

ALWYN'S EMPIRE

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Chapter 1

The flickering firelight cast dancing shadows across the stone walls of Castle FalconKeep. Above the high mantle, and betwixt a pair of ancient swords said to have been forged in the First Millennium of the empire, a battle-worn shield bearing the arms of House Falconus guarded over the master himself, seated behind his desk and staring through the gloom at a ragged sheet of yellowed parchment.

Alwyn Falconus, Master of FalconKeep, gazed at the strange symbols and icons on the parchment. He knew that no amount of illumination would aid him in their decipherment, yet he paused in his scrutiny to light three additional tapers. It was, he sighed audibly, no use—the mysterious characters refused to give up their secret.

Of the parchment's provenance, Alwyn was unsure. He had found it in a book of zodiacal treatises; the subject of this particular parchment, however, was not astrological in nature, nor did it match the rest of the book. It was smaller in size, much older and of cruder grade, and it appeared to have been torn from a separate volume. The ink which formed the symbols, according to Alwyn's chymists, was of an unknown composition which had turned a brownish yellow with age, and the parchment itself, being of scraped grinnich hide, was so brittle that Alwyn handled it as little as possible.

Why Alwyn would be interested in a relic such as this was another mystery, since his personal library was already stuffed with ancient manuscripts and he had purchased the astrological book for its own value and not for the sheet of parchment. The zodiacal writings were a treasured addition to his library, but the parchment seemed to have mesmerized him to the point that it was interfering with normal business.

Alwyn rummaged around on his desk—he was not particularly organized—and managed to locate a magnifying lens. Pulling the tapers closer, he held the lens over the parchment until the lines and symbols came into focus. He had already done this a score of times, but this time he thought he could just make out a tracery of characters, so faint that they had escaped his previous attention. He could almost make them out when...

"Still wasting your time on that worthless scrap of paper?" said a melodiously feminine voice from directly behind him.

Alwyn laid down the lens and leaned back in his chair until the back of his head met something soft yet unyielding. A pair of small, slender hands slid around his throat and began massaging the back of his neck, and a curtain of midnight hair fell across his face.

"This parchment intrigues me, Elspeth," Alwyn sighed as her fingers caressed his muscles.

"*Obsesses* you is nearer to the truth," she murmured. "You have done nothing except stare at it since the moment you discovered it. If I remember correctly, *I* used to be the object of your obsession."

Alwyn tilted his head back and accepted a kiss, then he reached up and stroked her delicate cheek. "My dearest wife," he said softly. "I shall always be obsessed with you. You know full well that we are bound together for all time. I apologize if I seem neglectful, but this parchment..."

Elspeth pulled his chair back, then she hiked her gown up and straddled his lap, put her hands on his chest and stared into his eyes. "You pay me more attention than I deserve," she said with a smile. "I know the demands on your time are heavy, and I also know that you need an occasional diversion which doesn't include keeping me satisfied. Not that I am dissatisfied, you understand. Now tell me about this mysterious scrap of paper, Alwyn. Perhaps together we can reveal its secret."

"Together?" Alwyn exclaimed. "Since when did you take an interest in my hobbies?"

"I've always been interested," she replied, "but most of your hobbies involve smelly chymicals or dusty tombs or damp cellars. Now tell me about your paper or I'll have to find my own diversions."

Alwyn studied Elspeth's small face as it hovered six inches from his. They had met two years ago at an antiques auction, and in those two years she had grown even more beautiful. She was ten years younger than Alwyn, still considered a child in some provinces, but a woman in body and mind, nonetheless. Only her pixie size belied her age; the top of her head barely reached Alwyn's chest. Her nubile body was slender, with high firm breasts, a narrow waist and smooth hips; her pale, heart-shaped face with its delicate features was framed by a tangled mass of jet-black hair which hung to her waist in twisted curls. But to Alwyn, Elspeth's most outstanding feature was an enormous pair of emerald green eyes, behind which was a mind which was every bit as shrewd as his.

"You are incredibly beautiful," Alwyn whispered as he stroked Elspeth's soft cheek. "You know that, don't you?"

"So you have told me," she grinned. "I know you're trying to change the subject, so unless you're about to strip me naked and make passionate love to me, you'll tell me about your little piece of paper."

"Very well," Alwyn sighed. "As usual, you have twisted me around your little finger. If you will quit squeezing my waist with your thighs, I will explain. Thank you. First, it is not paper, it is parchment, as you very well know."

"I know," she smiled. "I was merely teasing you. And second?"

"Second, the parchment, along with the writing, is extremely old."

"So I surmised, considering you are an antiques dealer. And third?"

"Third...there is no third. I have no idea what is written on the parchment."

Elspeth wrinkled her tiny nose. "Then what you have may be nothing more than directions to the local greengrocer's."

"I doubt if it's that," he replied, "but whatever it is, it's very detailed and intricately done, executed by an artistic hand. Whoever created it spent a lot of time, and considering one edge is ragged, my guess is that it's a page from a book. I want that book, Elspeth."

"Just what you need," she snickered. "You have one page which you can't decipher; why not an entire book you can't decipher? That should keep you busy for the next ten years. Meanwhile, I'll grow old and wrinkled, maintain a vow of chastity, and pleasure myself while you're in here squinting at indecipherable squiggles through your magnifying lens. May I ask what you're doing with my blouse?"

"Removing it, in anticipation of stripping you naked in preparation for passionate lovemaking. You have made your point, my dear Elspeth."

Chapter 2

Elspeth stared into her mirror and gasped as Alwyn tugged at the laces in the rear of her ankle-length gown. “One would think,” she wheezed, “that my waist is narrow enough without being further compressed.”

Alwyn tied her laces and stepped up behind her; reaching around her, he pulled her back against him and gazed at their reflections. “Your waist is the envy of the empire,” he murmured, “but formal occasions require formal dress and this is a very formal occasion.”

“So it is,” she sighed. “We make quite the dashing couple, do we not?”

“Yes, we do,” he agreed. “Are we ready?”

“I suppose. What if we descended the grand staircase completely nude? I’ll do it if you will.”

“Perhaps next time,” he chuckled, wrapping his hands around her waist and lifting her off the footstool. He spun her around and admired her beauty and how the maroon velvet gown clung to her body and complimented her green eyes. She had spent hours trying to do something with her midnight hair, finally piling it on top of her head and arranging her curls so that they hung from her temples.

“Must we attend this affair?” she murmured as he leaned down and kissed her. “I can think of better ways for us to occupy our evening.”

“Since we’re the hosts, it would be inappropriate for us to abandon our guests. Besides—I want to show you off.”

“So I’m a mere bauble?”

“No, you’re my beautiful wife and I am very proud of you.”

“Oh. Well, in that case, let’s not keep our guests waiting.”

FalconKeep Manor was ablaze with light, the old candelabras having been recently converted to gaslamps. The main foyer, from which ceiling hung ornate crystal chandeliers, was teeming with couples in formal attire, as was the ballroom which occupied the east wing. Servants in red livery darted here and there with trays of drinks and platters of sweetbreads, and the sounds of gay laughter echoed through the hallways.

The chatter died and all eyes lifted as Alwyn and Elspeth stood at the head of the grand staircase. Slowly they descended to the applause of the onlookers; when they reached the bottom they were immediately surrounded and were followed into the ballroom. A chamber orchestra took its cue and began a lilting waltz, and the party was off and running.

Alwyn and Elspeth did not participate in the dancing; they made their way to the crystal punch bowl and sipped a tart red liquid while they greeted various dignitaries of the realm. Almost all of the provinces were represented, Alwyn’s name being known far and wide. Even a delegation from the Empress Deronn was present, although said delegation seemed to be more interested in the food and spirits than in ritual diplomacy. Indeed they should be more interested in the food, because the empire was currently in dire financial straits; the royal court was virtually an empty shell these days since the late Emperor Timov IV had squandered the taxpayers’ money enlarging his palaces and investing in weaponry invented by inept court

scientists. One such weapon had razed Timov's summer palace, along with Timov, after which tragedy the empress proclaimed a halt to further flights of destructive fancy. Such a proclamation wouldn't have mattered anyway, because the government was dead broke.

Of course this sad state of financial affairs was a secret, but Alwyn had ears everywhere; hence the party, to which the imperial delegation had been invited in hopes that the empress might wish to take out a loan. Alwyn was no fool—the loan would never be repaid, but a generous loan can be repaid in other ways than with bags of gold talons: influence in policy-making decisions, for example, or the signing over of acres of lush, fertile land presently owned by the royal court and hopefully held by Alwyn as collateral.

Thus it was that Alwyn and Elspeth kept their eyes on the delegation as its members stuffed various and sundry delectables down their throats and downed gallons of ale and other spirits. None of them seemed to be interested in striking up an official discussion, so Alwyn and Elspeth turned their attention to other guests.

Elspeth had a bevy of admirers, most of them wealthy young men (or shiftless sons of wealthy *old* men) who buzzed around her like moths circling a flame, trying desperately to attract her attention and curry her favor. But Elspeth knew them for what they were—and for what they wanted. She was, to her credit, very gracious and polite, as befits a Lady of the Empire, and she was deft at putting them in their place without embarrassing them (although a few of them should have been embarrassed at their scandalous behavior).

Alwyn also had his share of admirers, but he was rather less diplomatic at shooing them away. In his younger years he had been somewhat flattered by their shameless advances, but women who constantly whispered explicit sexual propositions in his ear had long since become an annoyance. "Not all whores walk the streets," he muttered to Elspeth at one point; it was the only time she broke her ladylike composure and giggled out loud.

Eventually the whirling dancers grew tired and formed into small conversation groups; the imperial delegation staked out a table and contemplated its collective navel, and various guests began departing. Servants with wide brooms began sweeping the ballroom floor and herding the diehards into the foyer by slamming the broom heads into their heels. The orchestra packed up their lutes and viols; the punch bowl was allowed to run dry; the party was finally over.

Alwyn motioned to Bunthorne, the head butler, who wove his way past the sweepers and stood expectantly, awaiting orders.

"Please see to it that the pudgy gentlemen who have passed out around yonder table are escorted to guest quarters for the night," said Alwyn. "Let them sleep in until mid-morning, then invite them to a light breakfast in the main dining hall."

"I'll see to it, sir," Bunthorne bowed. "I'll also alert the stable hands as to their carriages and see that their coachmen are provided shelter."

"Thank you, Bunthorne. Please advise the staff that they have done an excellent job and that there will be an extra gold talon for each of them at the end of the week."

"Thank *you*, sir," Bunthorne smiled. "If I may say so, you and Elspeth make quite a charming couple. On behalf of the entire staff, it is an honor to serve you."

"We are fortunate to have such a staff," Elspeth replied. "Now if you'll make our excuses, we're going to sneak up the back staircase and go to bed—there is something Alwyn needs to do to me. Quick."

Chapter 3

Sunlight streamed in the lead-paned windows of FalconKeep. Alwyn awoke and tried to rise, only to discover Elspeth's thigh across his belly and her head tucked into his armpit. How she could sleep like that, he didn't know; it was a wonder she didn't suffocate.

He laid next to his wife, enjoying her hot, sticky skin against his and the way her hair tickled his chest, and he marveled at the fortune that had brought them together. It had been in the Gnosis Province, whose residents almost worshipped the acquisition of knowledge and the practice of science. There, too, were the empire's seats of higher learning and all that was cultural, except for the royal court itself, which considered itself—mistakenly—to be the epitome of high culture.

Elspeth's father, Lord Kalain, was an independently wealthy scholar, as well as a member of the empress's Privy Council and an avid collector of antiquities. Alwyn had met him only by reputation, but there came a time when a matched pair of Second Millennium figurines was to be auctioned by the great auction house of Natter and Nabob. Alwyn knew that he would be in bidding competition with Lord Kalain for the figurines so he had personally attended the auction rather than send a representative.

Lord Kalain, however, had not been able to attend but had instead sent his daughter Elspeth to represent his interests. Alwyn did not know her and was unaware she was Kalain's daughter, but it was soon apparent that the pixie-sized girl who constantly outbid him was pushing his purse to the limits. When the bidding reached ten thousand gold talons, she gave Alwyn an capricious wink and raised the bid by ten talons, just over his self-imposed limit, and he shook his head sadly at the auctioneer.

After the auction, he watched as the girl deposited the gold with a cashier and collected her prize, then he approached her.

"You did well," he told her as she stuffed the figurines in a carpet bag. "I've not seen you at auction before; do you attend often?"

"Never," she smiled up at him. "My father sent me here to acquire the trinkets. Not that he wanted them, you understand; he just didn't want *you* to have them."

"He certainly succeeded," Alwyn conceded. "Only one man has enough wealth to purchase two antiquities simply out of spite. I assume you represent him?"

"I am Lord Kalain's daughter," she replied. "You could have won them, you know, but you adhered too strictly to your own appraisal of their worth."

"They were not that important, and I enjoyed watching you outplay me. Now they will adorn your father's museum; I hope he enjoys what he paid for them."

"He will, if I lie about the look on your face when you lost the bid. May I have your permission?"

"Of course," Alwyn chuckled. "Tell him I turned red in the face and stormed out of the auction hall throwing loud curses in his direction. Do you have a name, Daughter of Lord Kalain?"

"Certainly," she grinned. "My name is Elspeth."

“A beautiful name, as befits a beautiful girl. May I assume that you are still a maiden?”

“That depends on your definition of ‘maiden,’” she replied. “I have never been married, nor have you.”

“You seem to know more about me than I know about you.”

“I never do anything without researching it thoroughly. I know all about you, Lord Alwyn Falconus.”

It was Alwyn’s turn to grin. “Then you have me at an unfair advantage since I know almost nothing about you.”

Elspeth wrinkled her nose. “That is easily remedied.”

“What did you have in mind?”

She gave him a crooked smile, then she put her tiny hand on his sleeve. “If you will allow me to stop by my inn, you may treat me to dinner. I’m afraid I spent all my father’s money on a pair of dusty statues.”

Alwyn laughed. “I take it you don’t share your father’s love of antiquities.”

“We’ll talk about it over dinner, and perhaps afterwards as well, if we’re not otherwise entangled.”

Alwyn had waited for Elspeth in the common-room of her lodgings; when she descended the stairs, he rose to his feet and stared at her in disbelief. She had shed her casual attire and donned a gossamer blue gown which hung midway down her glossy thighs; the neckline plunged both in front and rear, revealing her bare back and the deep valley between her high, firm breasts. In fact, had it not been for her breasts the gown would have slid sideways off her shoulders. The gown fabric was somewhat translucent and revealed Elspeth’s fair skin beneath, and it appeared as though she was wearing no undergarments.

“You look absolutely stunning!” Alwyn breathed as he gazed at her pixie body.

Elspeth bent her head and stared down the length of her body, then she slid one bare leg through a slit in the gown and held it out in front of her. “I had this made just for you,” she murmured. “I hope it’s not too revealing.”

Alwyn stared at her sleek leg. “It’s not too revealing for me,” he replied with a gulp, “but I hope you don’t dress like this for every man who takes you to dinner.”

“Oh, no,” she smiled. “I’m actually quite modest. I have to be, considering that I’m still treated as a child.”

“I don’t see how anyone could treat you as a child,” Alwyn said, blatantly staring at her breasts as they moved under the gown.

“It’s my stature,” she replied. “You will admit that I am very small, despite the shape of my body. Speaking of which, are we going to dine, or are you content to stand there and stare at me?”

“I’m sorry,” Alwyn said. “I didn’t mean to stare.”

“Of course you did,” she smiled. “And I meant for you to stare; otherwise I would have worn a gunny sack. Now then—put your arm around my waist and escort me to dinner. And I warn you: despite my size, I eat enough to fill a horse.”

After the plates were cleared and the serving wench had poured them each a tankard of after-dinner ale, Alwyn leaned back in his chair and gazed fondly at the diminutive girl sitting next to him. “May I ask you a question?” he asked as she blotted her lips with a napkin.

“Of course you may,” she replied.

“You said you had your gown made just for me, and you’ve manipulated me into asking you to dinner. And now here we are, sitting side-by-side in a public house. I can’t help but wonder if this is some plan of your father’s to set me up.”

Elspeth's midnight hair swirled around her shoulders as she turned her head and gazed up at him. "That was not a question," she murmured, "but it wasn't my father who set you up. It was I."

"You? Why would you be interested in me?"

Elspeth bowed her head. "Be assured that it is not your wealth," she said quietly. "When Father asked me to represent him at the auction, I looked into your background, such parts as are public record. The more I looked, the more fascinated I became. I suddenly found myself wanting desperately to meet you in person. Not just in the auction house, but personally. Alone. Just the two of us."

Alwyn stared down at the top of her head. "I'm flattered," he whispered back, "but that doesn't explain why you would be interested in *me*."

"Wishful thinking," she sighed. "I was foolish—you're young, you're handsome, and everybody who knows you says you're the nicest man they've ever met. Girls probably throw sticky underpants at you; any one of them would marry you at a moment's notice...but I had to try."

Alwyn snaked his arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him. "And here we are," he said softly, "just the two of us, alone and together."

Elspeth lifted her head and squinted into his eyes shyly. "I guess we are, at that," she smiled.

"And I'll tell you something else," Alwyn continued. "I can't think of anybody I'd rather be sitting next to than you."

Elspeth's green eyes lit up with a fire of their own. "Really?" she breathed. "You really mean that?"

"Yes, I really mean that. I knew from the moment I first saw you that you are different than other girls."

"Different how?"

"Well, for one thing, I sense a deepness about you, whereas the girls who throw sticky underpants at me are shallow and vain. 'Research' is a foreign word to them; you actively engage in it. Very rare for a woman, you know."

"Women are encouraged to cook food, wash clothing, service their husbands, and bear children," Elspeth said bitterly. "I'm a terrible cook, the clothes I wash are dirtier when I'm finished than before I started, and the physicians tell me that I am unable to bear children. I don't know about servicing my husband because I've never...I've never..." She gave him an embarrassed glance, then she muttered, "If women were allowed at university, I would be there instead of helping Father buy trinkets for his collection."

"I understand some of your plight," Alwyn replied, "but if Empress Deronn has done one good thing, it has been to elevate the position of women. No one believed that a female could rule the empire, yet Deronn has done well, considering that her previous duty consisted of producing an heir to the throne. Perhaps one day, girls will take their rightful place alongside their mates."

"Instead of under them," Elspeth snickered.

"Sex is a vital part of any meaningful relationship," Alwyn whispered, his fingers stroking her bare arm. "You said you've never..."

"Had sex? No. There is no one suitable to have it with. Oh, there are young men my own age, but they know as little of sex as do I, which is virtually nothing." She lifted her green eyes and stared him in the face. "Someday," she whispered, "I shall meet a man who will teach me about love. Someone who will treat me as an equal. Someone with whom I can converse about subjects unrelated to female conquests, spoochball and grinnich hunting. Someone I can love, and someone who will love me in return. Someone like...someone like...like you."

Three days later they were married. They knew after spending one night together that it would happen sooner or later, so they chose to make it sooner. Their arrival at FalconKeep

created quite a stir since the staff had not been informed of the marriage, but they greeted Elspeth graciously and in turn they found Elspeth to be a warm and gracious Lady of FalconKeep. They even threw her a belated wedding shower, giving her little presents they had made with their own hands. Alwyn consoled Lord Kalain's ruffled feelings by sending him a set of rare tomes for his library and a valuable pair of ancient coins from the First Millennium.

Such were Alwyn's thoughts as he lay abed with Elspeth's thigh thrown over his belly and her head tucked into his armpit. Her leg jerked and she stirred, then she raised her head and laid it on his chest. Alwyn moved her curls out of his face and ran his fingers up and down her silky back, feeling the bumps in her spine, the narrowness of her waist, the soft hardness of her buttocks...

"You're making me wet," she whispered.

"I can tell," he whispered back. "I can feel your sweet juices on my hip."

"Sweet, they are not," she chuckled softly. "We need a bath."

"I'll have Alita fill the bathing pool."

"Will she be joining us?"

"I am not in the habit of bathing with the chambermaid."

"A likely story. Alita is a young, flaxen-haired beauty with breasts that bounce and jiggle when she walks. I'm sure she has thrown her sticky underpanties at you."

"There, you are wrong," Alwyn chuckled. "Alita doesn't wear underpanties."

"No knickers, eh? And just how would you know that?"

Alwyn's reply was cut off by a soft knock on the door. It opened and the subject of their discussion poked her face in the bedchamber.

"Begging your pardon," she said in a soft voice, "but Bunthorne said to inform you when the imperial delegation had risen. They have done so, and will meet with you in the main dining hall in a half hour."

"No time for a bath," Elspeth frowned.

"We will meet with the delegation at our convenience, not theirs," Alwyn replied. "Alita, please draw our bath, and while the pool is filling, tell Bunthorne that we'll meet with the delegation in my study after they have dined. Then come back up and all three of us will bathe together."

Alita's blue eyes blinked rapidly. "All three of us? Really?"

"No, Alita," Elspeth sighed. "Not *really*."

Chapter 4

The six pudgy delegates sat on sofas and chairs in Alwyn's study and fidgeted as they awaited his arrival. Most of them had pounding hangovers, unabated by a fine breakfast washed down with copious amounts of strong tea.

The person who entered, however, was not Alwyn but Elspeth, resplendent in a black crushed-velvet gown with gold trim. Her long hair bounced around her as she strode to the desk and seated herself behind it; she folded her hands and looked around the group.

"For those of you who don't know me," she began, "I am the Lady Elspeth Falconus, wife of Lord Alwyn Falconus. I trust you enjoyed last night's festivities and this morning's breakfast. We are honoured by your presence, long live Empress Deronn, and whatever other ritual greetings I am supposed to convey. My husband regrets that he is needed elsewhere so he has asked me to meet with you in his stead. Is there one of you who wishes to speak for the rest?"

A man who was more than pudgy (fat) frowned and cleared his throat officiously. "We were told that we would be meeting with Lord Al—"

"As I informed you," Elspeth interrupted him, "my husband's schedule is extremely full at present. He had expected to meet with you last eve, but none of you appeared to be in a condition which was conducive to intelligent conversation. Now—if you insist, I can arrange for an appointment in about, oh, three months or so. Will that be satisfactory?"

"I'm afraid our business is most urgent," said another of the delegates. "I assume you are authorized to speak on your husband's behalf?"

"We are equals in every way," she replied. "If you wish to conduct business, then please state it—my schedule is also quite full."

"Very well," sighed the fat man. "My name is Elric, Special Attaché to Her Royal Highness, Empress Deronn, Wife and Widow of Our Late and Beloved Emp—"

"Yes, yes," Elspeth sighed, waving her hand. "I know who you are and whom you represent. Let's get to the point: Deronn's broke and you've come to ask us for a loan. Am I correct?"

"Unfortunately, you are," Elric replied.

"Ah, so," Elspeth smiled. "And how much does Deronn wish to borrow?"

"Uh, well, considering the nature and amount of her debts—"

"Don't try to justify it, just tell me how much."

"Four hundred thousand gold talons."

Elspeth propped her elbows up on the desk and rested her chin on her interlaced fingers. "Four hundred *thousand* gold talons?" she exclaimed. "Surely you're not serious."

"I'm afraid we are," said another of the delegates. "If you could see your way clear to—"

"Tell me something," said Elspeth. "What is the empire's annual tax intake from its citizens?"

"Those numbers are secret," replied Elric. "We can't possibly—"

"Very well," Elspeth sighed, then she rose to her feet. "Gentlemen, our business is concluded, but you are welcome to stay as long as you like. I will dispatch a messenger to Deronn with the minutes of this meeting along with a suggestion that you be forced to run ten laps around the royal palace every day. Good day and be well."

Elspeth had gotten halfway across the room when Elric suddenly stood and called out to her. She spun around and stared at him expectantly. “Well?” she snapped.

“Uh...we uh, that is, the empress really needs—”

“Sit *down*,” Elspeth commanded.

Elric backed off, then he plopped down on the sofa and stared up at her with a sullen expression. It was obvious that he was not accustomed to be spoken to in this way, especially by a young girl, and a tiny one at that.

“Now then,” Elspeth said as she paced back and forth. “Deronn needs four hundred thousand talons to run the empire, and she thought we might have money to loan her. Neither I nor Alwyn are willing to hand over that much gold without some assurance that it will be repaid, *with interest*, in a timely manner. Therefore, you will supply us with the following documents: all tax records for the past four years; a ledger of all expenses for the same period; a complete listing of all imperial land holdings marked and cross-referenced on an official map; a complete listing of all royal buildings including palaces and an inventory and the appraised value of whatever is contained therein—

“In other words, gentlemen, you will open your books to us and we will spend as much time as we need to evaluate them. You will not hold anything back. As always, we will keep this information in the strictest confidence. If you are completely honest with us, we will determine how much, if any, we will loan you, at what interest and with what collateral.”

The blood had drained from Elric’s face as Elspeth spoke. When she was finished, he whined, “But even we don’t have access to that information. The Chancellor of the Exchequer is charge of the Treasury, and he is most secretive—”

Elspeth shrugged. “Those are the terms, gentlemen; if you can’t work with the chancellor, that’s your problem. We are as patriotic as the next citizen, but business is business. We’re sure Deronn could borrow the money from other sources, but since you’re here I assume she trusts us to treat her fairly and, as I said, with the utmost discretion. The gods forbid that word of the empire’s financial state were to leak; it would cause a panic and probably a peasant uprising. We wouldn’t want that to happen, and neither would Deronn. If we don’t hear from you in a fortnight, we’ll assume Deronn made other arrangements. Good day, gentlemen.”

Two floors up, in Alwyn’s private conservatory, an elderly white-haired gentlemen was bent over the mysterious parchment, studying it intently, his spectacles as thick as the magnifying lens he was holding shakily.

“Well, Janis?” Alwyn asked impatiently. “Any idea what it is?”

Janis leaned back in his chair, laid the lens down, and drummed his fingers. “This is undoubtedly a page torn from a book,” he said in a tired voice.

“What kind of book?” asked Elspeth as she strode into the room. She gave Alwyn a hug, then she gazed down at the parchment.

“He hasn’t said,” Alwyn replied. “Oh—Elspeth, this is Professor Janis Gerane. Janis, this is my lovely wife Elspeth.”

“Lovely is an understatement,” Janis squinted through his goggles. “Pardon me if I don’t rise—it would take me ten minutes.”

“We don’t stand on protocol,” Elspeth smiled. “You’re a professor?”

“Of history,” Janis replied. “Retired, now. Alwyn here was one of my best students—never showed up for my lectures.”

“That doesn’t sound like a very good student,” Elspeth giggled.

“Oh, but he was. Never interrupted me with stupid questions. I tended to forget what I was talking about when I was interrupted. Always passed his tests, too. Knew the textbooks better than I did. Now where were we?”

“The parchment?”

“Oh, yes.” Janis gazed at the object, then he pushed it away from him. “It’s a page torn from a book. A very old book.”

“That much we already deduced,” said Alwyn. “Can you tell us what kind of book it might have come from?”

Janis’s eyes lit on the parchment again, and it was a long time before he spoke. “You’re a student of history, Alwyn—what was here before the empire?”

“No one knows for certain,” Alwyn replied. “All we have are pieces and fragments of what was here. There are the legends and myths, of course, but those are just stories.”

“Stories,” Janis echoed. “Don’t be too sure, Alwyn—legends and myths tend to be based in part on facts. The book from which this page is torn...well, there are some books which shouldn’t be read.”

“Shouldn’t be read?” said Elspeth. “What kind of a book shouldn’t be read?”

Alwyn looked at Janis quizzically. “Surely you’re not referring to *magick*?”

Janis shrugged. “Many legends speak of such a thing.”

“Spooch poop,” Alwyn snorted. “Chymists have been researching such a thing for millennia and they have yet to observe an event which defies the laws of physics.”

“I can make a gold talon disappear,” Elspeth announced.

“Most women can easily perform that feat,” Janis chuckled. “Seriously, young lady: there are many legends which speak of men and women who could make a gold talon disappear, and not by spending it at the local jeweler’s. And that was just a fraction of what they could do. It is said that one who controls magick controls the empire and everybody in it.”

Elspeth frowned. “How could one person control the entire empire?”

“I have no idea,” Janis replied. “The legends do not speak of specific techniques, but they do indicate that such techniques were carefully documented by the ones who practiced them and the books were then hidden and guarded, perhaps again by magick.”

“And you think this page is from one of those books?”

“I think it is entirely possible,” Janis nodded. “Probable, in fact.”

“Why would you think that?”

Janis raised his eyes to hers. “I’m a historian, Elspeth, and I’ve spent many years studying ancient legends; in fact, I’m the first to assemble a detailed collection of them, the majority of which no one has seen for millennia. My first thought was to publish them, but no one is interested in pre-empire history. So, I preserve and study them.

“Now, as to your particular parchment: I’ve seen these symbols before; they appear in several fragments of documents I’ve collected from various sources. This is the first complete page I’ve encountered.”

“What do you think the symbols represent?” asked Alwyn.

He pulled the parchment toward him and stared down at it. “Elements, perhaps,” he replied. “Compounds. Mixtures. Potions. When combined in the proper proportions, they do...something. Who knows what. Or perhaps they represent energies. Powers. Forces such as we have never seen or could imagine. Since this is but one page, we’ll never know.”

“What if we could get the rest of the book?” asked Elspeth.

“That might help, if we could decipher the code. *Can* you get the rest of the book?”

“We don’t know where it is,” said Alwyn, “but we know where the page came from. Perhaps the book is in the same place.”

“If it is,” Janis said softly, “then I would exercise extreme caution. If it really is a book of magick, then it is best left where it is. Or burned. As I said before: some books shouldn’t be read, and this would be one of them.”