as for the fluffy slippers ...

"I agree!" he declared, wiping the drool from his wizard's beard. "Splendid job. Never trust anyone with a moustache, that's what I always say!"

"Your views on the cultural traditions of the Q'ush are hardly relevant", sniffed Crow Emerus, smoothing his own snow-coloured handlebar.

"Aren't they?"

"No".

"Oh". Crow Valgor seemed disappointed. A pair of bushy eyebrows slid down an egg-smooth dome of a head. "In that case I say we ought to throw her in the dungeon!"

"And could we get some more tea?" he added, waving an empty cup about at no one in particular.

Jenna was gripped by an urgent need to protect what remained of her innocence. "I took a pledge to defend the Realm", she flashed. "Crow Zemini told me that our mission was to put an end to the siege. I was merely – "

"Following your orders?" Crow Aolin snapped. "Yes, highly commendable. And yet ... not entirely wise".

Jenna held her breath. This didn't sound like Crow Aolin. Normally it was 'follow the rules or find your head on a spike'.

And then the Mistress of the Black Guild turned her whole world upside down.

"Crow Emerus is right", she said. "You might be the finest Raven in the Citadel, but you are headstrong, stubborn and single-minded to a fault. And that makes *you* a serious problem".

The old woman pierced Jenna with cold blue, sapphire eyes.

"Let me tell you what Crow Zemini's *real* mission was".

#2

- RED -

Being a thief and hustler for the Guild was not as glamorous as it sounded.

It wasn't the food (uniquely awful) or the hours (even worse) or that they treated him like something he would scrape off the bottom of a shoe.

It was more the annoyingly predictable way he got stuck with the crummiest jobs.

The latest demonstration of this iron law of nature was the safe. The rusting junk heap hidden in the wall was his least favourite kind of high-security storage unit.

In other words, it was locked.

Red double-checked the numbers that Crow Emerus had given him, spun the dial for the umpteenth time and when the handle failed to budge released a stream of hysterical curses.

This made him feel much better.

He decided to have another go.

Tossing the note aside, Red pressed his ear to the container and slowly began to pick his way through the clicks that betrayed the combination.

Precisely ninety-two seconds later, the door was swinging open to –

Aaaa-aa-TISH-oooOOO!

Red screwed up his eyes and held his breath amidst the swarm of dust that every part of him, especially his nose, instinctively knew to be sneezing powder.

This was not top of the list of things he hoped to find in a safe.

The only way it could be any worse would be if –

The safe was empty.

Red blinkfrowned. He looked again. There was absolutely, positively nothing in the box.

Another burst of expletives coloured the air as Red prepared to make a getaway, sneezed a second time and froze in a state of stomach-churning terror.

Bloodburners!

What in four hells were *they* doing here? The leather-armoured ogres were supposed to be guarding the temple. They should not have been anywhere near the Theatre Dramatica, let alone bothering a small-time crook disguised as an extra from the naval battle scene.

There was a moment or ten in which he and the beast held a world-class, boss-level staring competition before the glow from the fire in the creature's eyes told Red that it was time for him to leave.

He was tugging at the fake nose as he scarpered out the doorway, peeling off the beard as he clambered down the steps and had just ditched the wig by the time his feet were flying like a supersonic arrow through the heart of Concert Square.

A bright peal of excitement rang out in his chest as he dashed across the cobblestones and threw himself into the crowd.

With an expert stumble the cool-eyed, copper-topped, raffish youth crashed straight into a group of prim and highly proper ladies, paused momentarily to gather himself, bowed politely, tidied up his waistcoat, mumbled something about how terribly sorry he was and scrambled off down King Street pocketing a newly acquired bracelet on the way.

For denizens of the City of Echoes, such a louche performance was barely enough to warrant the twitch of an eyebrow.

But the sight of a bloodburner closing in to make a kill could set the most insipid pulses racing.

Why couldn't things, for once, go according to plan?

It wasn't as if he ever went out of his way to look for trouble. And yet it always came looking for him. Most of the time with a map of the Realm and an 'X' to mark the spot.

Red had only lasted this long due to a combination of reckless charm and the copious use of skulduggery.

Also, he was *really* good at running ...

He hurtled past a blur of suits and pearls on Champagne Broadway, belted past the broken hearts and dreams of Cobbler's Row, twisted his ankle while trying to dodge a pothole and hobbled into Zigzag Lane, the narrowest alley in the Cultural Quarter and clear favourite to scoop any prize going for 'backstreet most likely to resemble a demonic grin'.

The Guardian of the Celestene Church remained hot on his heels, leaving an uproarious medley of panic in its wake.

Not that this came as a surprise. In Red's experience, being chased through the streets by something trying to kill him always involved a pounding hammer of noise.

The strange part was that bloodburners themselves were always so quiet. They never even made so much as a vaguely threatening hum. The plasma-powered, undead beasts just kept coming with those glassy eyes until they caught up with whomever they were after.

Which was right about the time when all the screaming normally started.

Red tried hard not to worry about this as he limped along the passageway, found the rusty drainpipe and hitched himself up as nimbly as could be expected from anyone wearing trousers that were too tight for this sort of thing.

In less time than it took him to accidentally talk his way into a fight with a drunken sailor, he had set off on a hop, skip and trot across the rooftops.

From behind him came the unmistakable clank of a bloodburner climbing up a flimsy metal tube.

Red considered his options.

The fail-safe for this sort of thing was known as Rule #5. It involved a false tooth and a hidden capsule with enough Dusk oil to put a whale hog on its side.

The basic principle of Rule #5 was that there wasn't a Rule #6.

But the inventor of this particular scheme had not counted on Red. Because he was the kind of person who refused to take the easy way out unless it involved *not* dying a horrible, pain-filled, futile death.

So he was keen to stick to the top of the list if he could.

Don't be lucky.

Perhaps Rule #1 had some life in the old dog yet.

For here, high above the foggy streets and buildings like misshapen bread, far from the rattle and clatter of the carriages, safely tucked away amongst the broken, rickety roof tiles ... was a *warren*.

The Black Guild's network of ultra-secret passageways weaved across the city like the threads of a devious web. And at this precise moment, they were Red's best hope of getting back to the Citadel in fewer than fifty pieces.

He counted off the chimney pots as he staggered towards the Olde Town, veered to the left when he heard the familiar squeak, wobbled in the direction of the docks for twenty paces and went tumbling through a hole that shouldn't be there.

He landed with a crude, ungainly whump!

Several thoughts competed for his attention. The first involved the throbbing of his legs and the primal need to give somebody a lesson in how to close the secret hatches. Thoughts two, three and four were all about the pirate. He had a tricorn hat, a shipwrecked beard, knee-high boots and bangles.

But most of Red's attention was focused on the club.

"Who in four hells are you?" Red blurted.

Apparently, the man was not in the mood for chit-chat.

He was in the mood for whacking something, hard.

Red found out what this was in a sparkleburst of stars.

#3

- BONES -

The pot was black and onion-shaped and smelled as bad as a drain. Its plucky fire sent clouds of smoke up the shaft of a wide stone chimney. Over the rim peered an urchin boy with a mop of snow-white hair.

He rubbed his nose in contemplation, giving the mixture a swish.

This was the place, beneath the towers and the courtyards, where the Chambers of Elchamy burrowed deep into the ground. The rooms were dim and impossibly stuffy. There was barely enough space inside to swing a miniature rat. Only the most reclusive and socially inept could tolerate their gloomy traits in any shape or form.

They suited Bones to perfection.

Because *this* was where the magic happened.

Not proper magic, obviously, because *proper* magic – the stuff that bent reality into shapes it wasn't designed for – had long been banished from every corner of the Realm. But the ancient Art of Elchamy was *magical* nevertheless. To an untrained observer, it might have been little more than a fancy way of cooking up horrible, toxic smells. But to Crow Valgor's apprentice, it was the finest means of probing the laws of nature ever devised.

The trouble was that sometimes nature got fed up being poked about and decided to have a go back ...

Bones gave the air a worried sniff and retrieved the stub of a pencil that was wedged behind an ear. After a brief consultation with one of the charts that lined the walls, the shortling found a notebook under his tunic, rustled a few pages, squinted thoughtfully, wondered if that '8' should have been a '3' and arrived at a conclusion that was as inescapable as the dungeons of Gnuum.

This wasn't supposed to happen.

And it was most certainly not supposed to be happening right now.

The class had taken him weeks to prepare. There had been endless hours of toiling over the formulas, selecting the right ingredients from the stores and enduring sleepless nights of worry about the infinite ways it could all go horribly wrong.

But even he had failed to account for how determined disaster could be when it really wanted to strike.

"Your cauldron's going to melt!"

"For the fourth time", muttered Bones, "it's *not* a cauldron. It's a bosslepot. It's used for making elchemical brew and it's forged from carbonated iron and lead. It *isn't* going to –"

"Why does it smell like rotten eggs?"

"Um ..."

Up until two minutes ago, the throng of novices crammed in between the potions had shown about as much interest in elchemical laws as stone-dead, petrified sheep. But with the impression taking hold that the lesson was not going precisely according to plan, their curiosity was growing to a remarkable degree.

Bones' stomach gurgled with nerves. It had been an uncannily accurate guide to events for the first twelve years of his life and he had no reason to suspect that it was going to give up on him now.

Unlike the bosslepot, which fumed and hissed in a crude, sulphuric way.

"*Is it dragonflame?*" wondered a girl with prominent teeth.

Bones nearly choked on the sheer preposterousness of the question. "I am *not* making dragonflame", he said. "Because that is the most dangerous substance known throughout the Realm. One bottle of it would be enough to turn this chamber to rubble. Which is why it's strictly forbidden. Anyone caught using it, trying to make it, or even *thinking* about it without permission risks being sent to the Mines of Mish".

Eyes widened. Clearly this was not a future that one ought to contemplate.

Bones was contemplating a dark horror of his own.

He had triple-checked the recipe and followed Crow Valgor's instructions to the letter. But since when did honey-hooch smell like this?

And why was it turning green?

He ran through the ingredients one more time. Just to be totally sure.

Three gallons of clean-ish water (not easy when it came from the river Irk) ✓

A half quart of sugarwax (preferably unsalted) ✓

A handful of flowering fangroot (Bones had small hands so he had put in one and a half) ✓

Two vials of lumpit powder (Crow Valgor had given him these personally that morning) ✓

Four strands of hair from the tail of a habbajinx (impossible to get hold of at this time of year, but the feathers of a turrabin usually worked as well) ✓

A twist of wild lime (according to taste) ✓

Bones rubbed his nose. The concoction was perfect. Not a shake, not a stir not even a whisk was out of place.

In other words, he had no idea what was going on.

Fortunately, he *did* know how to make the bubbling stop.

The first (and at this moment, most difficult) thing to do was not to panic.

The second thing was not to panic even more than he already wasn't.

The third thing to do was snatch a vial of neutraliser from the wonky rack on the wall, uncork it and tip the whole lot in.

There was a sharp, collective intake of breath as everybody in the class waited to see what was going to happen.

Which was this.

The pot seethed for several moments, belched up a head of foam and burst into a kaleidoscopic haze of multicoloured glimmering flecks that fizzed with raw volcanic power and the sinister threat of plenty more to come.

Bones was around thirty per cent convinced that this was perfectly normal, but he had never used essence of crimp before and had no idea what the results were going to be.

There was a whiff.

There was a wummmmmffff!

And a stereophonic sizzle as the bosslepot came alive with a halo of flames.

All as one the class began to scream.

Bones considered this to be an excellent idea because it was starting to look an awful lot like an ectothermic reaction. Which meant that in approximately fifteen seconds the brew was going to explode.

Bones looked from the burning pot to the wailing, cowering children, took a monumental breath ... and dived into a corner.

There was a seismic BANG! and a brief moment in which he expected to learn what it felt like to be splattered all over the walls before Bones realised that Crow Valgor had burst in through the door, which, if ever there was any bursting in to be done, was always the best place to do it.

One glance at the chaos was enough. The Master of Elchamy made a noise of mild alarm, produced a jar of yellow powder from beneath his spangly robes, unscrewed the lid and threw the contents into the fire.

With a tremendous, grumbling, churning burp that wild rage was tamed. In seconds, the bosslepot was gurgling like an infant in a crib.

"I don't remember telling you to blow anything up", Crow Valgor said.

"You didn't", groaned Bones.

“Oh good. That means it’s your fault”.

Bones looked up at the simmering brew and the heap of terrified pupils. “I was trying to – ”

“An elchamist must not allow their pot to get out of control!” Crow Valgor pinned him with a glare. “It’s the first and most important rule. You should never, ever, *ever* leave your mixture unattended”.

“Unless you need to use the privy”, he added. “Or make a snack. Or have a little nap. Or ... anyway, the point is that your pot is *your* responsibility”.

“I understand”, said Bones, hanging his head.

Crow Valgor frowned. “I think we need to have a chinwag after lunch”.

And with that, he turned on his heels and swept out of the room.

Leaving Bones wishing that he had been splattered after all.