

THE SPELL

by Eve Barbeau

BOOK ONE

THE PORTEND

## Chapter One

The gloom in Master Magre's tower wasn't lightened by the countenances of the two who stood with him. The pale new moon barely defined the oculus—that watchful eye over their heads. Always before, it seemed to Master Magre, it had looked on him with kindness, as though the Great Ones peered down and smiled at him. But not tonight. Tonight, and more often now, there was accusation in the eye's regard. Why hadn't they found the one who would help them? Time was growing short. If only the shifting mosaic would show them the nature of the coming calamity. They could, then, better prepare. But its nature wasn't foretold, only that there was one who could save them.

Master Rah, who stood next to him, struck his staff, once, on the floor and a cold blue light flared at its top illuminating the mosaic tiles at their feet. Images formed, shifting, changing, one followed by another and another, of dying crops, animals dead at birth, and if not dead malingering in pain and privation. The folk in misery, careless of themselves, careless of

each other, starving, not for lack of food, for there was still some, but starving for lack of light, and hope. They were nearly gone, merely husks whose hearts still beat.

Portends of horror.

“Light, light, light,” chanted Mistress Eufemia, her hands fluttering before her as though she would cast a spell to rid them of the blighted sight.

Master Magre marked the sign of the four and clapped his hands. The mosaic beneath their feet shifted more swiftly, ranging over all Erdry. With hungry eyes, they searched for a spark of light.

“There,” said Magre, his long finger pointing to a tiny glow that blinked and went out.

“Has Master Bram been sent north? What report has he?” asked Master Rah.

“As before. There are some here and there with the gift. One in Tresson, a woman, young, barely more than a girl. But what good has ever come from Tresson? Do you not remember the vile Faustus, Aiden the Terrible’s most fanatical follower? Do you not remember the horrors he committed?”

“There, there, there,” sang Mistress Eufemia. “Did you see it? Did you see that flare of light? Something comes. Something comes to the one. Something aids the one in Tresson. Do not judge her, Magre, on the folly of others.” She put her hands together bowed her head and rocked back and forth. “There’s hope, there’s hope, still.”

“The one? I saw only a momentary blink, but, yes, there’s always hope,” said Master Magre, his words dry and lacking the belief that was fervent in Mistress Eufemia’s words.

Master Rah said nothing. He tapped his staff on the floor again, and the blue light quenched.

They stood in darkness until the pale moon above offered a little light to their eyes.

Finally, Master Rah cleared his throat. “Would that we could at a stroke erase from the minds of the folk the terror Master Aiden unleashed on our world and that we had time enough to shore up our store of young wizards. I fear this is yet some of his doing, this horror that’s to come.”

“Not Aiden, surely not. He was killed. You were there Rah, and you, Eufemia,” said Master Magre.

Master Rah shook his head. “An old man...I’m an old man with too many terrible memories of that time.”

Mistress Eufemia touched his arm, and for an instant, the point of Master Rah’s staff glowed as she passed him a little of her energy.

He smiled and patted her arm. “Mistress, among your new students, are there any...?”

Mistress Eufemia bobbed and fluttered. “I haven’t marked one particularly—unless...”

“Who?” asked Magre eagerly. “Do I know him?”

Mistress Eufemia said nothing for a moment, then, “Perhaps. Perhaps he could be—”

Master Rah patted her hand again. “Tell us then, for we need some kind news.

“I have hope—if not the one in Tresson, perhaps Ursus, Son of Daniel the Reeve?”

Master Magre snorted. “On that, I can’t agree, Mistress. He acts the fool, more often than not.”

Mistress Eufemia nodded. “Ahh, there’s more to him, would you but look. If not, don’t despair, there’s time yet. The Great Ones won’t abandon us.”

“When shall we meet again?” asked Master Magre.

“Let’s not look again too soon,” said Master Rah. Even the visions drive my spirit down and I fear. dampen my senses. All my faculties are required for my work. Lives depend on it.”

“But if that one—that spark, and that brief flare—did I truly see it?” asked, Master Magre.

“No, no, don’t doubt,” said Mistress Eufemia. “I feel that light still in my heart. I saw it. You saw it, and Rah saw it.”

The moon made a valiant attempt and for a little while at least, the outline of the spiral stairway was visible. Mistress Eufemia leaned on Master Rah’s arm. “She’ll come. I feel it here,” she said touching the place where her heart beat rapidly under her breastbone. “Come Rah, help a poor woman down the stairs. Magre, I wish you a good night.” She paused and tilted her head to one side. “No, before we go, create for our well-being a Luminance spell. We would be blessed...”

Master Magre rubbed at his creased brow and nodded. “Come,” he said and ushered them into his chambers. He waited until they had settled then he lifted his hands and began to work.

An image appeared before them, the colours all-over grey and sombre, of a youth in a scullery, brushing ashes from a hearth. Here he added a little ochre, there the pearl of ash. Master Magre’s arms rose, fell and swayed as though he were conducting a great choir. He began to chant:

Pawter u argentu

Awsi u auru

Illuminare Magni Dio

e mentie anime

He touched the image here, and here, and there with a tawny-rose, then with a honeyed yellow and at once the image caught a glow and erupted in radiance.

They stood basking in the life-giving light until it winked out and the image sifted to the floor.

The three parted, going their own way, their hearts at peace—for the moment. They had yet time.