

Chapter One
Views from Underbill

It was three days before the end of the world. The Lord of Ysthar was playing Hamlet.

The stage was empty but for him; the auditorium was full.

Raphael—his real name was Raphael—hurtled through that Sunday evening performance, the last week of the Great Game Aurieleteer, the last week of the old order of the world, with only half his mind on the action of the play. The rest of it was rather more concerned with his magic.

Not that anyone noticed this.

Raphael had spent a great deal of time and effort ensuring he was regarded by the magic folk as a mage of small corners and hedgerows, unconcerned except as they were all concerned with the end result of the Game. As for the ordinary people of the world—well, they saw James Inelu on stage, and thought no more of magic than the glamour that came with a movie star come from Hollywood to London’s West End; which, to be sure, even in the early twenty-first century was something.

He was alert to the weight of the audience’s expectation. He crested the hump of the “To be or not to be” speech successfully—slalomed down through the tennis-game conversations—and grounded on the next-to-last line of another soliloquy. Just as he drew breath to speak, a great wind from beyond the world’s end blew over London, and for a moment fractured his attention.

“O,” he said, and so fittingly for inward thought and outward character he paused, disconcerted as if he spoke into a sudden collocation of silences in a crowded room.

He paused, as the wandering stars pause in their stations, as the ball pauses at its zenith, as the heart pauses between beats, listening to the slow silence in the great hall. He paused: not Hamlet, not the Lord of Ysthar, not any of his hundred pseudonymous half-lives: just himself, listening to nothing.

The wind surged across the city, making for the Salisbury Plain and the end of the Great Game Aurieleteer in a wild careening fury of snapped umbrellas and gunshot flags.

Inside the theatre it was silent, still, a black and pregnant air, awaiting him. Outside his magic was caught up in the tumult like a kite cupping the air, canting across the height and breadth of England.

His first instinct was to drop all he was doing. He had been slowly twisting together the borders between Ysthar and the other worlds, one of his last tasks before the end of the Game. He knew only too well what such a wind could do.

He paused, attention fractured, instinct goading him: but he was not a man much given to obeying instinct. Honour also pricked him, to maintain his roles, to keep them separate, never to falter in the interplay of subtle magic and outward ordinariness. He had learned how to be stubborn in the long course of the Game. He would not falter now, three days before its end, whatever wind-borne temptations called him.

He did not like his ruthlessness, but ruthless he was.

He wrenched his mind down into the abyssal silence of the lower hall, that silence of quiet movements, that black-and-white void between the floodlights and the wall. He found his hands fisted against the foreign air whose passing went otherwise unnoticed. He let them become Hamlet's fists, and folding himself back into character took one further step forward.

“O, from this time forth, my thoughts be bloody, or be nothing worth.”

After, in the process of simultaneously divesting himself of Hamlet and crossing the wood-and-metal-strutted space behind the stage, which was a large room that felt like a corridor, he was halted by Robin hailing him with great gestures that fit words from another play entirely. “Hand me my crown, give me my robes, I have immortal longings in me.”

Raphael raised his eyebrow amiably; Robin grinned as at some private thought.

In appearance the faddish director and general impresario of the theatre, Robin was less well known to be one of its main shareholders. It was known to even fewer that he was also a prince of Fairyland; Raphael did not try to fathom his private thoughts very often. Robin for his part seemed to enjoy trying to winkle out his secrets, and sometimes he succeeded, which made him Raphael's closest friend.

Having nothing else to hand, Raphael gave him Hamlet's sword. Robin accepted it gravely, bowing his head in mock sobriety so his avant-garde fringe of red curls fell over his eyes. “I thought you might have missed your cue there for a moment. I imagine you were thinking more of shaking things up this last week.”

It was also the last week of the play, which flouted ancient custom and ended on a Thursday, thank God. “The sword has a notch. It may break before the week's out.”

Robin gave it a careless appraisal. “Do you reckon? Never you mind about that. I'm sure the props mistress can sort out a spare if it comes to it—or you could always improvise. Oh—

Rod—can you check your contact information? The accountant has been complaining about his records.”

Roderick Maxwell played Claudius. He halted uncomfortably close to Raphael to scribble his telephone number on the form, the king’s robes draped over his arm in a sumptuous fall of red velvet. “I see our film star has managed to keep anonymous, with a postal box address and no phone number.”

This was ostensibly addressed to Robin, who glanced at Raphael (who did not much like talking about his recent stint in the movies) and said, “I have his number elsewhere. Not though you ever answer your mobile, James.”

“I answer it on Saturdays,” Raphael replied. James Inelu was his current *nom-de-guerre*. It was suitably pretentious for being a semi-foreign Hollywood actor, although he’d chosen it before that particular challenge in the Game had been made.

“You didn’t answer it yesterday when I called,” said Robin.

Raphael was distracted by the outdoor magics as someone opened the stage door and a cool air swirled around them, and answered vaguely. “The battery may have run down.”

Roderick gave him a pointed sneer Raphael had long admired on artistic grounds. “I find it hard to believe you don’t have backups in case someone wants to tell you how much they appreciate you.” He made a gesture like the dumb-show actor’s pouring poison.

Raphael returned him an austere stare. “I’m not expecting anyone to need to reach me this week.”

“Somehow I’d forgotten you and Circe d’Armiene broke up on the weekend.”

This time Raphael produced his blandest smile. “You should be careful what you believe from the tabloids.”

Without noticeable effort Roderick made his lip curl yet further. “Why, were they wrong in saying you and she weren’t a good match except to look at?”

Raphael wondered what Roderick would say if he told him that Circe was the powerful enchantress she pretended was her namesake, and had spent five thousand years—give or take three days and a season—trying to take magical control of the world while he resisted, and that, no, not in any way, shape, or form were they a good match. Probably Roderick, once he got over the shock (and requisite proof) of real magic, would assume this meant Raphael had magicked his way to success, although Raphael was equally proud and ashamed of the fact he hadn’t needed to.

Robin, who did know that about Circe, spoke cheerfully before he could do more than smile. “Thanks for your number, Rod. James, I know you’re busy Wednesday with your errands, but I was thinking we could do brunch on Friday—noonish?”

Robin didn't know it was the last week of the Game. In fact, he didn't know Raphael was the Lord of Ysthar; Raphael had kept it even from him, needing friendships untainted by power. Although as a great magus himself Robin surely knew it was near the end of the Game from the shape of the world's magic, neither Raphael nor Circe had ever given it to be understood when precisely it would end. Raphael didn't know Circe's motives for this reticence. He cherished hopes no one would notice if only he were sufficiently careful.

Though that did depend on his winning on Wednesday. He said, "I can't commit at the moment, I'm afraid."

"Fair enough. Circe might spill over into your life. She's not always very good about boundaries, eh? And you're not exactly, as you say, friends."

Raphael believed Robin thought him a minor flunky of the Lord of Ysthar who had gone to Hollywood precisely to keep an eye on Circe in the run-up to the end of the Game, but this was the closest Robin had ever come to saying so. Raphael smiled blandly again and turned to greet their friend Will's approach. He was already changed out of Horatio's garb, sauntering up in his street clothes with an amused smile for Roderick's pettish departure.

"Are you not changed yet, James?" He was emphatically punctilious as usual with the name, which after six months of their reacquaintance he still seemed unused to.

Robin blew his hair out of his eyes with a heavy sigh, this time of mock annoyance contrasting a dimpled grin. "I forestalled him. Will wants to tell you ideas, Dickon. Please take him for a walk, he'll keep trying to make me debate the relative nobility of Agamemnon and Orpheus and their fitness for heroic verse all night if you don't. Give me no crowns of laurel or gold but a warm fire and some wine. Give him, oh, pease porridge hot and hard tack cold and salt cod boring and your Bartlebeian imperturbability of countenance, and perhaps he'll tame his poetry to a moderate modern taste."

Will folded his scarf about his neck with a show of dignity. "I have no objections to salt cod."

"That's because you're from inland counties where it's a treat in Lent. Fie on your salt cod *and* your poetic frenzies."

By this exchange one would perhaps not have surmised that in rescuing Will from the enchantments of a troupe of lesser fairies Robin had acted out of anything beyond mischief. Raphael thought it perhaps belied his occasional claim to lack a heart (or a soul; he wasn't always consistent), as Robin had missed Will even more than he had in the years when they had thought the poet dead.

All three of them had been rather surprised when the fairies of Avon-under-the-Hill had asked Robin for help: Will to discover two of his friends were of the magic folk, Robin that his

greatest friend was alive, and Raphael ... several things, including how much better he was at acting now.

Mindful of the unclosed border between Ysthar and Eahh awaiting him below London, Raphael would have demurred, but before he spoke Will added, "I offer you choice of crowns to champion, gold or laurel. Which do you choose? Or then there is—"

Robin flung up his hands, scattering papers across the floor. "No! No! By God no God! I don't want a theological play. No one wants a theological play. It's a secular age. God is dead! quoth Nietzsche."

"And on the third day he rose again, quoth the Scriptures," Will retorted a touch doubtfully, as one might who had spent some centuries carousing with the Good People underhill.

"Stick to Agamemnon or Apollo," Robin said, and as Will started to protest the incurrence of Apollo Raphael made his escape to his dressing room.

The theatre-goers had already dispersed by the time they exited. Will set off towards the river, following the same road Raphael usually took to go home. Robin's theatre was not far from Victoria Station, along streets that were quiet at night; they walked in companionable silence towards the Embankment. Raphael fretted against the tautening coils of magic, having to stop himself from plucking at the patterns he had established years ago. The wind had not torn them loose as he'd feared, instead boomed along almost joyfully.

There was very little left for him to do, in fact, three days before the end of the Game. Down below London he had the border with Eahh to close, and then tomorrow there was the final temporary closure of the others to accomplish. He hoped it would be temporary.

And then ... and then ... just prepare himself for the end of the world. Or rather prepare the magic of the world, the stuff of his duty, for what would happen if he lost on Wednesday. If he lost he would not be doing anything. The rules of the Game were very clear on that point. This might well be the last walk he ever took with Will, perhaps even his last walk through the night city.

One of the things he most enjoyed was walking at night in fine rain. It had been many years since he could do so safely with a friend, and for a moment he was awash in gratitude for such a gift. Will continued silent, which let him tuck away that small pleasure into a corner of his mind, like a potted plant in a Gothic cathedral. Pleasant and a bit ridiculous, a bit of gilding on a rhinoceros' horn.

When they reached the river Will stopped to look over the railings at the dim light-spangled

water. The tide was well on its way out; the moon was a glow near the western horizon, behind the buildings. They were near Raphael's house, which was invisible to all eyes but his. He carefully did not let his gaze rest on it.

Will said, "I find it odd how much deeper the river is now."

Four hundred years ago Will's Thames had been awash with noxious mudflats, not tamed until the Victorians' enthusiastic engineering. The building of the embankment had moved Raphael's house and grounds from an island in the river to part of the city proper, though of course the builders hadn't known that. Raphael lit one of his house lamps with a soft thrust of magic. "The effect of channelling it."

"I should think that would make it more likely to flood."

"There are gates at Greenwich in case of a storm and a flood tide come together."

"Truly? I shall have to go see them. Have they been proved? Would not high water from upstream together with high winds and the tide overmaster them?—A fine image to use, this channelled river."

He started sauntering downstream. Raphael looked at the bulk of the hill in the darkness behind his walls. He felt an untoward sense of dislocation at the knowledge that Will could not even see the wall, let alone the hill, didn't know that there behind old magics was where Raphael lived. He swirled the breeze around him restlessly until it prickled his magic.

Will bounced his umbrella along the railing in iambic pentameters. "Audiences nowadays appear to wish more—ah—verisimilitude. They shouldn't like it were I to write about the bounded river in a play about Orpheus or Agamemnon."

"Would you see Agamemnon a bounded river?" Raphael asked, tasting the magic running through the Thames, a gorgeous netting of energies, lacework of air and currents, dreams and stories and fishy activities, life and death and the steady rush from the city to the sea. It was cleaner than it had been for centuries. He'd heard people even wanted to develop a swimming beach on the Isle of Dogs next summer. Not something he'd much fancied doing since Roman times.

"Not directly, of course, but the image runs through my thoughts, this river through a city with its flood gates. What is Agamemnon's story if not a life bounded?"

"He chooses between duty and inclination."

"Between duty to his family and that to his friends."

Raphael considered the versions of the story he knew. "Family and family: Iphigeneia his daughter or Menelaus his brother. The goddess or the army: his conscience or necessity."

"Perhaps he was a man who had bounded his conscience with walls and flood gates, and then all breaks upon him at once and his artifices fail. Prohibitions and the Trojan War."

“There were dykes and gates in ancient Mesopotamia, but the Mycenaeans were seafarers. There aren’t any major rivers in Greece.”

“It’s a metaphor,” Will said caustically, “James. Why are you in *Hamlet*?”

Raphael blinked at the sudden shift. He had accepted the role because of an old promise to Robin, half-forgotten until redeemed. He’d started off reluctant and resentful of the time it took away from his duties, then become grateful for the ordinary demands of the familiar structure of rehearsals and performance, and finally come to depend on entering Hamlet as a release from the dire refrain of *should be—shouldn’t be—should be—shouldn’t be* of his unoccupied mind. He settled for, “Robin asked me.”

“Honest Iago.”

He was touched by this, as Will usually refused to play the game of quotations; if somewhat miffed by the choice of which particular allusion to bring in. “Honey-tongued Will. I am sure you could persuade us that Acheron ran through Argos.”

“If you insist, I have also considered the shape of the story of Orpheus the musician. He was of Thrace in the stories; there could be a river there. And indeed he did cross Acheron.”

“It would be a complex play with both Agamemnon and Orpheus to treat.”

“I have a ready pen; I can write more than one. They would pair well in some ways. Orpheus came to a confliction of desires, not duties. But in both there are the prohibitions.”

“There are duties in that story.”

“He chose to enter the land of the dead for his love. That is a fine tale indeed, but what duties are there? He flouted the human duty of obeying necessity for the higher love of—what shall we call his Eurydice?”

“It seems even less like a river,” Raphael observed, carefully tucking a few loose strands of magic back into their places.

“Even better: the farther from the reality, the better the analogy. Consider the man who loves enough to follow his beloved into the land of the dead! What is she? His soul? His art? His muse? I would follow my muse far and away.”

“You did follow her to Fairyland.”

“And you? How far would you follow yours?”

“I have none.”

“Honest Iago! Your voice goes flat, your shoulders tense, your hand gestures a dismissal half-seen in the glimmered reflections cast upon you by the river. Truly you have no muse. Very well. Do you seek one? Your assignations of the older days and now: what of them? Are they your search for a light to light your way?”

“They are errands, nothing more.” Errands of his duty to Ysthar, he called them to himself.

He made his shoulders relax, settled himself again into character: the openly pseudonymous James, Will's friend and Robin's, well known to the magic folk of Ysthar as a small mage, vaguely connected with the reclusive Lord of Ysthar; a far cry from the glittering film star James Inelu, or indeed the splendid lord magus; or himself.

"Errands—fine word! Whither do you wander on your errands? What path do you stray from? Shall I use you as my model? Are they after pleasures or duties or both? Agamemnon chooses duty, aye, but perhaps his tragedy is that he prefers his duty to his conscience."

"I should be concerned indeed to know I was your model for all the characters you've written me to play."

"Honest Iago."

Raphael thrust his hands into his pockets and considered some responses of varying wit and temper to that. Not that he'd played Iago for Will. By the time he thought of what to say, he had drawn ahead, Will having stopped to retie his shoelace. Realizing he was a hundred yards ahead Raphael turned back to see three figures advance out of the narrow alley between two converted warehouses.

By the time he covered the distance Will was down, his balance compromised. Raphael felt a faint affinity with that warrior Agamemnon as he strode into the affray and laid about him with elbow and edge of hand and foot and Will's dropped umbrella. He fought as cleanly as was compatible with a quick victory, his self-imposed rules to avoid causing permanent injury or using magic. The men were thugs, not skilled assassins, and though certainly sent by Circe, were not expecting his skill. Perhaps forty seconds passed before they fled.

Raphael did use his magic to assure himself of privacy while he pulled Will upright. The poet was breathing heavily, his eyes narrowed with surprise, indignation, and pain, fear not yet fully present.

"How are you hurt?"

Will spat, coughed weakly, spat again. "A buffet to the stomach. Faugh."

Raphael let his adrenalin diminish, heart thundering. He was astonished at how angry he was. It was the last week of the Game; by its fourth rule he was not to be the object of attack. He had felt safe to walk with his friend, and here he had brought him into danger.

Will unbent slowly. "I shall be sore upon the morrow." He peered around nervously, caught Raphael's calm gesture. "You're not afeared they'll return?"

"No."

"Shall we report it?"

"No. Can you walk?"

"I'm bruised, not broken. Aye." He gasped as he took a step, but Raphael saw from his

movements there were no injuries beyond the battering. “What of you? That was a magnificent rout. I’ve never seen you brawl before.”

“I’m fine. We should get you home.”

Will nodded shakily and grasped him by the elbow. Raphael let him lean, bounding his step to Will’s slower one. He picked the shortest route towards Robin’s Belgravia townhouse, which took them through the City instead of along the river. It was perhaps half past twelve in the morning, and the moon had set behind the Isle of Dogs. Alert now, Raphael was unafraid of taking narrow alleys, covered mews, strange routes that he knew from many a midnight ramble through London.

As he led Will into the dark crack between a bank and a church his friend said, “Are you certain we should take this way?”

“It’s most direct.”

“I’ll grant that, but we’ve been attacked out of a dark alley once this evening. Or I have. You sent them off with dispatch.”

“I’m sorry. I doubt we’ll be attacked again. I’m watching now.”

“A comfort indeed. You know who those men were?”

“I know who sent them.”

“Your errands take you into darker corners than ever I suspected.” Raphael led him at this sideways along a garden wall, through an ivy-hidden gate, and finally up via a series of stepped walls onto a roof-line that afforded them a view of north London as an ink sketch against scudding clouds. Will gasped slightly. “And also to finer vistas.”

Raphael leaned against a wide, warm chimney so Will could rest. As the echoes of their soft footsteps quieted he took note of the new CCTV cameras since his last jaunt along this route. He fitted them into other known dangers: the hollow roof that boomed under an unwary step, the narrow railing that Will probably could not have managed to cross even uninjured, the lit portions and the jump and the hidey-holes of people and things he did not want to deal with at the moment.

“Who did send them?”

“I have an enemy,” he replied, deciding on the route. “I’m very sorry you were caught in it. I wasn’t paying enough attention. I cry you mercy.” He paused, waiting for the clouds to flood the landscape with a grey wash. “It would be better to be quiet this next stretch.”

“I defer to your wider experience, as the river said to the sea.”

Raphael thought that was perhaps something Will had heard from Robin. With careful haste he brought him home over the rooftops to where Robin’s servant Zebulun awaited with a fire and wine and a nod for Raphael’s murmured comment that they’d had a slight scuffle. Will let

himself be bundled off with his only parting comment being, “It is a great gift to have good light; I shall be able to write another hour yet before bed.”

He didn’t say whether he was inspired by the river or the fight or the conversation, and Raphael, turning his attention back towards his duties, did not ask him.