

QUEEN OF SOULMATES

SEAN MCMULLEN

Award winning author Sean McMullen has gained a major reputation for his scientifically accurate “hard” science fiction. But he is also well qualified to write fantasy: having studied several units of history alongside his physical science subjects at university, he is also a karate instructor and the winner of several martial arts tournaments. As a result, his magical worlds are rigorously worked out, and his characters have a strong, earthy realism about them. And he writes the action scenes from experience!

Sean was born in Victoria into a Scottish-French-Irish family, and now lives in Melbourne with his wife and daughter. He has a Masters degree from the University of Melbourne, and works as a computer systems analyst. His fiction has won the Ditmar award three times and the Aurealis Award, and his short fiction has appeared in such magazines as *Analog*, *Interzone*, *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*, and *Universe* overseas, and *Aurealis* and *Eidolon* in Australia. His novels include *Voices in the Light* (1994), *Mirrorsun Rising* (1995), *The Centurion’s Empire* (1998) and *Souls in the Great Machine* (1999). He is an expert in the history of Australian science fiction and has won four William Atheling Jr Awards for excellence in science fiction criticism, and co-authored *Strange Constellations: A History of Australian Science Fiction* (1999) with Russell Blackford and Van Ikin.

Here is the story of the young mage Velandar — and the devastating weapon Silverdeath, which operates according to the mathematical rules of... magic.

* * * *

Weapon: This artefact, also called the Dragonrings and Silverdeath, is known to have fallen from the sky during a war among the gods in the very distant past. When inactive it assumes the form of metal armour, and while in this form it was stolen from its heavily guarded shrine. Once the thieves learned the true potential of Weapon they were so terrified that they buried it under a massive rockslide in the Seawall Mountains. The Councilium of our Order has inspected the site and is satisfied that even ten thousand men could not dig it out in a decade. Thus Weapon may be considered to be lost forever, and so no longer a threat to our

world.

(Extract from the Annals of the Metrologian Order: 10th day of the 8th month, 3127)

* * * *

The walled city of Larmentel had withstood the army of Commander Ralzak for five months when his patience finally ran out. Larmentel was rich, beautiful and massive, with a high, crenellated outer wall circling the cisterns, market gardens and storehouses that supplied its citizens. The citadel wall protected the inner city, where temples, palaces and mansions of white stone blocks rose in terraces to look out over the surrounding plain to distant mountains in the northeast. Stone gargoyles poked tongues and bared buttocks at the enemy beyond the outer walls, and nobles sipped wine from glazed pottery goblets shaped to a likeness of the head of Warsovran, the self-styled Emperor of Torea who was Ralzak's master. Ralzak's siege engines and storm climbers had been thrown back from the outer walls in every attack, and those defeats had cost him dearly.

The kingdoms of the southwest had been biding their time to see whether Larmentel would fall to the invaders' onslaught, but now they were beginning to lose their fear of Warsovran and rally. Sitting on the thick Vidarian rug in his tent, Ralzak read the reports of his diplomats and spies while Weapon stood beside the open flap, gleaming with the sheen of quicksilver and seeing through blank eyes. The walls and terraces of Larmentel were plainly visible in the distance, blushing red with the sunrise.

Ralzak looked from the city to Weapon. Weapon had the shape of a man, and was wearing Warsovran's band-plate armour and sword over a black tunic. In the five weeks since he had become Weapon's master and assumed command over Warsovran's forces, Ralzak had been afraid to use Weapon. For three years Warsovran had devoted fifty thousand slaves and ten thousand men-at-arms to digging it from under a rockslide in the Seawall Mountains. Thus whatever it was, it had value — and perhaps power.

When discovered, Weapon had the form of common body armour, but when Warsovran had put it on it had immediately melted and flowed to become a skin of flexible metal that covered him. What remained of him was his shape alone. A hollow, ringing voice declared that its name was Weapon, and that it was ready to do Ralzak's bidding.

Ralzak was totally unprepared for this magical warrior, and feared to

use it at first. He merely announced that Warsovran was wearing a new type of armour, and everyone but Ralzak thought Warsovran to be alive and in charge within his fantastic skin of living metal. His famed judgement and acumen were gone, however, and the alliances that had been formed by the brilliant and charismatic man were rapidly weakening. Warsovran was now a figurehead, and he gave no commands. For the past five weeks Ralzak had been discovering that he was not his equal.

“I never asked to become the supreme commander,” Ralzak confided to Weapon. “I’m just a soldier. I know my place and it’s not here.”

“Agreed,” replied Weapon in a flat, metallic voice.

“Defeating a few of the homeland’s neighbours, expanding our borders to advantage, that was my forte. Conquer a continent? I know neither why nor how. What would you do?”

“I cannot advise. I am to be used. Nothing more.”

Ralzak had heard those words before. He considered carefully, looking back to Larmentel. The city had to fall, but he did not need its people or wealth, nor did he want the luxury of its mansions and towers for his own dwelling. In his own way he was a simple man, fond of life in the field with his troops and politically unambitious.

“Destroy my enemies,” said Ralzak, gazing over at Larmentel again.

His voice was muted, as if he was just muttering his thoughts out aloud. Weapon regarded him with the blank sheen of its face.

“The feat is at the limit of my powers,” Weapon explained in its flat yet ominous voice.

“So, you *can* do it,” replied Ralzak.

“Yes.”

Ralzak stood up and glared out through the tent flap at the distant walled city.

“Larmentel is the strongest city in all Torea. With Larmentel gone my other enemies are mere cyphers. How quickly could you break Larmentel?”

“In minutes.”

Ralzak turned and blinked, his lips parted slightly. Weapon remained impassive. The metallic sheen that enclosed the head of what had once been Ralzak's master had the outline of human form and Ralzak wondered if the man beneath was still aware of what was happening.

"So, ah, when can you strike?" asked Ralzak tentatively when the silence began to lengthen.

"Now," replied Weapon.

"No, no," said Ralzak, with a hurried wave of his hands. "I want my troops positioned, ready to take whatever advantage you can give them."

"Not necessary," Weapon assured him.

Ralzak considered this as he began pacing before the flap of his tent, favouring Larmentel with a scowl at every pass. At last he beckoned to Weapon and they went outside together.

"I still want to be prepared in my own way before you strike," said Ralzak.

"I am yours to command," replied Weapon.

Ralzak's preparations took two hours. Men on active, relief and sleep shifts were all ordered to strap on armour and stand ready. The infantry were deployed at five strategic points to prevent the escape of anyone from the city, while elite lancers were stationed to ride for any breaches that the enemy might make. Storm climbers with ladders and water shields stood in closest of all. It was 8am before Ralzak was ready, wearing his own armour and standing with his sword drawn.

"Do your worst," he commanded, pointing with his sword to the undefeated walls of Larmentel.

Weapon's skin began to shimmer, then crawl as if tiny silver ants were swarming over it. Its head expanded, transforming into a shimmering silver globe. Ralzak noticed that its hands had become white, and even as he watched white skin was exposed at the neck. Warsovran's jaw became visible, and by now the globe had expanded into a sphere the size of a tent. Commander Ralzak shrank back as the mouth, nose and eyes of the emperor were exposed. The globe became bigger than a house, and it grew translucent. As it detached itself from its host Warsovran's body

toppled to the ground and lay still. Ever growing and fading, the globe began to drift upwards and over towards the besieged city. Soon it was so insubstantial that it was no longer visible at all. The sky was blue over Larmentel, and all seemed serene and calm. Ralzak began to wonder if Weapon might be playing some humiliating hoax on him.

Without warning a huge rent appeared in the sky above Larmentel, spilling a column of yellow and crimson flames. Fire burst down through roofs and poured out through windows, fire flung heavy tiles about like leaves and turned great wooden beams to ash within moments. Breakers of flame cascaded outwards, sweeping along the streets and out to the citadel walls where they burst like waves on a shore then rose high into the sky. To the amazement of the besieging army the circular wall of fire then curled back upon itself to converge above the very centre of Larmentel. All that was left was smoke. The heat had been so intense that it scalded the faces of the nearest besiegers. Larmentel's heart was burned out. The torus of fire, a third of a mile across, had spilled out from the centre, its edges rolling upwards, then backwards. It was as if the flood of burning had been a spring that had reached its limit.

“Brilliant!” shouted Ralzak. “The greatest of all strongholds, annihilated!”

Suddenly he realised that Warsovrán was standing beside him, pale and thin, but again himself. “You did well,” the leader who had brought down a dozen kings said hoarsely to Ralzak.

Riders were despatched with a demand that the outer gates of Larmentel be opened to Warsovrán's armies, but the surviving defenders were already streaming out of the city. Larmentel had been stabbed through the heart, and citizens were bleeding out through its walls.

“I must return to the capital,” said Warsovrán, beckoning for a horse. “You will remain here.”

“But, but Larmentel has fallen, Emperor, the triumph —”

“Is yours, Commander Ralzak. Stay here, make an example of Larmentel for all others to know and fear. You are Weapon's commander, after all.”

“But where is Weapon?”

Warsovrán pointed above Larmentel.

“I do not understand,” said Ralzak.

“I shall write out a series of incantations for you to make just before the eighth hour on certain days over the months to come. They will invoke Weapon in ever more powerful and frequent fire-circles. You must invoke it again and again until its energies are exhausted, and then it will fall from the sky above the city. When that happens, find it and bring it to me.”

Within the hour Warsovran was riding south with a strong escort. Ralzak rode in triumph through the main gates of the outer wall at the head of a squad of heavy lancers. Except for the inner citadel, the city was intact and brimming with wealth and potential slaves. Closer to the centre, he looked down a long, straight avenue to the citadel area. The mighty ironbound gates of oak had been blown out and burned to ash, and beyond was a glowing ruin. He rode as close as he could urge his horse. Nearby houses were ablaze from radiant heat, and the charred corpses of people who had not even been touched by the torus of flames littered the streets.

Upon leaving the city, Ralzak declared his eyes closed for three days, then gave his men the freedom of what was left of Larmentel.

* * * *

70 days:

At the western port city of Gironal the lateen-rigged demi-schooner *Arrowflight* crept under full sail past the sleek galleys of Warsovran’s navy. The young boatmaster, Feran, stood at the steering oar, enduring jeers from idle marines aboard the galleys while his crew prepared to trim the sails once they passed the breakwater and reached clear winds. It was only when they were well out to sea that a man emerged from below and walked haltingly over the rolling deck to where Feran stood with a bearded man in his mid-twenties.

“You’re safe for now,” said Feran. “This is Laron, our medician and navigator.”

“What shall we call you, Learned Brother?” asked Laron.

“Lenticar is my real name,” he replied, blinking with surprise at Laron’s perception. He gazed at the receding port with relief. “I’ve had so many assumed names that I sometimes wonder who I might really be. Let me be Lenticar.”

Lenticar was lean, tanned and stooped from years of hard work in the open air and sun. He had the fearful, furtive gaze of one who had been the slave of brutal masters for too long, and he wrung his hands and bowed involuntarily each time that he spoke.

“How long to Zantrias?” he asked, holding onto the wooden rail as the waves rocked them.

“Fifty days would be a fair estimate,” replied Laron. “We need to collect and discharge cargo to maintain the guise of a coastal trader.”

“Fifty days may be too late.”

“Fifty days is all I can offer. Is it about that fire-circle weapon that Warsovran used to break Larmentel?”

“It may be.”

“Did you know he used it again?”

Lenticar’s eyes widened. “No. Which city was burned?”

“It was only a test over Larmentel’s ruins, and apparently no lives were lost. In a circle of over a half-mile across there was not a scrap of wood, cloth or flesh left.”

“So it was bigger than the first time?”

“Oh yes.”

A steady wind filled the sails and drove them through the waves. The *Arrowflight* was too small to be a warship yet fast enough to escape privateers, and so was well suited to move freely between ports of all alliances. Feran had been at sea since the age of eight, and at eighteen was the youngest boatmaster working the Torean coast.

* * * *

120 days:

In the early afternoon the *Arrowflight* tied up at one of the long stone piers in the port of Zantrias. A large temple was visible in the distance, perched on a verdant hill three miles back from the coast. Feran escorted

his passenger through the port to the safety of temple complex, and at the hospitalier's portico they were received by the Elder's assistant. Here Feran was told that his work had been well done, but that he was no longer needed. As he made his way back through the empty Gardens of Contemplation someone hailed him.

"Learned Terikel, how delightful to see you again," he said as a blue-robed priestess approached, attended by a student girl in green. "And Deaconess Velandar, I see that you are still... a deaconess."

"And you are now a boatmaster," Velandar observed by the red shoulder tassels of his deck jacket. "Congratulations."

"Will you be in port for long?" Terikel asked.

"About eight days."

"Velandar and I need more practice with spoken Diomedan. Are you available?"

"For Terikel and Velandar, always. Why not walk back with me now, speaking Diomedan?"

Once through the gates and past the guards Feran softly asked "Have you any more news of Warsovran's weapon?"

"There have been two more tests," Velandar replied. "One of them was a week ago, and burned a circle two and one third miles in diameter. The King of Zarlou was invited to see it happen. The other was sixteen days ago and smaller."

"What have you learned?" asked Terikel.

"The first fire-circle was a third of a mile in diameter. I learned that from slaves that the *Arrowflight* carried on commission. As for the second test, we only know that it took place from tavern talk by Warsovran's troops. Maybe he was not sure why it worked the first time, and did not want witnesses if it failed."

All the way to the docks they discussed the figures that encompassed destruction combining the swiftness of lightning with the power of a volcano.

"What can be done to fight it?" asked Velandar as they approached

the *Arrowflight* along the pier.

“Just what we are doing: learn its workings,” Feran replied. “How many days until you are ordained, Velander?”

Velander shrugged. “Eight — but five of those are vigil. I have to fast, drinking only rainwater while I endure ordeals and interrogations alone.”

“Hah, it’s brave of you. I always have a crew to suffer with me through my ordeals.”

“Battles with privateers?”

“Hangovers.”

Terikel stifled a giggle, and Velander shook her head.

“I shall not be completely alone,” Velander added confidently. “One’s soulmate customarily endures a fast nearby to give comfort. Learned Terikel will be fasting in the Chapel of Vigils as I fast in the temple’s outer sanctum.”

“And then you become a priestess with twelve years of celibacy before you,” sighed Feran. “Who could endure such a wait as that?”

“Not you, boatmaster?” asked Terikel.

“Not I, learned, celibate and holy ladies.”

They reached the *Arrowflight*, but priestess and deaconess turned back. The schooner was being unloaded, and the air was full of the curses of wharfers.

“So, which do you fancy?” asked the deckswain as Feran stood watching the pair walk back down the pier.

“Me?” asked Feran innocently.

“You,” chorused the deckswain and Laron.

“Velander’s just a serious puppy, but Terikel! Ah, she’s like a queen.”

“The little one adores the priestess, while that curly-haired, brunette priestess is as protective as a mother cat,” observed the deckswain. “I’d

not like to come between them.”

“I’ve been asking around, as like I always do,” said Laron. “Just three years ago Velander was in deep trouble. She had killed several people — apparently by accident but I know no details. Terikel’s sister brought Velander here and got her into the temple academy. When Terikel’s sister was murdered by Warsovran, Terikel made Velander into a sort of foster sister. She became her friend and mentor, and even found sponsors for the girl’s years of study. As far as Velander is concerned, Terikel is her friend, sister, saint, and queen. She would die for Terikel, and probably kill for her too.”

* * * *

That same day the Councilium of the Metrologan Order met the agent that Feran had delivered. The man was by now wearing the earth-brown robe of a lay scholar.

“This is Lenticar,” said the priestess who was Councilium Elder. “He was captured early in Warsovran’s wars of expansion, and worked in slavery for three years. Lenticar, tell the Councilium what you told me.”

Lenticar bowed to the Elder, then to each Councilium member in turn.

“The, ah, essence is that I spent three years in an army of slaves, digging out a collapsed ravine in the Seawall Mountains. One day, late last year, there was a great commotion down at the base of the diggings. We had reached the rocks of the old riverbed, you see. The area was sealed, and the six hundred slaves who had been working down there were put to the sword. The other fifty thousand of us were marched out at once to build a fortress on Vidaria’s border. I escaped as we travelled, as the guard was by then a lot less strict.”

“Did you see what was discovered?” asked a priestess.

“No, but I heard rumours that even the guards of the slaves closest to whatever it was were killed.”

The Elder now stood up again.

“We have learned that within a few days of the discovery Warsovran arrived with Commander Ralzak. Just over a month later that fire-circle thing burned Larmentel’s heart out. Now Warsovran is testing it on what is left of the city, and has learned how to refresh it more quickly. Word arrived by an

auton bird this morning that a fifth test scoured the life from an area four and two third miles across. That is enough to destroy any army, and is probably adequate to conquer this continent.”

There was a hurried, alarmed murmur among the members of the Councilium.

“Then why does he just detonate it over Larmentel, over and over?” the Examiner asked.

“Larmentel is a shell, and now worthless. He wants the other cities intact, so he seeks to frighten his enemies with these obscene demonstrations. Sisters, Warsovran has sworn to wipe out our order. For some of us it is time to flee, and time for the rest of us to fade.”

* * * *

122 days:

Velander sat on a stone bollard and looked down on the deck of the moored *Arrowflight*, slowly combing and re-pinning her brown, wavy hair back from her face with little ornamental combs. Terikel was nearby, bartering for something at a pier stall.

“Deaconess, should you not be keeping a vigil for your ordination?” asked Feran in Diomedan as he emerged through the deck hatch.

“As of noon, yes.”

He strode up the gangplank and stood beside her, smelling of sweat, sacking, tar and resins.

“Have you had a good breakfast?” asked Laron. “There’s five days of fasting ahead.”

“I’ve gone hungry for longer,” she replied enigmatically.

“In your travels?” asked Feran.

“To ... develop self-discipline, to practice for this day. How does my Diomedan sound? Could I pass for a native speaker?”

“You sound like a foreign scholar, but speak confidently. Why do you ask?”

“Oh, just curiosity. Did you know there has been a fifth fire-circle? It was four and two third miles across.”

“That’s not common knowledge,” said Feran slowly, avoiding her eyes.

“So it’s true?”

“How did you know about it?”

“I lived three years among common folk, Boatmaster Feran. They have ways of finding out, just as priestesses, nobles and kings do.”

“And now you ask about your spoken Diomedan. Could it be that you might go there soon? This morning I noticed crates from the temple being loaded onto a deep water trader bound for Diomeda.”

“I know nothing about that,” replied Velandar uncomfortably.

“Is it because of the fire-circles?”

“It was two years ago that Learned Terikel suggested we learn spoken Diomedan from you. She said I studied too much of mathematics, and that I needed the balance of an exotic language. There were no fire-circles then.”

Feran conceded the point. “Well, it’s meant two years of charming company whenever we dock here.”

“I cannot make out what energies drive the things,” Velandar said hurriedly, anxious to avoid this subject as well.

“I’m puzzled too,” said Laron. “Magic is too limited in terms of raw power, while hellbreath oil must be pumped out of a hose and does not burn hot enough to melt stone.”

Druskarl, a senior eunuch of the temple guard, strode down the pier from where the deepwater trader was being loaded. He was wearing the tunic of a pilgrim instead of his usual armour.

“Deaconess, your vigil starting today,” Druskarl said in a sharp, expressionless voice.

"I am under the escort of the Learned Terikel," replied Velander in a parody of Druskarl's hard, flat voice, gesturing to where Terikel was holding up a pilgrim's pack and arguing with the stallholder.

"Deaconess! Ordination vigil starting noon," Druskarl insisted.

"Nobody knows that better than me, Druskarl," she replied firmly.

"I note that the temple is shipping books to Acrema with you as escort," Feran interjected.

"Druskarl noting *Arrowflight's* masts hinge between braces," he countered. "Can lie flat."

"I smelled the scent of old books as your crates were carried past to the trader," Feran pointed out. "I am no stranger to libraries."

"Druskarl no stranger to ships, Boatmaster. *Arrowflight* riding high in water."

"The *Arrowflight* is nearly empty, and our bilges are being pumped and scrubbed," Feran explained with a trace of condescension in his tone. When speaking with the Druskarl, that was a mistake. "So, is your order moving to Acrema before Warsovran turns his fire-circle on Zantrias?"

"What are strange hatch covers below load waterline?" Druskarl asked instead.

"They are for looking through," Feran answered smoothly.

Druskarl frowned, neither believing him nor seeing the joke. "Below waterline?"

"Yes, in an hour there will be more cargo aboard and they will definitely be below the waterline."

"Druskarl say masts of *Arrowflight* easy to lowering. *Arrowflight* easy to sink, also. *Arrowflight* pretend sinking in shallow water when chased. Low tide coming, hatches closed by divers, crew ship pumping out, then ship floating."

"But we are not fishes. We would drown."

“Gigboat bolted upside down to frame on deck.”

“It would fill with rain otherwise.”

“Gigboat holding air if *Arrowflight* sinking.”

Feran’s eyes narrowed.

“Some people have minds so sharp they could slice precious parts of themselves off,” he said sullenly to the tall, powerfully built eunuch.

“They like to people having sharp noses, yes?” asked Druskarl.

“Well parried, Sir,” said Laron, standing back with his arms folded.

“Good Sirs, we need to bid you both farewell,” Terikel cut in as she returned with the canvas pack. “Velandar has to prepare for her ordination in five days.”

Terikel cross-grasped hands with both men in turn, but only Feran felt a scrap of paper slipped between his fingers.

* * * *

At noon Velandar was formally summoned to the outer sanctum of the temple by the Elder, and began five days of fasting to prepare for a vigil that would see her emerge as a priestess. In the *Arrowflight’s* master cabin Feran examined the scrap of paper that Velandar had given to him.

It was a scroll of tissue, the type used on messenger birds. There was a preamble that was not easy to follow, but it eventually became clear that the authors were two priests of the Metrologian’s brother order. They were disguised as peasants who were staying not far from Larmentel, and helping to strip everything of value from the ruins. They had witnessed Warsovran’s weapon being used for the fifth time. There were second-hand descriptions of the first four tests and quite accurate figures on the destruction’s extent. Each test had been at the 8th hour of the morning, and every time a perfect circle had been blasted and scoured by the most intense fire imaginable. Many stones had partly melted or crumbled, and the fire had penetrated to the deepest cellars and tunnels. Not a scrap of wood, food or even charred bone had survived, but they noted that the bodies of fish in a deep ornamental pond, while boiled alive, were at least whole and uncharred.

“It is our feeling that Warsovran’s Commander Ralzak has a weapon of such potency that no city or army could stand against him,” the report’s minuscule writing concluded. “Total annihilation in a hopeless cause is far less constructive than surrender in the knowledge that Warsovran’s day will pass. Our order can continue to work in secret until more enlightened times return and —”

There was a short pen-slash, as if the writer had had his arm jolted, then the fine writing commenced again.

“We have just seen a fifth wall of fire over the city, one reaching right to the outer walls. It burst from the sky at the eighth hour in the form of a torus about a half-mile above the centre of Larmentel, spilling fire down the centre to blast all before it before rolling back into the sky and down its own centre again. It covered the radius from the centre to the outer walls in the time one needs to draw a deep breath, and made a sound like a continuous peal of thunder. The degree of annihilation was the same as before on the ground. Make what you will of this ghastly nightmare, we shall release a bird with this message and send more news as we are able.

Learned Deremi and Learned Trolandic”

There were figures and dates for the five detonations of Warsovran’s weapon going back 120 days. Feran was intrigued by the line about the fish in the pond, because that meant the weapon had limits. Appended in different handwriting was the name of a dockside tavern, *Stormhaven*, and the word *dusk*.

Feran gazed through the cabin window’s fretwork at the port. Were the weapon to be used on Zantrias, the *Arrowflight* could be sunk with its crew, and with the air in the gigboat they could last as long as six hours. The only drawback was that the schooner needed several minutes to sink, and the weapon could raze the port in as many seconds.

* * * *

127 days:

Five days of drinking water alone and eating nothing had left Velander unsteady and weak, but feeling strangely self-controlled. At noon she was led into the inner sanctum of the temple by the Examiner, and they meditated together for two hours. The Councilium then entered and

subjected her to an intense, aggressive barrage of questions about knowledge theory, verification, and her own personal loyalties. She was run ragged, but did not break. Presently she was left alone to meditate again while the Councilium discussed her candidature.

From the distant harbour Velander could hear the bell at the end of the stone pier ringing the change of ride, followed by code for shipping movements. *Steady Prosper*, *White Wave* and *Bright Leaper* had arrived, but there were no departures. *Arrowflight* was cleared to sail the following afternoon. So, Feran was still there. Perhaps Terikel and she could go down to the docks and wave him off as priestess and priestess after one last hour of Diomedan practice. She felt so weak, though, and three miles was a long, long way.

Late in the afternoon Velander was led out to the plaza before the temple, where brushwood had been piled up in a blackstone grate shaped like a huge, clawed hand. All priestesses and students in the complex had been assembled on the stone steps to watch Velander's last ordeal begin. Everyone except Terikel, of course, who was in the little Chapel of Vigils further down the hill. As the sun touched the horizon, trumpets sounded from the steps of the temple's outer sanctum, and Velander took a firebrand from the temple's eternal flame and plunged it into the brushwood. The blaze symbolised the light of knowledge being ignited against the onset of darkness, and the brushwood fuel was a reminder that knowledge must be tended closely or it would quickly burn out. If she could endure through the night to stoke the flames until dawn, she would automatically become Learned Velander as the sun cleared the horizon. The watchers filed down from the steps, leaving her alone to her task.

Staying awake seemed such a simple thing until one had to do it after five practically sleepless nights and no food at all for as long. The supply of brushwood fuel was cunningly measured so that too much piled on at once would burn out before morning. One had to actually be awake, not to ... nod! Velander caught herself falling forward. The fire was still burning: she had drifted away for only moments. She tossed a bundle onto the flames and sat back, again drowsy with the smoke.

Someone to talk to was all she needed, but Terikel was keeping her own vigil after no more sleep or food than Velander had been allowed. Terikel was suffering too, and her soul-mate's ordeal could not be wasted. Velander cast about in her mind for a problem, and thought of Warsovran's fire-circles.

The tests had begun 64 days apart, halved to 32, then 16, then 8.

There should have been a test on the second morning of her fast, then one on the fourth, and one on the fifth. Somewhere in the temple complex a bell rang the 8th hour past noon. Another test would happen at this very moment, then at 2am the next day, 5am, 6.30am, 7.15am, 7.42am ... and soon after that the tests would converge on some time around the ninth minute past 8am. That was it! Nine minutes after 8 am tomorrow Warsovran would become able to use the fire-circle at will ... or perhaps it moved back to lengthening intervals after the convergence. Perhaps he had to make his conquests very quickly, or the interval would soon be 64 days again.

She thought to the years ahead. To be ordained in the Metrologian Order one had to do six years of study, then vow to follow ordination with six of travel, six of research and six of teaching. It was not a celibate order, but marriage was not permitted until the teaching years began. She put another bundle of brushwood on the pyre, then circled it slowly to keep herself alert. Terikel had once endured this ordeal, after all, and now she was fasting again for Velandar. Don't fail Terikel, Velandar told herself as she forced her legs to walk.

* * * *

Velandar was down to two bundles of brushwood when a brilliant bead of light appeared on the eastern horizon. Her fire was still burning brightly, and in tribute the temple bells began to ring out. Priestesses and students streamed out of the darkness and Velandar was swept away to warm broth, a bath, a suit of blue robes, then a lengthy audience with the Elder. All through the celebrations and ceremonies Velandar thought of Terikel, who had endured the same privations yet got nothing more than the satisfaction of supporting her soulmate. A canvas pack with the symbolic contents of dried fruit, water, a writing kit, coins and books was presented to Velandar. The Elder signed her ordination scroll, blotted the ink, then rubbed it with beeswax to waterproof it.

"Twice the usual number of subjects in half the time," the venerable priestess said approvingly. "But what is your favourite?"

"Mathematics," Velandar replied dreamily. "Oh and languages! Languages, definitely."

She was taken back out to the seamstress to have the straps of her pack fitted properly. Sleep washed over her like waves over a sandbar, and she chattered to stay awake.

"What has been happening for the past five days?" Velandar asked.

“In the temple, port or world?” asked the seamstress.

“Start with the world and work back.”

“The King of Zarlion has invited Warsovran to send an ambassador. That fire-circle thing of Warsovran’s has him as frightened as our own monarch, you know. / think it’s all a trick. Notice how it is always set off in the same place? I think it’s just slaves spreading hellbreath oil. The eunuch guard Druskarl sailed on the evening of the first day of your vigil, and who do you think was waving and weeping on the pier? Why it was Learned —”

“Has Warsovran’s weapon been tested again?” Velandar interrupted, shaking her head to clear it.

“Twice more, as I’ve heard.”

“Twice more? In five days?” Velandar asked slowly, pleased that her convergence theory was holding true.

“I’m sure of it. I have my sources.”

“Are they reliable?”

“Oh ... yes and no. If a Councilium meeting is called within a quarter hour of an auton bird arriving, I know that another fire-circle has burned. Pah, the way that Warsovran has been squandering hellbreath oil! Just what is he trying to prove? He’s just like a little boy playing with fire, and one day the fire will get out of control.”

Suddenly a jumble of figures began to cascade into order in Velandar’s mind. The Elder’s words returned, followed by those of the seamstress: *twice the subjects in half the time, one day the fire will get out of control.*

Velandar knew only four fire-circle diameters and even those were approximate, but a trend was there: a third of a mile, no figure, just over a mile, two and a third, four and two thirds ... and what of the latest tests? Six should have been nearly ten miles across, and seven over eighteen.

A deep, cold chasm suddenly opened up within Velandar. Twice the diameter in half the time! The fire-circle was doubling with each detonation, but in half the time. It was not being tested, it was out of control! Velandar calculated frantically, oblivious of the seamstress chatting to her as she

adjusted her pack's straps. Detonation 8, just under 38 miles after one day. Detonation 9, 75 miles after half a day. The 10th would have been at 2am and 150 miles across, followed by one at 5am a staggering 300 miles from rim to rim. It was nearly 7am now, so about half an hour ago a fire-circle must have burned the life from a circle 600 miles wide. The next would stop a mere ten miles short of Zantrias in perhaps twenty minutes, and after that...

Screaming the single word "Run!" Velander tore away from the seamstresses and ran from the fitting room. She fled down the stone corridor beyond, swaying and stumbling from five days of fasting. It was three miles to the beach, but Terikel had to be warned first. She ran across the plaza of the temple complex where her pyre was now ashes and into the dormitory cells. Terikel's cell was empty, with the bed made up. The refectory! Velander ran down the stone steps and across a courtyard where stone dragons breathed water into a lampfish pool, then burst into the refectory. The first shift of priestesses and novices was eating breakfast in silence while a novice stood at a lectern, reading from an ancient text.

"Terikel!" Velander shouted. Silence and stares answered her. "Run for the beach, the fire is coming!" Velander added by way of explanation, then whirled and dashed out.

There was a last chance: that Terikel had fallen asleep in the Chapel of Vigils when the temple bells had rung out to announce Velander's ordination. The chapel was not far from the main gates to the temple complex, just beyond the Gardens of Contemplation. Velander screamed Terikel's name as she ran, shattering the serenity of those who were there to meditate, then stumbled up the steps to the chapel. The glowing stub of a coil of incense was tagged with Velander's name, but the benches beyond were empty.

Velander hurried past each row, in case her soulmate was asleep on the floor. Outside, the thief-bell was being rung, and people were calling her name.

Soon they would catch her, they would think she was having a fit. Explanations would take time, perhaps hours, but only minutes remained. It was three miles to the docks. The *Arrowflight* could be sunk but still hold air to breathe. It would take long enough to convince Feran of the danger, let alone the Elder. Velander took the stub of incense and extinguished the glowing point in the skin of her left wrist.

"By this mark I'll carry your memory forever," sobbed Velander.

“Forgive me for deserting you, Terikel, but I tried my best.”

The gates of the temple complex were not yet locked as Velander neared them, but the two guards were alert with their glaves at the ready. Velander stopped and panted a tangle of life force between her hands, then flung it. One guard fell with glowing amber coils wrapped about his ankles, but the other tried to slam the gates shut. Already weak from the first casting, Velander breathed more life force between her hands and flung it, binding the second guard to the heavy oak slats of one side of the gate. The effort of casting so much life force cost Velander greatly in strength, and she shambled through the gate, barely able to hold herself upright. The pursuing priestesses would catch her in moments unless ... the casting binding the first guard suddenly collapsed and streaked to Velander, swirling around her head and quickly dissolving into her skin. As the second casting returned to her, she was able to break into a headlong, unsteady run again.

The Metrologian Order wore light sandals and loose trousers under an outer robe, well suited to running. Velander dodged past a wood cart delivering fuel for a baker’s oven then ran through the market square where stall keepers bartered with customers. So much life, but they would all be dead within an hour, she thought. The sky was clear, and there was no wind. It was a perfect, flawless morning. Children were playing knucklebones on the cobbles, and two town constables were making a leisurely patrol. Should warn, must warn, can’t warn, Velander thought. She could snatch up one child and try to save it, but the constables would soon catch her and explanations would take hours. Pain lanced at Velander’s side and her lungs burned, but still she ran. She cleared the square. Two miles to go, perhaps less.

She ran on more slowly, but still at her body’s limit. Down was safe, down was to the sea. She looked up as the port watchhouse loomed, then stumbled over a gutter and sprawled. Dragging her self up, she ran again. One mile to go now. Knives plunged into her left knee at every step. The streetside stalls became more nautical in their wares: netting, floats, cordage, sails, tar, ship’s biscuit. Suddenly the buildings vanished, and Velander was facing clear sky and masts. The docks! Her legs betrayed her, she fell, crawled a few feet, then got up. She stumbled a few paces further, fell again, then crawled for the pier.

“Learned Sister, are you all right?” asked a docker in alarm.

“Leave me alone, pilgrimage,” she wheezed.

With an ever growing crowd behind her Velandar forced her aching legs to support her again and shuffled along the flagstones of the stone pier. Five ships along, unless they had sailed already. Five ships to — the *Arrowflight*. She literally fell down the gangplank and flopped to the deck, gasping for Feran. Laron's face filled the blue sky that she lay staring into.

"Velandar?" he asked.

"Release hatches," she panted. "Sink. Tell Feran."

"Shush!" he said in alarm, dropping to his knees and bending over her. "There are people on the docks."

"Soon — all dead. Fire-circle, coming."

"Get the boatmaster," Laron said to the deckswain, suddenly comprehending.

"But Sir —"

"I know!" shouted Laron. "Just get him. Velandar, the weapon is at Larmentel. How —"

"Out of control. Reach here, only minutes."

Feran arrived, stripped for sleeping and wearing only sailcloth trousers. Laron hastily related what Velandar had said. Feran thought for a moment, looked to the crowd gazing down from the stone pier, looked to the upturned gigboat bolted to its frame, then beckoned to the deckswain.

"She knows something," he said softly. "Cast off, use the sweep oars to take us near the deep mooring buoys." He walked across to the carpenter next. "Go below, and at my order release the sink hatches," he said quietly.

The man goggled at him, then gestured to the crowd on the pier. "But Sir, we're within sight of at least five hundred people. They'll know our secret."

The schooner began to move as the crewmen pushed against the stone pier with their sweep oars.

"Soon it won't matter —"

Directly to the north a curtain of flames reaching miles high burst over the Blackstone Hills, then stopped as if it was some god's guard dog at the end of its chain. The flames towered above the little port, boiling high into the air before coiling back upon themselves. Continuous thunder rolled over the port, and heat seared the faces of everyone watching like the blast of an open oven. Then the fire vanished back into a cauldron of smoke that followed in the wake of the huge, blazing torus that had barely spared the port.

Some people began to leap into the water at once, while others rushed for the ships that were still tied up along the pier. Fights broke out with the crews as they tried to cast off, desperate to escape. Feran glanced back at what Velandar had spared them, then rushed to where she was trying to sit up.

"How long?" he demanded.

"Less than a half hour, more than twenty minutes," she replied, staring to the north where the sky was a wall of brownish-white smoke. "Why don't you sink the boat?"

"We need to reach deeper water."

The masts and rigging took many precious minutes to bring down and secure. Several ships and boats managed to get under way in the meantime, and one medium sized galley-ram actually cleared the harbour. With the hatch chocks knocked out the *Arrowflight* began to sink quickly and Feran ordered his crewmen under the gigboat. After another minute the *Arrowflight* gave a loud gurgle, then sank on an even keel to thump softly into the sand below. A moment later the water around them blazed a whitish green, brightening until they had to shut their eyes, then a deep, shuddering thunderclap resonated through the water and their bodies. There was a terrible hissing, with a rushing sound as if a huge breath was being drawn by the world itself. Someone near Velandar began to pray. Others joined in, not all in the same tongue. As suddenly as it began the light faded and the rumbling became a declining hiss. The water was distinctly warmer around them.

"That wasn't so bad," came the deckswain's voice. "Any number of folk might have survived by diving off the pier."

"Talk sense," panted Feran. "We're at least fifteen feet deep here, yet feel the heat. The air above will be as hot as a smithy's forge for hours."

“You’d char from the lungs outwards by breathing it,” added Laron.

Feran freed a sweep oar and managed to push it up vertically. The wood was charred at the end when he pulled it back down. Yielding at last to the torments that her body had endured, Velandar passed out.

* * * *

Hundreds of miles out to sea Warsovran was bailed up with his officers on the quarterdeck of a large caravel-built merchant ship. The crew was in a state of blind terror after seeing an immense wall of fire, water and steam surge out of the east to tower over them, then collapse.

“You can’t make us sail into that!” shouted the bosun, pointing to the roiling mass of fog and ragged waves that now lay not a mile to the east. “What if that thing comes back?”

“Then we’re dead anyway,” Warsovran said in a clear, sharp voice that was firm with authority. “The firecircle that follows is always twice as big.” He lowered his sword and let the point rest on the deck. “What you have just seen is a god’s weapon turned loose by a fool. Now it is spent, quenched by the sea, and I *must* return to Larmentel and get it back.”

“Meaning no disrespect, Emperor Warsovran,” said a midshipman, “but if you think we’re goin’ near what caused *that* you can take a jump and swim.”

“The lad’s right,” agreed the bosun. “We’re six hundred miles out to sea and yet it was grand fearsome. What’s Torea look like after that’s been over it? And what land are you planning to burn next?”

“I am a ruler, I have no interest in annihilation. Until my idiot commander unleashed that infernal weapon from the gods I was uniting Torea’s kingdoms under a single empire and bringing them order and discipline.” He jabbed his finger to the east. “*That* was an accident. Now the weapon lies spent at the centre of Larmentel for *any* scavenger to pick up. Would you rather it fall into the hands of yet another fool, or be safe in the hands of someone who can control it? You *must* help me! I *do not need* to use the fire-circle weapon, and I want to make sure that it is *never* used again.”

They began to argue over his words, which did indeed make sense — provided that one could trust him. Warsovran was adept at swaying

crowds, especially when playing them for his life. He had got them wavering over a difficult dilemma, and now it was time to offer an irresistible reward.

“You need only take me to the port of Terrescol, where I shall take the horses and supplies we carry and ride on to Larmentel. While I am away searching for the weapon, you can amuse yourselves by digging for melted gold in the ruins of the merchant halls, temples, and even the palace.”

There was a highly excited mutter from the crewmen this time, and a great number of fingers pointed east amid the gesticulation.

“Wood burns, paper burns, and even people can be turned to ash, but gold merely melts. If you get there first you may well dig out a half ton of gold before I return from Larmentel. We can sail to Acrema, buy a fleet of ships, then sail back and dig out gold from all the other port cities. Imagine: a ton of gold for every man on the deck.”

As he paused for breath the crew gave him three cheers and rushed to raise the sea anchors and unfurl the sails. Warsovran remained on the quarterdeck, glancing to the sun and fearfully estimating when the fire might return to sweep over them if he was wrong. He knew that a fire-circle would be quenched if its entire circumference or more than half its area was over water. According to the finest maps available to him, the latest fire-circle should have been the last ... but mapmaking was by no means an exact science.

* * * *

When Velandar revived again she was being held up by Laron, and everyone under the boat was silent as they shared the bubble of air. They waited. The water remained warm, but did not get any worse. When a second oar was held up it came down undamaged. Next a seaman swam clear of the upturned and submerged gigboat and held his hand just clear of the surface. He swam back to report it had been like plunging his fingers into boiling water.

The air under the boat became increasingly humid and foul. Another hour passed. They kept very still, not even praying now. The tide was on the way out, and when they could hear waves lapping more distinctly another crewman swam up to the surface. He returned and said that the air was hot but breathable. Others swam out to release the four heavy anchor stones, and the schooner slowly rose to the surface.

A blustery, hot wind was whipping the sea into a choppy confusion as

Velander emerged from under the gigboat and waded through knee deep water to the rail where Feran, Laron and the deckswain stood. Behind them crewmen were setting up a valve-plunge pump while others dove to re-chock the sink hatches. Parts of the port glowed like the embers of a campfire through a veil of steam and smoke.

“Is the whole of the world like that?” asked the deckswain.

“Hopefully not,” Feran ventured.

“Over water the fire-circle may cool and disperse,” suggested Laron.

“But how do you know?”

“I don’t.”

Velander turned to Feran to ask a question, but noticed that a woman had come up beside him. She was wrapped in a blanket, with dripping, disheveled hair. Curly brunette hair. A harlot from the docks, she assumed, then did a double-take so abruptly that the bones of her neck clicked. Her mistake had been natural. She had never before seen Terikel without her blue priestly robes. Feran ducked his head sheepishly, then hurried off after Laron and the deckswain to help unclamp the masts. His back was a landscape of scratches, while his neck sported three lurid bites.

“Thank you for leaving incense to keep soulmate vigil for me,” said Velander icily, pushing her own hair back and feeling for her combs.

“Think nothing of it,” muttered Terikel, shivering in her blanket.

Terikel left the rail and walked to the aft deck hatch. Looking down, she saw that the pump had not yet removed enough water to let her enter and retrieve her clothes.

“I nearly *died* because I went searching for you!” Velander burst out, her fists raised and her eyes blazing. “You betrayed me!”

“I failed to be *Velander’s* Terikel,” she said as she stood at the edge of the hatch, “but that’s not the end of the world, is it?” She stabbed a finger at the coast. “*That* is!”

Velander did not appreciate the comparison. “Ironic though it may seem, you are now the Elder,” she pointed out as she began to wring the water from her robes. “Have you any pronouncements?”

“The celibacy rule is hereby annulled,” replied Terikel sullenly.

* * * *

Feran and Laron went as far as the stone pier in the corrak while the ship was being pumped out, and Laron went ashore and endured the heat long enough to gather some solidified splashes of gold. They were from purses that had been dropped by merchants who had died where they stood. There was much speculation about whether the entire world or just the southern continent of Torea had been devastated by the fire-circles. Seasonal trade winds could take them the five thousand miles to the continent of Acrema, but was there any point to making the journey? Feran decided to take the chance, and they set sail in the early evening. Battling winds that swept in from the ocean to the hot land, the *Arrowflight* tacked away from the coast and by evening was on a heading northeast. Velandar stood at the stern, where the deckswain was taking his turn at the steering oar. Laron was nearby, taking sightings from the stars.

“I must thank you for saving us,” Laron said to her suddenly.

“I was saving myself,” she replied coldly.

He gestured down to the deck, below which was Feran’s cabin. “When it comes to choosing lovers, rules must be cut to the cloth.”

“So I have noticed.”

“Don’t blame Learned Terikel loving the young boatmaster,” said the deckswain. “She’s spoken to me, she ... she still wants to be your soulmate.”

“I have a new soulmate.”

The deckswain scratched his head. Velandar looked up to the stars that were guiding them on their five thousand mile grasp at survival. The mathematics of progressions had saved her a bare half-day earlier, and now the mathematics of navigation was taking her to safety. The Queen of Philosophies was ever-faithful, and never let her followers down. Shivering, weak, tired, but totally in control, Velandar imagined a cold yet comforting arm about her shoulders.

Has the world ended, Velandar asked her new soulmate. Was the fourteenth fire-circle the last, the figures asked in turn. Eighteen fire-circles

would have been needed to blanket the world in fire, she calculated mentally.

“I fainted after the first fire-circle passed over,” said Velander to the deckswain. “Were there four more after that?”

The deckswain gave a short, bitter laugh. “There was but one that passed over us, but that was enough to roast the world.”

Velander allowed herself a smirk.

“Not so. Only Torea, the Great Southland, was destroyed.”

“Uh — really? How do you know, Learned Sister?”

“My new soulmate told me, the soulmate who kept me awake to tend my pyre, and who warned me to flee this morning.”

The deckswain fell silent, unsure of whether or not she was sane. Velander could hear Terikel just below, sobbing in terror of the world’s end. She decided not to announce her latest discovery for five days and one night by way of retribution. Again she imagined a cold, firm arm about her shoulders. Lovers, kings, ships’ captains, priestesses, and even magicians knelt before the throne of Mathematics, the Queen of Philosophies, and yet out of everyone in Torea she was soulmate to Velander alone.

* * * *

AFTERWORD

Velander is an important character in a fantasy novel that I am writing, and she is a girl with a cold, sharp, quantitative attitude towards the magical phenomena in her world. How did she get to be that way, I wondered? Was it from being a bright but friendless bookworm as a child, was it from being an awkward teenager with no aptitude for magic in a world where magic is commonplace ... or was it just because mathematics saved her life part-way through this story — which has been adapted from the book? The answers had to be no, no and no. Velander’s attitude, founded in mathematics and logic, cried out to have an intensely emotional cause. Weapon’s convergent progression was interesting to construct, but not creatively difficult, yet working out a way to get Velander exceedingly upset gave me more trouble than the rest of the story put together. When I found the solution, a very appealing title also fell straight into place, but this is so often the way it is in

writing: the best things happen by accident.

— *Sean McMullen*