

Audra had been distracted by the changing colors of the leaves for the first week – the yellow-oranges were brilliant – but now, with the village’s fair in full swing, she was sitting on the heavy stone wall that ran along the western edge of the settlement. Barely ten yards further west, the gray of the Septirillian Wastes extended to the horizon and beyond.

She had lost track of time, or she wouldn’t even be here. There had been a flash flood, and she had been washed down a gully to wake up, some unknown time later, here, stuck in Quintirillian time. Now, though, knowing it was the Autumnal Equinox, she knew exactly when it was. Day Fifty-four in the Cycle. She needed to get back to Octarillian time, which meant, from Quintirillian time, Day Eighty. There was, however, also the Sept to deal with. She couldn’t enter the Sept until Day Seventy-one, or else the Quint-Sept confluence on Day Seventy would pop her into Septirillian time, and there were only two Sept-Oct confluences...

“Are you going to avoid the whole fair?”

She glanced back over her shoulder at the man who had spoken; he had introduced himself as Rob – and then expanded to Robert MacLaren – when he had found her, half-drowned, in the mill pond on the edge of town. He was a soldier, in his early thirties, not unattractive, but not what she was interested in – which made his sometimes overt flirting irritating.

He climbed up on the wall next to her when she didn’t answer.

“Why are you so glum, then?” he asked.

“It’s going to take me a lot longer to get home than I wanted,” she said. “It’s a ten day trip across the Sept to Octarillian time, and I can’t even cross over for another twenty-six days. Given the timing of the next Quint-Sept confluence, there’s a very narrow window for leaving that won’t leave me camped out in the Wastes for two weeks, or land me in Septirillian time for two months.”

He was quiet a moment. “What?”

“I told you, I’m from Octaril.”

“You’re saying you can get there across the Sept?”

“Physically. You can’t actually see it until there’s a confluence.”

“Which happens...”

“From here? Every forty days. I’m surprised it confuses you, what with the Quint-Sept border *right there*. Aren’t you all used to Septirillian time being accessible every thirty-five days?”

“Yeah. There’s a forest full of bandits right across the border, and they raid every time they can. Why do you *think* there’s a wall here?”

“Ah, so you all don’t generally venture over.”

“Not so much.”

She had turned her eyes back to the Wastes; he didn’t leave, however.

“So what is Octaril like?” he asked.

“Green. Although now, heading into autumn, it becomes a more monotonous gray.”

“So Octaril got green... what is green?”

“Grass, leaves. Some eyes... they’re rare there, oddly enough. They’re considered lucky; the Empress’s eyes are green.”

“Yours are...”

“I’m not sure. Not blue, not green. Julian says they’re probably brown, since the texts say it was the most common, but it’s really hard to tell with light fractured.”

“How long are leaves green, then?”

“Oh, almost from the time they appear, to about the first frost. High Summer is the Octarillian festival season. The autumn is when the world starts going gray for us.”

“Whereas it’s our brief flash of color outside flowers.”

“Oh, don’t be jealous of me for our half a year of green. In Decirillian time, the sky is blue.”

“Every day?”

“When the sky is clear.”

“Why are you in such a hurry to go home, then, if your color is all fading?” he asked.

“I’ve been gone two months.”

“Someone waiting for you?”

“Not exactly.”

“No? That’s a surprise.”

“He asked once, years ago. I told him it wasn’t a good idea.”

She had been trying *not* to think about Julian. It was hard to say how she felt about him at this point; she had known him since she was six, and some days it was obvious how he felt about her. Others...

But no. He knew what the Autumnal Equinox was to her. They had spent the past eight or ten together. She had really wanted to be home today...

Not that she should really be referring to it as *home*. She hadn’t had a home since she was six, not since...

“Magic doesn’t work in odd times,” she said, then turned and hopped down off the wall to head back into town.

“What?” Rob had to scramble to catch up. “Magic?”

“How do you think time got fractured in the first place?” she asked. “But for some reason it only works in even times.”

*If she had been born in an odd time*, she was thinking as she let him lead her in the direction of the fair, *if she had born in an odd time, her parents would still be alive*.

The fair was mostly music and dancing and eating and drinking and games for the kids and contests for the largest squash and the best sheep. Yellow-orange banners and streamers were all over; the color was still unfamiliar to her, but it leapt out from the gray at her.

She declined to dance, despite Rob’s encouragement, even when some of the other men asked. Now that she had been reminded of Julian, she was really not in the mood for any kind of merrymaking. The food was hard to pass up, though. The food was accompanied by some kind of pale, autumnal ale, though, which meant that soon she was *not* declining invitations to dance.

The Widow Gallagher’s lean-to was more familiar than it had been the first time she had woken up there. Audra found herself stretched out on the cot in the small room of the back of the Widow’s house still fully dressed. Her head was foggy yet; how much was the ale, and how much was the dwindling factors... Fifty-five wasn’t terrible, though. Still three. Fifty-nine would be another matter.

The Widow had taken her in when she’d woken up in the village mostly because Rob had offered. Audra wouldn’t have taken him up on it anyway, but the idea of an unattached, unaccompanied female staying with a bachelor apparently upset the Widow’s senses so badly meant that Audra was sleeping on a cot in her back room.

By noon she was sitting on the wall again, staring west. Feelings were getting harder to define. Sometimes it was hard to say that there *were* any. But something felt wrong about

staying with the Widow. Audra had money in the currencies of various governments in all twelve times, but the Widow would have none of it. The social niceties suggested she should be keeping the old woman company, but Audra wasn't sure she was really good company for her.

Rob had apparently been looking for her for a while when he found her, as he seemed exasperated that she was on the wall again.

"What are you *looking* for?" he asked.

"I'm not."

"What?"

"I'm not looking for anything. Don't you have a job or something? You seem to always have time to bother me."

"I have a commission," he said, a little defensively. "I'm a lieutenant in the army of the Duke of the North Line."

"Oh, so you saw the war with the South Lachens, then?" she asked.

"Most of it." His brow furrowed. "What does a girl from Octaril know about wars in the Quint from two years ago?"

"I travel quite a bit," Audra said. "I tend to keep up with the news."

"Between times."

"That is generally the best way to get away from people in your own time."

"And what would a nice girl like you have to get away from?"

Audra laughed, despite herself. "*Nice*? Definitely not applicable."

"The Widow took you in—"

"Because the idea of you offering me somewhere to stay offended her."

"How are you *not* a nice girl?"

"I really don't think that's any of your business."

"No?"

"No."

Audra frowned; the invisible barrier that separated Quintirillian and Septirillian time, ten yards away, had *wavered*. Not in its entirety, but just one small spot.

"What was that?" Rob asked. She glanced at him.

"You could see that?"

"You couldn't?"

"Only someone with mageblood can see distortions in time." She hopped down off the wall and started heading back towards the village. Rob caught up with her.

"Which means what?"

"In even times, you can probably access some sort of magic."

"How?"

"It's more or less impossible to explain here. Have you never shifted times before?"

"Not really. I've been across the border into the forest a couple times, but that's been years ago, and it was never for more than a couple hours."

"And that's into Septirillian time. You'd have to go across the Sept to Octarillian time, or go northeast, to Decirillian time." She paused a moment. "Decirillian would be easier for you if you wanted to go back and forth. You can do that every ten days. Well, fourteen, at the cycle reset. But still, it's easier than the forty day waits that you get going from Quint to Oct."

"How do you *know* all this?" he asked.

"I've been shifting time to travel for probably fifteen years," she shrugged. "The first time was just into Tri – the Haendelarian baronies southwest of the main chunk of Octarillian

time-space. First time I'd been somewhere magicless. That's every twenty-four days for confluences."

"So you just multiply the times together?"

"Not really. Goes by factors. If the day is divisible by the number, it confluences with the other days that divide into it. Say for tomorrow. Day Fifty-six in the Cycle. Seven and eight confluence – if I could have gotten into Septirillian time early enough, I could have gone home tomorrow. But translocation magic doesn't work in odd times, so I can't skip around through confluences faster here. But, tomorrow, four and two also confluence with seven and eight, since they divide in."

"With... twenty-eight and what, fourteen?"

"Right, but time and light and magic only fractured into twelve parts. So everything caps at twelve. And after twelve squared, the Cycle repeats."

Behind them, somewhere across the fence, something snarled, and Audra swore.

"What is that?"

Rob had stopped to turn and look, but Audra caught his arm and kept him moving towards town.

"Something we don't want to be caught in the open with," she said.

A hairless, hound-like head appeared with two sickle-clawed paws atop the wall behind them, then disappeared again. Audra pulled Rob into a run.

"What are you doing, taking it to *more* people?" he snapped.

"Need the obstacles of the market," she said. She pushed him out of sight around the first building in the village they reached and kept running; behind them, the hound, hairless and the size of a pony, had jumped the wall and was gaining on her.

The people in the market who had seen them coming were running as well, now, the women and children shrieking. Audra slid under the first wagon in the market she came to, vaulted herself atop it on the other side, and jumped to land on the hound's back as it was circling around to her.

Rob caught up as she landed on it; she locked an arm around its neck to try to control its teeth as it writhed. He didn't know where she had gotten the knife, but she was probing a little frantically between its ribs, trying to find its heart. When she finally jumped clear as it collapsed, Rob could see why she had been so urgent – its claws had found home more than once on her back. He hurried over to her.

"Audra—"

"*Not* a nice girl," she murmured to Rob to cut him off, shrugging off his hand as she probed the extent of the wounds on her back.

"What the *hell* is going on here?"

The head of the ten-man village militia, Vincent Burns had arrived, and Audra's face assumed a neutral, pain-tinged expression; she was still looking at the hound, which wasn't yet dead, but still bleeding on the way to it.

"Why don't you ask questions when she's not still bleeding," Rob said, frowning.

"Not much point in that," Burns said. "Can't ask questions of the dead."

Audra's eyes shifted to Burns without turning her head.

"If you don't know what it is, you don't need to know," she said. She turned to go, and Burns caught her arm.

"Don't you just walk—"

There was suddenly a knife at his throat, still covered with gore from the hound.

“You’re a little slow on the uptake, huh?” Audra said to him. “Don’t bother me.”

She pulled her arm free and headed back through town. Rob followed her, but she ignored both his inquiries and his supplications that she get help for the wounds in her back. She was going to have to concede the latter once she got to the Widow’s house, anyway; she was at least a minimum of five days from anywhere where magic worked.

The Widow promptly fainted when Audra walked in the front door; Audra just continued back through the house to her room to clean her knife and sheathe it. Rob had stopped just inside the front door, and Audra looked back over her shoulder through the doorway at him.

“See to the Widow at least, huh?” she said.

While he moved to do so, she closed the door to her room and stripped off her shirt to look at the wounds in her back in the mirror. They weren’t terribly deep, and were mostly just oozing. She cleaned them at the washstand and bandaged them as best she could, then pulled on a clean shirt before going to see how the Widow was.

When Audra got to the front room, Rob was being scolded by the Widow. Audra stopped in the doorway.

“I need to go.”

The Widow immediately turned to look at her. “Oh, my God. Are you all right, dear?”

Audra shrugged slightly. “I’ve been worse. If they’re sending hounds after me, though, I need to not be *here*.”

“Are you not still bleeding?” Rob asked.

“It’s really not too bad. Surface wounds, for the most part,” she said.

“And where are you going to go?”

She just shrugged again. “Across the Sept.”

“Into the Wastes? That’s crazy.”

“That’s also how I usually travel. As long as I keep track of time, it’s not complicated.”

“But you’re not well,” the Widow objected.

“If I stay here, they *will* keep sending hounds,” she shook her head.

“What about all the problems of falling into Septirillian time?” Rob asked. The Widow frowned at him, and Audra wondered if offering her shelter had been to protect *her* from *him*, or if it were really the other way around.

“That confluence is still two weeks off. I’m not worried about that so much as the annoyance of having to camp out in the Wastes for a week or ten days,” Audra said. “Especially in an odd time, since you can’t cook. That’s a goodly bit of salt pork and beans to tote.”

She headed back to her room to pack her things before either Rob or the Widow could object again; Rob followed her out the front door when she left, despite the Widow’s protests.

“Are you going to ask it or not?” Audra asked as he walked beside her towards the market.

“Should I bother? You’ve been pretty clear that you don’t want me hanging around.”

“Octaril is generally not a pleasant experience,” she said. “Traveling there with me would not be the most enjoyable of trips.”

“So you’re saying you wouldn’t say no.”

“Not entirely eager to head into the Wastes alone and wounded when there may be more hounds already looking for me,” she said. “But if your only reason for going would be pursuing me, no, there wouldn’t be a reason for you to go.”

“I could stand to get out of town for a while.”

“Then you should be packing for at least three weeks of travel before replenishing food is

possible,” she said. “And I can’t really give you a timeframe for when you’ll be able to come back.”

“Wait, but the overlaps—”

“The confluences are predictable. The politics are not.”

“Ah.”

“So if you’re willing to risk some unpleasanties in Octaril proper...”

“When are you leaving?”

“As soon as I acquire enough food for the trip.”

“What about water?”

“Water’s never a problem in the Wastes. Not here, anyway.”

“Where should I meet you?”

She shrugged slightly. “At the wall.”