

Mab/*Bone Reader*/1

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The Bone Reader

Mab Morris

Chapter 1

“There is no use in having second sight, if all it does is help me bury the dead, and anyone can do that,” Cemirowl reflected bitterly—except she knew that this was not why she was unhappy. With hands stained and reeking of funereal herbs and rancid oil, she rubbed tears from her face. She was mourning, but she was used to mourning. It was her mentor’s recent deathbed apology that struck her hard.

Fighting more tears, she put Meelac’s words to the back of her mind and focused on her intent to come out into the woods by herself, away from the rest of the villagers in mourning. She had two reasons to look for fresh bones.

She looked up into the morning fog, listened to the waning chorus of spring peepers. A crow made its spring caw. After taking a deep breath to steady herself further, she moved on.

She almost missed the first ones, nearly stepped over them. Cemirowl stopped, knelt, and put her fingers to the yellowed bones. Crouching, she rummaged through bracken, and found more than one lone bone carried there by a carnivore.

She picked up one of the bones, picked almost clean by crows, ants and yellow ground bees, then touched the bone with her mind. Some of the animal’s spirit still lingered within. A faint echo, nearly gone.

“Wait, wait, wait!” she cried.

The spirit froze, caught, crouching and waiting for danger, but no longer running away. Not fading any more.

Relief nearly loosened Cemiowl's control over her grief. She crumpled onto the ground, catching herself with her free hand. *Oh!* You I will not have to send away, she thought as her trembling subsided. "But where is the skull?"

Animals had scattered the bones from the kill, taken some away. Cemiowl moved carefully as she gathered up leg bones, brittle ribs, and little vertebrae. She finally found the skull under a mound of bracken and a young shoot of fern. A fresh yellow Asfodel bowed over the left eye like a pale star. She sat back for a moment and then dug up the bulb. The root was poisonous, but the flowers were pretty.

After nipping the flower off, she pulled her carry bag off her shoulder and put the dirty bulb inside. She wove the soft stem through worn holes in her bodice. She placed the rest of the bones with the bulb and other herbs she'd gathered. Then, she picked up the skull and lifted it towards her face.

She thought of Meelac. She missed him, and it hurt more than she could bear, but she put the thought away. Instead, she stared into the eye holes of the skull.

"Come to me. Stay with me," Cemiowl said to the spirit of the little grey fox pup she sensed on the other side of the veil. It was still frozen, caught by its fear. Disconcerted, surprised, lost. She sensed it heard her.

The fox pup emerged from the otherworld and joined the entourage of animal spirits swirling around her skirts. "Come, let's go home."

She carried the skull in her hands and caressed the bone lightly in her fingers. After a moment, she paused. She realized she could breathe again—more deeply than she had in the past three days. The sharp pressure of Meelac's death eased into a bearable grief. Also, she had new bones to help her Reading.

“I wish my vision was as clear as the villagers seem to think it is,” she murmured to her ghost pets as she approached her cottage deep in the woods. She thought, *Maybe one day that will change?* She could be like the fortunetellers in stories—except they were usually old, fearsome, unwanted creatures. *Maybe that will be different for me.* It was a tired refrain, and had less power than the fresh worry inspired by Meelac’s last words.

As she walked through the woods, Cemirowl wanted there to be any other conflict in her mind than what arose from her mentor’s words. What else could she do but go on as she had? She was a priest of Soft Water, even if she did not feel part of the village. Dead, would Meelac finally understand that she heard less than he had believed? And far less than the villagers believed using her mother as their guide? If he came back to discuss these matters, he’d find the conversations far more slow-going than all his teaching before.

He had apologized for letting her distance herself from her village, and her mother’s family, the ones who were sane and not gifted with seeing the spirits of the dead. Would he now see how this, more than any reason, kept barriers up between herself and any other person she knew—even him, her beloved teacher. Ironic that even death wouldn’t help.

Apology and accusation came as he was dying. Her only answer was to cut his soul from his corpse and then bind his body with cloth. Her job was to make sure his soul could not return and that it would be forced to find its way to the Holy Gates guarded by the Three.

She had waited to grieve in private, because she could not leave her fellow student, Alcon, till their duties were done. She escaped when the rest of the village could gather round him. Unlike her, he was well loved by the village and even the town nearby. She felt superfluous because she was; she could go off by herself to hunt for bones.

In his long career, Meelac hadn't seen the dead, but he'd wrapped many bodies and walked behind the burial cart in mourning many times. At first alone, then with his pupils, Alcon and herself. He had never needed second sight to do his work, and she knew that he had done it as well as she could.

She and Alcon had pushed the cart that held his body through the village and beyond so all could see his body, mourn, and wish him well on his journey. Cemirowl had waited to see his ghost. He hadn't come.

She didn't need to see him to not think of him. Neither did Alcon. Memory had been unavoidable. The cart, Meelac was fond of saying, reminded him of death. The left wheel creaked, "harsh and inevitable." They never could fix it.

Each time it had screeched, Alcon and she had laughed and wept, and told a story about their mentor—some they both knew, some neither had shared with the other. While she was in the woods, Alcon would be doing the same sharing with the villagers as they prepared a funereal feast.

Cemirowl was alone by choice. If she were anyone else no one in the village would have found this acceptable. It was pure petulance to ask now: but how many priests did a small village need? Three had been ridiculous. Alcon could do the job just as well as Meelac had. Who would notice? Or care? She might, but how could that matter to the villagers? They could not see what she did any more than Meelac had, and he had been a true scholar, from the king's city by the Pyrandor River. Alcon was a younger son. A local boy. A son of a gentleman. More admired than she ever had been. He was not a scholar in the same way that Meelac or even Cemirowl was, but Alcon brought faith within the reach of all in the village.

Cemirowl crashed through the woods. Then stopped and shook her head. To calm herself, she took a deep breath, sensed the ghosts around her, those of animals, not of those she had pushed away as was her duty. She looked again at the eye holes of the skull. Calmer, she looked about, and saw another good healing herb peeping from the bracken. She stopped, dug it up, put it in her pouch on top of the new bones.

Beyond easing her pain, the new bones would hopefully clarify her readings. And this was the fraud: no matter how accurate others believed her fortune telling to be, she could never call them “clear.”

The bones had said, “Change was coming,” and coming directly to Cemirowl. But from where? And what kind? For a month, the lay of the bones she had thrown had been strangely similar. Constancy had not helped her understand the reading any better than before. It might be amazing to some, spooky to others, but it was frustrating to her. Change. Change would come. Was this change her mentor’s death, a madness like her mother’s, or something else? If she had done these readings for someone else, an event would transpire to prove her skill and inspire awe and amazement.

Cemirowl snarled out a tuneless, “Euegh!”

She wiped her face again with stained hands and looked around to see where she was. By the look of the trees and a stream, she had gotten a little off track. After going east a little longer she finally came to her garden and sat down on her bench beside her largest Compass plant. She breathed in the fresh, sharp scent of the funerary herb while running a spray of its needles through her fingers. She rubbed the tacky oil into her skin. The scent could open the mind and clear away evil.

With sticky fingers she examined her new bones, settling her mind into them and getting a feel for the fox puppy's spirit.

The sharp pain of death, fear and confusion came first, then memories of 'mama.' A longing for comfort—possibly why it had responded to her? There was a sense of curiosity and play, but with an echo that exploring could lead to getting lost and a painful death.

She called the puppy closer and let it sit upon her lap, something it would never have done in life. She said a few words appropriate to human burial, sending away its pain and fear. She looked into its eyes.

"Now, Little Grey, let me tell you of Meelac. He was hale during the hard winter, but as the tree frogs, the peepers, began to sing their songs again, he caught a spring cough. I tried everything to cure him, but he died." She felt her eyes burn again. She rubbed them.

She'd been with Meelac as he died, but then officiating at his funeral, Cemirowl had to thrust him far from her. Running her fingers through the fur she could not quite smell or feel, she held onto the sense of this small, now trusting animal, and let grief wash away from her.

A sound startled her and she looked up. Someone was walking up the path to her house. Still shadowed by the trees, a patch of sunlight lit the man's face and clothes for a moment. She remembered him: The nobleman who had watched the funeral procession from atop his horse the day before. Under the glinting spike and turban, the arrogance of his face matched the bold, purple stripe crossing his surcoat that declared he was a nobleman in King Larthor's employ. Cemirowl was surprised he had not left the village yesterday. Soft Water was too poor a place to offer any comfort to a gentleman of his standing and wealth. Sir Thade's town was not so far off he couldn't have travelled there before nightfall.

He stepped out of the trees into the garden before her house. Her chickens scattered with much squawking. Cemirowl watched him in silence. His walk was confident with a hint of easy grace. He was handsome.

She bit her lip. Resolutely she examined his clothes. If she remembered her father's stories, the turban around the spike implied he had been trained to fight against enemies across the straight to the south—primarily Hergila who was now an ally. The tawny right side of his surcoat implied a worthy ambition. The white field was either empty or indicated silver; that meant he was either a caballier or a baron. With the relaxed cant of his shoulders, Cemirowl decided white was blank. The sickle dividing the purple line declared an expectation of a fruitful harvest. The choice of a young caballier with new property?

He was proud. He was wealthy. The cloth was the finest weave she'd ever seen. The embroidery magnificent, shot with color, even while his clothes seemed quite plain otherwise. Not even Caballier Thade's wife and daughter wore such wealth.

Cemirowl thought, *Father would have called it "Arrogant Humility."*

Her chickens were already coming back.

He seemed to sneer at the surroundings. "Dusane?" he called.

She gathered the bones back into her pouch, then stood and asked, "Good day, Sir. How may I help you?"

"I am looking for Dusane."

"I am Cemirowl Dusane."

He was examining her now, from the worn brown and green dress, the wilting Asphodel. He disregarded her. "Hmm. I believe I need your father."

"I am sorry, Sir, but he is not here."

He smirked. "He is travelling? Perhaps overseas with Sir Thade's wine merchants?"

"No, sir. He never traveled. He died five years back."

This seemed to surprise the gentleman. "Oh! He never traveled? Or worked for Thade?"

"He did, sir."

"His profession... These are the caballier's hunting grounds? They were friendly?"

"I believe so, sir."

"What was his profession, then? Huntsman?"

"No. An apothecary."

This surprised the caballier even more. "Interesting. A trifle odd. Hunting grounds and no travel, and only as an apothecary."

"Yes sir."

"And you are his daughter. Does he have a son who works for Thade?"

"No, only I."

"You are one of the priests, I believe, that I saw yesterday?"

"Yes."

He examined her autumn-russet hair, bound in a wild, curly tail, but fringed at her neck and brow. It was the same inappropriate stare he'd displayed when he'd come across the funeral procession. *Obviously some Caballiers do not mind being rude.*

"A priest with no intention to marry?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, disconcerted, wondering at all the questions. "They used to do this more before the Queen refused to cut her hair when she married our king."

"I know. I just haven't seen it in a long while," he said. "Most young women bind their hair in a scarf, or those... rounded things."

“A Barrette? Or a Coif?”

“I guess,” he said, not interested.

Meelac had refused to let her, or Alcon, take more than an Ordination which did not bar them from marriage. Meelac had claimed, “You are a beautiful woman. You will marry, surely!” Defiantly, Cemirowl had shown her intentions with her hair. *No one wanted me. Why did I bother?*

“Is there anything I can help you with, as my father is not available?” She asked.

“You are the one who tells fortunes? The...the Bone Reader?”

“Indeed,” she said, thinking that it did not take a fortuneteller to know that he was perturbed about something.

“Dusane is an odd name this far south,” he said.

“Is it? I would not know. I grew up with it.”

“It is evocative of a northern duchy,” he said. “I am surprised to hear the name in a small village this far south. It is why I would have been very interested to meet your father.” He paused and then looked at her. “May we go indoors and do your Reading? I would like to see the inside of your cottage.”

She pushed the door open and turned, “Come in, if you wish a reading.”

His hand touched the hilt of his curved sword lightly as bowed, almost as if mocking her. Skepticism rode his eyebrows like paint. *This will be an easy job*, she thought. No matter what the bones might offer him, it was clear that the experience of his visit was showmanship enough for any fee. And showmanship was all he expected, from her. He did not appear to want answers from bones. As soon as he entered, he seemed to disregard her presence and make himself at home, examining the objects of her house.

She went straight to the table and cleared off the few books Meelac had left her, putting them on the shelf beside her bone basket. The caballier came in and moved to the fire place. He examined the objects on the mantelpiece while she readied the table; his eye lingered on the wooden squirrel and raven.

“My father carved those,” she said.

He picked up her father’s pewter plate. It had an intricate pattern nearly lost to tarnish. The caballier bent it towards the firelight, and then to the light coming from the open door. He grunted in surprise, looked up at her, and then back at the plate.

“It belonged to my father,” she said.

“Truly?”

“Of course.”

“Did he tell you of the crest? The family that it represents? I can’t quite make out whose it is.”

“No, sir, my father never said anything about it.”

“Interesting.”

She wondered if the caballier recognized whatever he could see of the pattern. Wherever it had come from, it didn’t matter: If her father had retreated to the country, as the heraldic squirrel might indicate, the raven meant she had to make her own life. She did know that he was well educated. His manners far above that of a peasant, something he’d attempted to teach his peasant wife to no avail. His coffers had run out long ago. Impoverished, living as an apothecary, and more like a peasant, he’d refused to sell the plate. Though she still had a store of wine that Sir Thade had given her father before he had died. It was, possibly, the only wealth she had besides her chickens.

The caballier put the plate back and looked at her curiously, but said nothing further. He seemed content, now, as if he needed nothing further from her.

“Please take a seat.” She gestured to one of the stools.

“Oh. Yes. The Reading.” He paused again. In great good humor he asked, “Do you not have a cat?”

“Excuse me, Sir?”

“Aren’t you supposed to have a black cat? At least a cat, I would have thought. The stories say fortunetellers have cats.”

Her fingers were at her mouth as she bit back amusement. The stories also said she ought to also be a hag, old and bent. It was a rare opportunity to be mischievous without further damning her reputation.

“Oh! I do not need one. There is an herb I use in my thatching. Mice and squirrels cannot abide it. Pests leave in a day or two. Do you need some? Half an ounce is four crowns.”

None of it was true. Most vermin avoided her ghosts. She could probably throw something together which might work, if he asked. If he believed her.

“I’d rather have a cat,” he said.

Cemirowl smiled watching his shoulders relax as he laughed. He’d been more uncomfortable than he’d imagined himself to be. She wondered why. After adjusting his sword, he rested his elbows on the table. “How do you read bones?” he asked.

Cemirowl wondered if he were asking, *What sort of magic do you use?* or *How does this work?* It was impossible to answer the former. There was no magic. Only an inherited curse that had driven her mother mad. She answered his question with, “Your part is very simple; I will

lead you through it.” She placed the basket on the table, unfolding the square of cloth that covered it.

“Do you need to know the question?” he asked with one eyebrow raised, his face tilted in challenge.

“No, Sir. You need not tell me. Just think on your question before you take a handful of bones then toss them onto this cloth. First I must ask your name, for payment and exoneration.” She sat down, her hands smoothing the square of red wool flat onto the table.

“Exoneration? I don’t understand,” he said.

“I am only a translator of any message the bones may give you. I merely relate what I see in the lay of bones you’ll have thrown. There are some who believe I cause the readings to come to pass; that is not true. I only interpret.” *And that badly, more often than not*, she thought. “So I ask you to exonerate me of causing any future event I might read to you from these bones.”

His eyes narrowed, his brows drew in, the corners of his lips pulled together as he examined her. Then his face lightened.

“What would you do if I was not honorable?”

She smiled. “Lie and predict only good things.”

He laughed. “Well, then, I am Caballier Mercari. I exonerate you.” He pulled out some coins from the decorated, leather pouch hanging from his belt. “Is this enough?” He put the coins on the table.

“Yes. Thank you, Sir,” she said, pleased that she had guessed he was no Baron.

She slid the money into her hands without looking at it for more than a few seconds before putting it in a small bowl behind her. A glint of silver told her she would be able to buy

staples she could not grow or forage. She might even be able to buy more cloth to replace her dress and her worn vestments. More wealth than wine or a pewter plate!

As she turned back, she caught his eyes staring at her red hands.

“Why are your hands red?” he asked.

“My hands? Do you not know that I am also a priest of the village?”

“Yes. I noticed you and your brother priest yesterday behind that cart of... if I guess right by the objects on the cart... your mentor? I wondered why such a small village had two priests—once three. That’s how I learned of your other abilities.”

“Priest Meelac taught both Alcon and me in the mysteries of priesthood. Alcon performs most of the other duties. The villagers prefer him. By Meelac’s choice and my natural...inclination, I tend to the burials. I wrap the bodies and perform the other rites for the dead.” She looked at her hands. “Do they not wrap in the cities?”

“Of course, but the wrappers do not go about with red stained hands.”

Her hands were over the bones in the basket. “Really?” She looked at her hands.

“Maybe it’s the oil that soaks the fabric or the vegetable dyes we use. We have to dye our burial cloth with what the forest gives us. The stain usually fades before the next burial, unless there has been illness in the village.” It had happened once.

He shrugged, looking at the basket under her hands, no longer interested in dyes or burials.

“I do not think you’re the sort to be dismayed by the touch of bones,” she said. She stirred the basket, calling her animals closer, calling them to examine the questioner. They came, swirling around her, some leapt onto the table. Mercari did not notice them, but Cemirowl noticed that the hairs on his arm lifted lightly with the change in the air.

She hid her smile and said, “Think of your question. When you have it, stir the bones, take a handful and toss them gently onto this cloth. Try to think of one without a yes or no answer.”

She stopped stirring them and put her hands into her lap while he pondered the question to ask. *It is most likely a love question, Cemirowl thought, it usually is.*

As he focused on his question, Cemirowl began to shift her focus. She breathed in and out rhythmically till the echoes of smells, sights and sounds of her ghosts were nearly as clear as the young man sitting before her.

She watched her animals investigate him. They batted at his hands, moved silently around and through him, crouching on his shoulders, sniffing his ears and breath. The ghost of her cat sniffed his hands tentatively, then turned and began washing herself.

Time and practice had minimized the two-realm vertigo that had probably contributed to her mother’s madness. Even while the room shifted and wanted to spin, Cemirowl found her center between the two realms.

By the shift of his shoulders, Cemirowl knew he was coming close to asking the bones his question. She took the remaining seconds to contemplate him and his movements. There was an edge of pain around his soft mouth. His shoulders were still somewhat tight. Many women would want to smooth the pain away.

He shifted in his chair and the mail made soft music as he moved to gather bones. The movement brought an echo of scent. He smelled of horse, and the padding needed cleaning, but his sweat, though a little sour from travel, was not unpleasant.

The bones echoed the music of his mail as they fell onto the cloth. She bent her head to examine what he had thrown.

“Some of these do not look like bones,” he said, interrupting her thoughts. He pointed to one or two of the objects. His eyes were bright and curious as he examined the bones and her face.

“Most of the basket is filled with bones of different animals: fox, bird, squirrel and dog among others.” She gestured to the different bones. “Some of these are stone or other object that represent different ideas or talents, such as this tuning pin for a vihuela.” She pointed to the worn brass pin she’d gotten from a wandering minstrel. “They aren’t really necessary. I only added them recently to add some... immediacy to what I could interpret.”

She did not mention the one object that had caught her attention with some surprise. The small black stone roughly shaped like a bird. It represented herself. It had come into other readings without having any significant echoes. This time it was fixed within a reading for a complete stranger.

She bent back down to look at the bones, hoping that her own troubles were not interfering with another man’s reading.

First Cemirowl looked at the different positions of the bones and their relationship with one another, as well as their relationship to their former selves. She contemplated their symbolism in heraldry or popular tales. This was only to help her hear what she called echoes. It was the one part of her talent that felt touched by magic. Even for her the process was mystical.

She was confused. There seemed a great deal of information in the lay of bones divided between his immediate question and one that had come through despite any relation to his inquiry. The answer to his immediate question was clear.

“You are traveling to the king’s city,” she murmured.

“Does it tell you that?”

She looked up into his surprised face. “Even if they did not, it was quite obvious. You came from the southeast yesterday. The king’s city lies in the opposite direction.” She gestured at the glittering purple line of his surcoat. “You are clearly the king’s man.”

His eyebrows lifted. He’d not expected her to explain herself, but rather expected she’d claim higher knowledge. It would come, though. *Sideways and strange as always...and useless.*

She bent her head again.

“You are a younger son, but have already surpassed your inheritance. You are leaving someone of importance, but going back to someone you believe to be of greater. The first is a man and related to the young woman to whom you are returning. She is a pretty creature, but sly. I believe she sings quite well. She places you high in her plans, without true affection, merely for the promise of your position.”

“She does not!”

Cemirowl glanced up at him, eyebrows raised. *Do you wish to be entertained or not?* she wondered silently and waited for him to subside back into his chair.

“Do you have proof?”

She laughed gently. “From these bones?”

“How can I trust them? You?”

She did not know how to answer him. How could he want proof that this reading was true? What could she give him? She’d enough experience to know that the information was real, but it wasn’t exactly practical or necessarily helpful. She was surprised when she saw her cat butt up to Mercari’s chin affectionately, giving him a ghostly cat kiss. Then, as only a cat can

do, live or dead, it disdainfully turned away and sauntered to the dog, butting its head in a gesture of affection. Cemirowl could almost hear it purr.

Her animals were not usually this blunt if they aided a reading. Most of the information came from the echoes of imagery, sound, or even feeling. Things half seen or felt. She looked away, slightly embarrassed, even if she could not explain why.

“I believe her actions towards another might give you the proof you seek.” Another echo, another flash. “Possibly in late spring, or early summer?”

She glanced back at Sir Mercari, who looked every inch of a Caballier, capable of using the sword or knife hanging from his belt. The movement of his head in the fire light flashed on what she’d thought were decorations circling his turban. The spike of the helmet underneath the cloth, alone, could kill her. She swallowed and bent back to the bones, forcing her breath to steady.

“To continue, the nobleman you left probably has some connection to a wolf, perhaps in his heraldic device. He will travel to the city in some months to come, giving you a positive answer to your request—an engagement? By then it will be too late. You will have decided to reject a course involving either of them.”

“Is that all?” Mercari’s voice was dry and colorless.

Cemirowl was examining the other part of the lay and said, distracted, “About that question, yes.”

She closed her eyes and dropped her head further. She had not meant to say anything. This part of the reading would not be as entertaining as the answer to the love question—which he already disregarded as pure fiction and would probably turn into a source of derisive amusement later.

“There is more?” he asked.

She looked up at him. He was leaning forward. His eyes and shoulders were strangely intent. His hands far from his weapons. The sickle on his tawny field seemed to loom over the small pile of bones. *Fruitful harvest?* she thought.

Cemirowl did not know what to do. She turned back to the bones. Normally the immediate question did not play such a minor part in the reading. With her little raven stone so clearly within the swirl of these bones, she had great doubts on the truth of her perceptions or this reading.

Yet there is the fox tooth and the bear knuckle and the way this lays over that... it does have something to do with this young Caballier sitting across from me. Maybe the raven just means I'm influencing events by giving him this reading. But I don't like how those eagle claws are clenched around me. No, it can't be. I'm never going to see this man again. I don't have to tell his fortune to know that. I can see that just from the look on his face.

It was strange because the echoes of this reading were similar to those she'd thrown for herself. It made her feel small and helpless and strange, as if the changes predicted for her life came from further away than she could ever have imagined. Not Meelac's death, nor Sir Thade's men finally catching up to her for non-payment of rent or taxes her father had never paid, or that somehow playing with the Realm of the Dead for so long she too would go mad like her mother. It was something else. And more frightening for being something completely unlooked for. If the caballier's reading had anything to do with her.

The fox pup, whose bones she had not yet added to her basket came and sat on her lap. It laid its head upon the arm she'd lain on the table. It pressed its nose between her elbow and chest as it whimpered. She looked down at it, wanted to comfort it, but could not move.

Careful Cemi, she told herself. *Focus. Concentrate.*

She hoped Mercari expected something eerie for his entertainment. She'd give him his money's worth. She felt an eerie chill glide up her spine as she spoke.

“Sir Mercari, from what I read here, there will be a time of difficulty coming for you. Sometime within this year someone very important to you will die.” Saying it, Cemiowl winced softly. She could hear the classic story-tale charlatan's line.

She swallowed back a nervous laugh. “Because of the tasks you will be called on to perform, either by association, duty to the king or other influences—I cannot see that clearly—you will be hard pressed to act with probity. Oddly enough, I believe that you'll have all the tools or abilities to see many things clearly, during these events, but will be either incapable or unwilling to act. It is as if you will not be able to bridge some gap between what you know and the confusion caused by this person's death, or other loyalties.”

She shifted on her stool and looked up at him. She wasn't sure how to convey what she could see in the lay. It reminded her of the cart wheels, but three of them spinning independently. “The whole lay is interesting. Circles within circles. It is as if your hope for your young woman is one wheel or circle, bright and clear. Unhidden. This upcoming death is another wheel, but more hidden by yet another larger, more obscure wheel. This last is associated with only you, not these people who participate in either of these other events. As if the girl is a reflection... and the woman is... treacherous. One wrong move and these wheels will clash into each other and wreak havoc. Speak with caution and care. One wrong word will bring about more added difficulty.”

And that added difficulty might mean difficulty to me, Cemiowl thought.

Cemirowl did her best to present a calm front. That her raven was part of the reading was information she did not want to give. None of it made sense to her. She reminded herself:

Assumptions defeat intuition!

Yet there was no future she could imagine that would involve her with this man again. They were nominally equal in rank, but their differences of wealth, upbringing and location were far too disparate to include any entrance to the level of courtly affairs he moved in.

She finally focused on his face. Her heart sank, but she said, "I think you must school yourself against corrupt thoughts."

He did not believe her, though he was very much entertained. All he said was, "The priest says this." She gathered, by his wry condescension, that he was not overly fond of priests.

Cemirowl did not know if she should feel relief or dread because he did not believe her and thought she was trying to preach to him. A wave of tiredness settled into her shoulders, down her spine and into her eyes. She wished he would go.

She had seen that look on many faces. Usually from people who had lived in the village for a long while. Her mother had died mad, her father eccentric, her mentor merely kind by giving her a job. In their eyes, when it suited them, as it suited Caballier Mercari of King Larthor's employ: she was the village crazy, his morning's entertainment. Not priest. Not healer. She had no ability to see a truthful future.

It hurt, even though she agreed with him.

He stood, for he'd had enough of the village's sideshow. He tossed her another coin. "Thank you for the diversion."

When he'd left the house she put away the bones and wondered, *And what did I see?* That somehow she would be in his life again? That someone would die and cause him

confusion? How rare would that be in the court of a king, where intrigue and tournaments and action were part of daily life? Her days were only eventful if someone became ill, died, or wanted a reading just as futile as the one she'd just given.

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