

For centuries prior to unification, the Ondiric Empire was little more than a notional hodgepodge of sovereignties, large and small, most of them Ondiric speaking, under a feeble imperial crown.

—*A Concise but Complete History of World Events*

Unfazed by the thick clouds blocking the light of the two moons, the lone figure in a hooded cloak moved with preternatural assurance through the darkness, while ascending the rugged western slope of the high hill. Upon reaching the castle at the top, the figure—in a remarkable display of free climbing that would have dismayed the structure’s long-dead architects—exploited the shallow angle formed by the meeting of the curtain wall with a massive round tower to scale thirty feet of sheer stone in less than five minutes. Finding no guards atop this section of the battlements, the intruder quickly crossed to the other side and began a more challenging ascent of fourteen feet on a curving diagonal to a window on the eastern side of the tower. Although now in full view of much of the castle, the climber remained undetected—due in part to the cloudy night, but in part also to the chameleon-like qualities of the hooded cloak, which provided an effective magical camouflage against the mottled gray stone. Several tense

minutes passed, as the intruder clung precariously to the side of the tower, while contriving to open the latched window without breaking it—or falling some forty feet to a bone-shattering death on the cobbles below.

Once inside, the hooded figure dropped lightly onto the wooden floorboards of the large workshop or laboratory that took up the entire eastern half of this level of the tower. The room was overflowing with esoteric objects and mysterious equipment, ranging from an enormous armillary sphere near the window to a fully articulated walrus skeleton with thirty-inch tusks by the door. Paying these interesting distractions no heed, the intruder instead maneuvered sure-footedly through the cluttered darkness to a ladder leading to an open trapdoor in the ceiling. Climbing it in something approaching silence proved difficult, but with time and care the intruder emerged successfully into a small but similarly crowded bedchamber.

It was a warm night, and the room's half-naked occupant had kicked off his bedclothes. In his mid-thirties, he was unexceptional in appearance. His slow, steady breathing confirmed that he was still asleep. The intruder approached and studied him dispassionately for a moment before drawing a long, narrow-bladed dagger and thrusting it with both force and precision between the fourth and fifth ribs, through the musculature of the intercostal space and the fibrous tissues of the pericardium, and into not only the left but also the right ventricle. A swift jerk freed the enchanted blade, while slicing open the punctured heart. Blood gushed from the wound, as the sleeper gasped and opened his eyes, awake and uncomprehending in the

dark for just seconds before he succumbed to unconsciousness. Less than a minute later, he was dead.

With an indistinct vocalization, the killer dipped a finger in the blood and placed a single daub on the victim's forehead, before cleaning the dagger, returning it to its sheath, and making for the bedchamber window. There the clouds chanced to part for a moment, and the light of the larger of the two moons flooded in, illuminating for the first time the distinctive face concealed by the hooded cloak—angular, high-cheekboned, and female.

Evidently the cloak had more than one magical quality, for after taking hold of special handgrips sewn into the fabric and placing her feet in a pair of cloth stirrups, she leapt from the already open window, stretched out all four limbs, and glided forth like a flying squirrel. Banking sharply around the tower, she cleared the battlements of the curtain wall and swooped down the side of the hill to the bottom, thus effecting her escape.

*Sildoor.* One of several minor states to emerge from the Time of Troubles, the Principality of Sildoor comprises five mostly contiguous baronies in eastern Ondiran. Ruled by the House of Solint from the capital at Talindor, it is considered generally unremarkable.

—*The Great Ondiric Compendium of All Knowledge*

Sinta could not help laughing at Othir's slyly malicious tale of how, at age eight, he had tricked his trio of tyrannical aunts into spending an uncomfortable afternoon trapped in a henhouse. The attractive young sorceress and her dashing man-at-arms were in a buoyant mood, as they returned home to Talindor from a successful journey to the island kingdom of Tserenets. Sinta had acquired a rare authentic copy of *Djanko's Grimoire*, the masterwork of one of the great Tseren sorcerers (and the subject of many forgeries), while Othir had finally obtained a magic sword, albeit one that did not seem altogether to approve of him (as sometimes happens initially when such weapons change hands).

Leaving their horses at the livery stable, the two walked the short distance to the town square, where they found a member of the princely guard standing outside the apothecary's shop that Sinta had inherited three years earlier upon

her father's death, and out of which she operated her freelance sorcery business. As they approached, she recognized him by sight as the man assigned to protect the prince's elderly chancellor. She also recognized the chancellor's arms on the caparison of the bay mare whose reins the man held.

Othir knew this person somewhat better. "Greetings, Fothenar. I hope Chancellor Thennis is not in need of medicaments!"

"No, Sir Othir," the soldier replied respectfully. "His Excellency wished to speak with Mistress Sinta." Stepping aside with a slight bow, he let them enter the shop.



"Ah, here they are now!" declared Pentigor, the master apothecary who rented the premises from Sinta.

The chancellor turned around with evident relief. "Thank goodness! Greetings to you both. Master Pentigor was not certain when you might return." He took a deep breath. "Mistress Sinta, I need your help in a confidential matter. Sir Othir, you may also prove to be of assistance, I think."

Sinta found the undertone of agitation she detected in the chancellor's voice disconcerting, for she knew him to be a man of calm authority, who had guided the fortunes of the tiny Principality of Sildoor with a steady hand since before she was born. Moreover, in her previous—though admittedly not extensive—dealings with him, the old man had invariably summoned her to his office in the

castle; he had never come to look for her in person. Something serious must be afoot.

She invited him upstairs to her study. Othir followed with their bags, which he quickly stashed in their respective bedchambers, though not before Sinta extracted her pet lizard, Angvar, from his travel basket and placed him in the windowsill, where he could bask in the sun.

The chancellor sat gratefully down on the second-hand chair provided for Sinta's clients. He took a moment to catch his breath following the two flights of stairs. "Eight days ago," he then began, "Lord Alfron, acting as the prince's food taster, became ill while sampling the prince's dinner and died within minutes. Naturally, the prince was most alarmed at this apparent attempt on his life—as well as distressed at the loss of Lord Alfron, his long-time friend and confidant—and he demanded an immediate investigation. I assigned the task to Halifor, who, as court sorcerer and a man of intellect, seemed to me best suited to the task. He fed samples from the various dishes served at the dinner to several different dogs and established thereby that the prince's serving of pork tenderloin alone contained a potent toxin. He then sought to identify the culprit, and I think he must have been making progress, because—and I'm sorry to have to tell you this, Mistress Sinta, for I believe the two of you were close—this morning he was found stabbed to death in his bed."

Sinta gave a horrified gasp and clasped her hand to her mouth. She and Halifor had in fact enjoyed a brief love affair the year before, and they had remained friends afterward.

Chancellor Thennis politely bowed his head to give the sorceress a little privacy at what he could see was an emotional juncture. He waited a moment before continuing. “That brings me to the purpose of my visit, namely, to ask you to pick up the investigation where Halifor left off.” He raised a hand to forestall the objection he could see springing to Othir’s lips. “I am fully cognizant, Sir Othir, of the danger inherent in my request, but I have confidence in your ability to keep Mistress Sinta safe. Additionally, we shall make every effort to keep the assignment secret.” He turned back to Sinta. “We can explain your presence at court by saying that you are under consideration for the post of court magician.” He smiled wryly. “Which has the added virtue of being true.”

Sinta struggled to master the flurry of conflicting emotions sweeping over her. The news of Halifor’s murder was of course a severe shock, albeit one now contending with a vengeful desire to find out who had killed him (the desire to find things out being one of Sinta’s defining characteristics, even under normal circumstances); nevertheless, the grim example of Halifor’s fate prompted a natural fear for her own safety, should she accede to the chancellor’s request (a fear aggravated by her lifelong tendency toward timidity, something she despised in herself and sought to quash); finally, she felt a guilty pricking of ambition at the prospect of professional advancement—for becoming a court magician at the age of just twenty-three (and as a woman, no less) would be a rare accomplishment, even in a minor court such as that of Sildoor.

The chancellor waited patiently for Sinta to say something. “So, will you do it?” he asked at last.

His voice shook Sinta out of her reverie. “Yes, Your Excellency. Yes, of course, I will.” She paused, as her conscious mind suddenly caught up with the workings of her unconscious, which was already evaluating the evidence before her. “Was Lord Alfron the prince’s only taster?” she asked.

The chancellor shook his head. “No, it was a duty he shared with the other Gentleman of the Chamber, Lord Fentimor, who now shares it with Lord Alfron’s successor, Sir Thigtonil.”

Sinta frowned. “But they must alternate based on some established schedule?”

“Oh, yes. Lord Alfron tasted on even-numbered days.”

“And this was generally known?”

The chancellor shrugged. “It was no secret within the court.”

Sinta nodded. “Then I think you can reassure Prince Folgar that this was not an attempt to assassinate him. If the killer knew who would be doing the tasting, Lord Alfron was the intended victim. It makes no sense to have used such a fast-acting poison otherwise. They are, in any case, quite rare and difficult to procure. The only non-magical one I’m familiar with can be extracted from fruit pits, but it’s quite a laborious procedure. No, if the intention had been to kill the prince, any competent poisoner would have chosen a slower-acting agent, such as hemlock, or arsenic, or wolfsbane. Those are all easy enough to come



by, and Lord Alfron's first symptoms would not have become apparent until it was too late to save the prince."

The chancellor eyed her shrewdly. "I knew I was right to come to you," he said. "Halifor came to the same conclusion—but not half so quickly."

Sinta blushed. "Well, to be fair, his father wasn't an apothecary."