

Epilogue

My Empress,
I pray you will find this message. My time runs short.

If you are reading this, then the man who returned from Yorovash with this box was not your loyal Envoy. Captain Gem is not who she claims - she never was - and her deceptions now threaten our very home. I believe she has been following me across Yorovash, disguising herself (or perhaps himself) using some arcane power and sabotaging my efforts to uncover the truth. This may simply be to condemn Yorovash's chances of allying with you, my Empress, but I believe her motives run deeper. She wants the amulet - your Gift. The damage she could inflict, should she learn the word of power that controls it, is unfathomable.

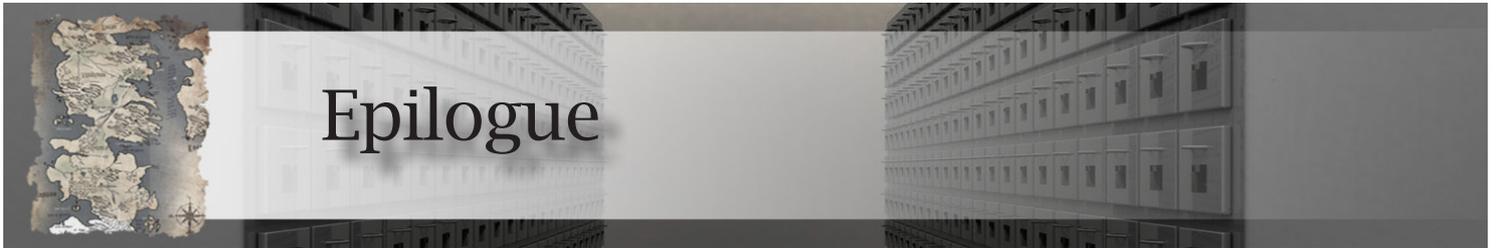
I sit in the cabin she has so graciously given me for our voyage home, now well aware that the drink she served me tonight was poisoned. I recognise the taste on my tongue: needletree sap. A small amount can make you forget the worst of events, but the amount she has given me... I will not only lose my memory, but I may accidentally reveal the word of power myself. At this very moment, she must be lying in wait for me to collapse, waiting to interrogate me, discard my body, and take my place at your side.

Fortunately, I can imagine no reason why you would ever repeat the word of power to her, but I have taken the risk of using it to encrypt this note out of fear of what she may do to you when she realises that. Her cunning, patience, and ability are apparently boundless.

For myself, there is only one way out, and I know you will not approve. I believe that banishing those three Morimoor thieves into the past had some subtle effect on history, shaping the land in the amulet's image (and our memories to match) in ways that we may never realise. I fear what may happen when I banish myself from this cabin. The amulet, of course, cannot come with me, and there is no way I can keep it out of Gem's hands now. I dare not cast it overboard.

I met a man of my height and build working in an inn in the cold north. He was constantly wrapped in a thick layer of coats, which will provide a useful disguise in case I encounter myself (or my shadowy foe). With my final hour of memories, I will send myself back and assume his life. Soon, my first conscious memories will be of working in that inn.

If you read this, please find me.



Epilogue

Dou put the hidden page back where you found it, hands trembling. The hidden compartment cannot be closed again, which makes you suspect that the Envoy's final message never reached his Empress.

If this Gem - or 'Sting', as you suspect she is really called - did learn the word of power on her stolen name day, then...

"Detective?" The Commander's head pokes in through the door. "I appreciate that you're making the most of your punishment, but it's after 7. You can go home!"

"Sorry sir. I've been trying to sort through some of this... older stuff," you say hesitantly.

He looks at the box before you, and laughs.

"That box? You've been reading Cisra's fantasy stories? We really need to throw those out."

You look from him to the box, then back to him, then back to the box. On the front is a worn printer label, which clearly says 'Cisra's Stories - DON'T OPEN'. How did you miss that? You're not sure you've ever been this embarrassed.

The Commander is still chuckling. "Well not all day, I hope. Get yourself to bed. You've got plenty left here in the morning."

Sheepishly, you head over to the archive door. The Commander flicks the light switch, and the sudden lack of fluorescent hum is deafening to you.

"By the way..." he adds as you head past him. "Tomorrow's the big day, right? Your code name day. You want to know what it is?"

He's going to spoil it anyway, you're sure. "What is it, sir?" You turn to face him, and freeze.

"It's ELITE. Bit premature, but we'll see how you do on your next real assignment."

You didn't hear a word of that. Every part of your mind is focused on the Commander's ornate necklace, peeking out of his uniform for the first time since you've know him.

He sees you looking. His face is expressionless.

"Something wrong, Detective?"

You meet his eyes. "No, sir. Goodnight." You turn away, and head down the corridor, heart racing.

Behind you, the Commander flicks the corridor light switch off.

But you don't hear any footsteps.