

THE 13th MAGE

Second Edition

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I dedicate this book to my daughter Daniela.

Inelia Benz

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Chapter 1

A slight tremor shook the small Spanish village of Santorcaz, making the swallows in the old tower fly out in fright. One or two people stopped walking, and a few put down their glasses in the bar across the plaza.

Owen put down his quill and looked out of the window. He listened to the swallows and the clouds, the breeze was whispering too. Was it time already? He went to the bathroom and stood in front of the mirror, he'd have to shave, his beard was much too long. How old was he now? Sixty? Forty? He'd have a better idea when he was shaved.

Time seemed to fly in Santorcaz. It was a pity he had to leave the village. Coming out into the world meant a huge amount of paperwork and adaptation. If only he hadn't made that promise to Aeofe he would be able to stay invisible for a few more decades and get some real work done.

"What was that tremor Owen?" Said a rasping voice coming from the dreaded face that looked at him from behind the mirror's reflection.

"Great Rossini, it's a great honor to have you in my humble abode. If I may be of assistance, I believe it is a Keeper moving through the dimensions."

Great Rossini was the Staff Holder, the Great Elder, The One To Be Obeyed. And although Owen didn't particularly want The Great Rossini to know that a Keeper was moving through the dimensions he had no way of lying. He knew that the best way to avoid having to tell Rossini about his personal work was to keep it so hidden, so quiet, that he would never ask about it at all.

"Do you know what it is the Keeper wants Owen?"

"Yes, Great Rossini, it is a matter of the witches."

“How come you by this information?”

“My stepmother, she informed me of the Keepers arrival today.”

“Witches... well, can't be anything important then. Be well Owen, it is not healthy to be mixing with those types, but seeing as it is your stepmother I shall let it pass,” said the spectral image before vanishing.

Owen sighed in relief, he couldn't remember the last time he'd had a visit from the Great Rossini, but it was not something he looked forward to, not now.

Getting the Staff wasn't a matter of education or birthright, it was simple ability, The Great Rossini had that ability and had been Holder for as long as Owen could remember.

Owen wanted the Staff.

Most other Council members were content to have been allowed to join the ranks of the Council; it was a great honor in and of itself. Owen however wasn't. He had known, from the day he found out about his nature as an Elder and the existence of the Council, that the Staff would one day belong to him.

He had traveled all worlds known to immortals, he had studied and practiced every possible craft but it was to no avail. The Great Rossini had a few hundred years advantage on him, and would forever be in front if Owen didn't do something drastic about it.

He could do something about it, if only he was left alone to do his work, but Aeofe wouldn't see the importance of his quest. No witch would. They were small minded creatures.

Now he would have to work on a promise made when he was no more than a child, it was humiliating.

To pass the Keeper's test. That is what he had promised to do as a child. Pass the Keeper's test. No two tests were the same of course; each person had a unique test especially designed for their own particular needs.

If he had chosen the Way of the Witch, he would have had to do the test hundreds of years earlier; it was something witchlings did in their teens.

If only the Way of the Witch wasn't such a simple craft he might have a chance of failing the test, he thought, and then his stepmother would leave him alone. But even if that was the case, there was also the matter of mage pride to think of, if word got out that he had failed a witch's test he would be the laughing stock.

He looked over at his ordinary staff; he didn't even bother to carry it around with him anymore, not unless other mages were around.

Not to worry, he would continue his work on the Staff in his spare time, there was really no way he would let The Great Rossini increase his advantage.

Now that he thought of it, he realized Rossini must be completely insane, no one in their right mind would insist on being called Great anymore, even though it was the right title for that post.

He put down the shaving blade and stared in horror at his new face in the mirror. He had clearly lost track of time and now didn't look older than twenty! His hair was jet black, not a spot of white anywhere, and his eyes looked larger than he remembered them, bright too, shining. He couldn't believe it. This explained his thoughts about the Great Rossini. After all he himself had always wanted to be called The Great Owen when the Staff came to him.

The Great Owen.

He laughed out loud, laughed so hard his belly ached. He was hungry, he was starving! Dammed be youth! Next it would be spots and uncontrollable erections!

He opened the window and smelled the air, freshly baked bread and cakes, local magdalenas probably. He hadn't had magdalenas for years. It was the Spanish version of muffins, he loved them.

As he walked toward the bakery he could feel the mid-morning sun hitting his pale skin, he couldn't remember the sun burning so much before.

"Pedro, Maria's teenage son, likeable young man," he projected before walking into the bakery.

Mrs. Martinez was serving Carlos, the garage attendant; Owen remembered watching them play in the plaza when they were no more than toddlers.

"Hola Pedro, how is your mother today?"

"She's fine Mrs. Martinez. I'll have two breads and a bag of Magdalena's."

"Tell her I asked after her won't you," said Mrs. Martinez handing him his bread and cakes in a bag. He noticed her breasts as she leaned over the counter and was unable to move his arm to take the bag. He blushed uncontrollably finding himself incapable of taking his eyes off the little bit of black laced brassiere showing just where Mrs. Martinez's breasts met.

The older woman smiled and leaned a little more, "come back at two," she said, "I always have a few partitas left over, no charge."

As he took the bag he felt her soft warm hand touch his, making the blood in his body explode. There was nothing wrong with sex. Owen practiced it every now and then, a great way to concentrate power

for any given target. But it had been centuries since he had his body invaded by uncontrollable hormones. Mrs. Martinez looked down at his crutch, a giggle escaping her lips and he realized he had to get out, fast.

“Two o’clock then,” he found himself answering and ran out of the shop.

“Forget me until two O’clock today. Then come to me at the Fortress Tower,” he projected while making his way back to the tower.

Inside the shop Mrs. Martinez felt this would be a hot summer. Maria’s boy had grown up to be a strapping fellow. She put the coins away, Carlos looked rather old these days, she thought, his mind must be going too, he had paid her too much for the bread. She went back inside to tell her husband to make half a dozen extra tartitas but couldn’t quite remember who had asked for them, one of the local boys had come to buy bread and asked for them, or maybe she had simply imagined it. The heat must be getting to her head, she thought as she walked back to the front of the shop.

To ordinary mortals the old tower was an abandoned attic occasionally visited by the fortress caretaker who tuned the clock, cleared the bird nests and generally kept the place clean. The caretaker hadn’t needed to go up there for years, but no one had noticed because the clock had run smoothly for decades.

It was dark up in the tower, Owen had left the window open before he left but it didn’t get rid of the smell of darkness and stale dust. No place to bring a lady, he thought and started cleaning up.

Three hours later Mrs. Martinez felt her blood begin to boil, told her husband she was going to drop off the tartitas at Maria’s house and ran out to meet her lover. Pedro was young enough to be her son, she had watched him play in the plaza as a young boy, but it didn’t matter much, no one would ever find out.

Two hours later Owen was on a bus to Madrid, a large smile plastered all over his face.

It was the year 2000, he had a teenage body built like an Adonis, had more money in the bank than most people alive and more power than anyone on earth. He thought about the fifty years he had spent in the village of Santorcaz without anyone noticing him getting younger, or wondering how he made a living, or having any thoughts about him at all as soon as he walked out of their sight and wished life was that easy in the rest of the world.

As he stepped out of the bus he noticed the air was cleaner than the last time he'd visited Madrid and the buildings were looking much better than he remembered them as well. Around him people spoke into small portable phones, women wore hardly any clothes and kids his body's age spoke a language which was completely alien to him, it made him nervous.

He had some catching up to do.

By that very evening he had acquired a portable computer, a notepad, mobile phone, new clothes, shoes and some designer sunglasses, he loved mortal technology. He loved mortals, always had and always would. He started getting an erection and thought of quills and cauldrons to make it go away. He would have to start aging pretty quickly or his youthful body would take him over completely, shopping like that was unnatural.

Women stared at him as he sat at a strange café that had replaced the quiet one he used to frequent all those years back. Young women, old women, beautiful women, half naked women, old women who were a fraction of his age. Women showing their shoulders and thighs. He put the laptop on his lap, and blushed against his will. Men stared at him too, this was getting worrying. The plan had been to get to around the age of fifty-five, that was a good biological age for a man, emotionally stable, mentally mature, and physically controllable.

A slight tremor shook the city, people carried on chatting into their mobiles and hurrying this way and that. The Keeper, as mages called them, had arrived. The feeling was powerful enough for him to notice, yet intangible. More like a fleeting aroma in the breeze.

“My God, what on earth have you done to yourself!” said an old woman who sat beside him and who was now laughing so hard her wrinkled face had gone completely red.

He looked around to see whom she was talking to.

“You,” she said poking him in the chest.

Startled at her impunity he scanned her aura, some skilled mages could pass themselves as mortals for a short while, but this one was just a mortal old woman, judging by the way she was behaving he concluded she was insane.

“Who are you who takes our Lord’s name in vain?”

The old woman stared at him and laughed louder than before, people were looking at them.

He gave her an invisible little push that would have thrown any mortal to the ground.

The old woman carried on laughing at him, not budging from her seat, he shuddered, he had been expecting the Keeper yet was unable to feel its presence next to him, it looked, well, so ordinary.

After calming down and sighing deeply, the old woman looked deep inside him, “don’t be surprised,” she said, “not many people can identify me the first time around, I guess you were expecting a man, hmm? Get me a cold lemonade and some of those nice Spanish tartitas.”

He blushed again and called the waiter, he knew he was in mortal danger but unexplainably he was more worried about the Keeper

watching him all the time, he found the thought disturbing, he wondered if she had been observing him a few hours earlier, the feeling was unprecedented. Still, insulting a Keeper was not something any sane person would do, unless they were tired of living forever.

He wondered if the test was simply the ability to survive a meeting with this strange being.

“Thousands apologies, Keeper, I didn’t realize... I mean if you will excuse my most thoughtless behavior, I ...” he blurted out when his tongue finally unfroze.

“Quiet boy. Aeofe should have taught you some manners before sending you out into the world.”

They sat there for an eternity.

Half an hour later she finished her last tartitas and cleaned her lips.

“I know that the Staff is very important to you Owen, I have been observing you for many years now.”

Owens eyes widened, his thoughts raced one against the other, a Keeper, a member of the most powerful race in the known universe, was sitting next to him and it was interested in his quest. Now, that was something which did interest him, maybe the test thing was not going to be a waste of time after all.

“I am honored...” he said before she shushed him again.

“As you well know, witches have powers different to those of elders.”

He knew that.

Owen had been raised by a witch. She had adopted him for a few years while his powers were still dormant. Once he awakened to the

power she no longer needed to protect him and sent him packing. In his lifespan the time spent with Aeoife, his adoptive mother, had been very short. But it was long enough for him to observe that witches, although small minded and lacking in ambition, had a certain something, a sort of wisdom, which he couldn't grasp.

"It's nature you see, witches are born creators, and elders are born manipulators. Many witches in this world today could take that Staff from your rival in a matter of seconds. Yet I have still to meet a witch who is interested in your little Council."

His mind raced to catch the implications of that statement. Witches were as powerful as the Staff Keeper, or more so, and had no interest in the Staff. A plan started forming in his mind. Maybe passing the silly test was not so silly. Maybe fate had intended for him to learn the ways of witches so he could realize his dream.

Not many immortals had ever seen a Keeper. Keepers usually disappeared into the Light and seldom showed themselves in any dimension. They had been known to appear every now and then on the ethereal or material world and partake in the lives of a mortal or immortal. Aeoife had told him he would be one of those people, she had made him promise that after meeting the Keeper and he passed the test, he would practice the Way of the Witch for a hundred years or more. Keepers' reasons were not known and not questioned. This particular appointment had been arranged over a thousand years earlier, and he could see now that it was more of an interview than an appointment. Elders didn't normally become witches. As far as Owen knew, no elder had ever become a witch. But if what the Keeper said was true then all he had to do to get the Staff was to pass the test and become a witch.

"Concentrate on the question at hand Owen."

He sat up and choked on his iced coffee.

“It is very hot at this time of year here in Madrid, I never much liked the heat,” she said and passed him a bag, “this is for the Thirteenth.” She added.

She took a fan out of her handbag and cooled herself down.

There was something soft inside the brown paper bag. Maybe it was a cloak or something of that nature. Who, what or when was the Thirteenth? He wondered.

“Mages evolved much faster when they were mortals, relatively faster that is. Did you know that Owen?”

“No, Ma’am.”

“I didn’t think you did,” she said and patted him on the head like one would a child. “You see, it is about going back to the Source. When we used to die we could go back to the Source for a while and rehabilitate our capacities, our knowingness and our energy. But since humans discovered how to keep their bodies alive indefinitely and called themselves witches or elders, progress has been much slower, much slower. You should have developed rehabilitation methods at the same time, a way to regain capacity, knowingness and energy while still in the material universe. As it stands, only one of you has worked it out and his solution is by no means a method I would recommend, it is more like turning back the clock. There are certain dynamics in his actions he did not take into account. What do you think is your biggest strength Owen?”

“I... well, my abilities as a mage I guess, my intelligence, my knowledge of mortals.”

They stared at the people walking past, a mother and her two teenage children, a group of youths, an old couple and three girls.

“Most commendable properties, but there is something about you which is much stronger, where your power lies, where your potential is the greatest.”

Owen looked at her in expectation, he knew he was about to be revealed a great secret, and the sense of being privileged was overwhelming him.

“I would like you to think about the things we have chatted about today,” she added, stood and put on her hat, “you should do something about those pimples, a facial mask made of mountain mud they tell me does wonders. Goodbye my child.”

And she left.

Owen stared at her walking away and vanishing among all the other ordinary looking people in the street. He touched the little lumps on his face. Pimples?

“Anything else señor?” Said the waiter looking down at him.

“A large vodka.”

“Sorry señor, I’m afraid we cannot serve alcohol to minors, could I interest you in a soda or milkshake?”

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