

An Extract From:

Land of the Burning Sands
Book Two of the Griffin Mage Trilogy

By

Rachel Neumeier

For more information, visit
www.rachelneumeier.com

From Chapter One

Gereint Enseichen sat on a narrow pallet in the lowest cellar of the Anteirden townhouse, waiting. He leaned against the rough stones of the wall, stretched his legs out before him, and listened to fierce sand-filled winds over his head pare the cobbles of the street down to bare earth. He could hear the savage wind, the scouring sand, faint crashes that marked the explosions of distant windows, the cracking of wooden beams, the collapse of stone walls: the destruction of the city under the ruthless wind and heat. Sometimes the very earth that surrounded him seemed to tremble in sympathy with the storm above.

Of course, the house's cellar was deep. Maybe Gereint only imagined he heard those sounds. Maybe he only imagined the occasional faint shaking of the earth. But if he went up the first flight of stairs to the upper cellar and then up the second flight to the door to the kitchens ... If he did that, he would surely find the storm. Surely it had by now raked down from the north and fallen across Melentser. If it filled the world outside, it would be dangerous to go up those stairs.

Or if he imagined the faint sounds of destruction, if the storm hadn't yet arrived ... it might be, for Gereint, more dangerous still.

Only if the storm had already come and destroyed Melentser and blown itself out would it be safe for him to leave the safety of the deep cellar. Gereint tilted his head, listening. Maybe the faint screaming of the wind, the raking hiss of blown sand, was his imagination. Maybe those sounds were not his imagination at all. Either way, he had no intention of going up those stairs. Not until he was *certain* the Fellesteden household was well away—and until he had given the storm ample time to arrive, rake across the city, and die.

According to Andreikan Warichteier's *Principia*, distance alone would break a *geas*. On the other hand, Pechorichen held, along with most other authorities, that only death could do that. How Warichteier had tested his idea was not clear, as no one *geas* bound could walk away from the man who "held the other end of the chain" unless he was given leave to go. But Gereint had not walked away from Perech Fellesteden. He had simply allowed Fellesteden to walk away from him.

If the *geas* actually broke, that would be best. If it merely became quiescent, that would do. Just so long as Gereint was not driven to follow the road south after his master, he should do very well. At the moment, he felt merely uneasy. He knew Fellesteden must be furious with him. But, sealed away beneath stone and earth, he was unable to hear his master's call, blind to the man's undoubted fury. The *geas* could not compel him to follow a man who was not there. Or so Gereint fervently hoped.

The desert's coming had driven everyone in Melentser into chaotic retreat southward, on roads never meant to accommodate such a massive number of refugees. Or ... probably not quite everyone. Gereint wondered how many others might be tucked away in cellars and wellhouses, waiting for the desert to drive the upstanding citizens of Melentser out of the city. The desperate, the stupid, the mad, those unfortunates

both crippled and destitute: Probably few of her last inhabitants would survive Melentser's fall by more than a day or so.

Gereint counted himself among the desperate rather than the stupid or the mad, and hoped he would find no reason to change his mind. He had made good use of the scant days of preparation. No one had been able to keep careful count of supplies in those last days: Pilfering had been easy and nearly safe. Here in the cellar, he had a bottle of the Fellesteden's best wine, two rare books from the Fellesteden library, a change of clothing, decent boots a little loose in the ankle, a few coins, nine fat candles, two lanterns and four jars of oil, a twelve-hour sand timer, a bag of apples, some fresh bread and soft cheese, plenty of the hard cracker and dried beef that travelers carried, and six skins of clean water. He had not had time to make the waterskins himself, but these were the best he had been able to find. They should keep the water clean and cool; they wouldn't leak or spoil. They were for later. For the present, he had a small barrel, which had once held ale and that he had refilled with water before lugging it, with some difficulty, down to this cellar.

Aside from his own stolen supplies, there was nothing in this low cellar but empty racks where wine had been stored. It was a pity that all the racks were empty. The Anteirdens had been renowned for the quality of their wines. But they had left nothing behind when they closed their house, which they had done quickly: Berent Anteirden, head of the Anteirden household, was a decisive man and not inclined to risk his family by dithering. Unlike Perech Fellesteden, who had indeed dithered and let his own household's flight become ... usefully chaotic.

Was he hearing the sound of sand scraping against stone overhead? Or was the sound merely in his mind? Gereint squinted up at the close-fitted stones of the ceiling and decided the sound was real. Probably.

To drive back the dark and his too ready imagination, he lit the second lantern as well as the first. This was profligate, but he had plenty of oil. He had made the lanterns himself and stolen only quality oil for them; the light was luxuriously clean and clear. There was nothing to do but wait for the dry storm to blow itself out. He did not intend to go up those stairs until enough time had passed to reasonably suspect it had. He picked up one of the books, Gestechan Wanastich's history of Meridianum, and let it fall open at random. Illuminations picked out in gold and powdered pearl glittered around the measured stanzas that marched down the page: *On this night, my friends, on this night of fire and iron / On this dark night of fire and rage / When we leave our wives weeping behind us / To play the game of death among the broken stones where the deadly wind cries ...*

Gereint closed the book and set it aside. All his masters had been men of learning, or at least had wished to pass themselves off as such. Inclined toward old beautiful books even as a child, Gereint had learned early that a slave's best comfort and surest escape was to be found in black ink and painted illuminations, in philosophy and history and poetry. But perhaps not Wanastich's poetry, just at this moment when all his hope was bent on a more literal and far more dangerous kind of escape.

The other book was also a history, Berusent's great Casmant Historica. At least it contained no grim poetry, Berusent not being of a particularly dour temperament.

Gereint picked it up, opened it to an account of the founding of Breidechboden, and read a few lines. But he found he could not concentrate. He put this book, too, aside, folded his arms across his chest, and stared at the ceiling.

How long *would* it take the storm of wind and sand to consume a city? A day, a night, and another day? That was how long Anteirch's account gave for the destruction of Sarachren. But then, Anteirch had fancied himself a poet. "A day, a night, and another day" was a poetical convention if Gereint had ever heard one. How long had it really taken? One day, three days, ten? Sarachren's destruction had happened too long ago, been recounted by too many unreliable historians. No one knew how long it would take for Melentser to disappear into the red desert. But if the storm took longer than three or four days to settle, Gereint would surely wish he'd stolen more food.

The sand timer ran down three times—counting off, as it happened, a day, a night, and another day—before Gereint lost patience and allowed himself to go up the first flight of stairs and open the heavy, close-fitted door that led to the upper cellar. He paused, then, listening. There was no sound at all. The air was different: not cool and moist. It was light and dry, with an unfamiliar scent to it. Like ... hot iron, hot stone. Maybe. Or maybe that was his imagination again. But a haze of dust glittered and moved in the light of his lantern. That was not imagination.

He went up the second flight of stairs. Red dust had sifted under the kitchen door and down the steps. It gritted underfoot; it puffed into the air when he scuffed it with his foot. When he gripped the stair railing, his hand left pale prints in the dust. He touched the door. But then he merely stood there for a long, long moment. He told himself there was nothing to fear. He heard nothing, even when he pressed his ear to the door. The storm ... probably the storm had subsided. And if that was so, then there was nothing to fear. No one would be in the kitchens. No one would be in the house. No one would be in the city—certainly no one important. Probably nothing would move in the broad streets of Melentser but wind and sand and one desperate man willing to risk losing his life in the desert if he could only lose the geas as well ... Lifting his hand, Gereint rubbed his thumb across the brand on his face. The smooth scar of the brand still felt strange to his touch, though it had been there nearly half his life.

The door's brass knob was warm to the touch. Gereint turned it and pushed. The door did not budge. It was not locked: Gereint could feel the latch move. He shoved harder. To no avail.

He knew at once that sand had drifted across the door. Perhaps a lot of sand. Perhaps the kitchen was filled with it; perhaps the house was buried in it ... Terror smelled like hot metal and hot stone: Fear lived in a handful of red dust. Gereint shoved frantically.

The door gave. Not much. But enough to suggest it could be forced open. Enough to let him push back panic, breathe deeply, stop fighting, and think.

The pressure was against the lower part of the door. He set his back against the stone wall of the stair landing and his feet against the door right at the base and pushed steadily.

The door opened a crack, heavily. Heat and light poured through the crack, and sand, and plenty of red dust. If there had been more than a few inches of sand on the other side of the door, Gereint would not have been able to open it. He couldn't quite block out this realization, though he tried. It was a well-made, sturdy door: Strong as he was, he probably would not have been able to break it. Clever fool: clever enough to hide in a nice, cool, secret death-trap ... Anger as well as fear loaned him the strength to shove harder on the door, against the sand that had piled up against it.

The crack widened. Light and heat, dust and sand, and through it all that strange dry smell to the air, as though heat itself had a scent. Red sand and silence ... He found the kitchen empty and silent when he finally had a gap wide enough to force himself through. The shutters on the windows were not merely broken, but missing. Splinters clung to the twisted brass hinges. The door that had led to the kitchen garden was missing as well. And the garden, itself: gone. Buried under sand, which had drifted much more deeply outside than in. Dust eddied in the corner where a white-barked birch had stood. No trace of the tree remained. Gereint could see the Fellesteden townhouse, but ... ruined, nearly unrecognizable—half the roof and part of the wall broken, the brick deeply etched by blowing sand. The house looked a hundred years old. Two hundred.

Everything outside the house was drowned in heavy light and red sand.

By the angle of the sun, it was late afternoon. Gereint scooped sand away from the kitchen door and retreated back down into the cellars. It seemed to him that even the deeper cellar was drier and warmer now; that the smell of hot stone was perceptible even here. He shut the heavy cellar door, looked down at the red dust that had settled on the floor, and wondered how far the desert now extended.

His supplies ... He had never thought himself generously supplied. But he had thought his supplies at least adequate. Now he thought of the powerful heat and red sand and tried not to doubt it.

That evening, as the powerful sun sank low in the west, Gereint sat in the shade of a broken wall, waiting for sundown and looking out across the ruins of Melentser. The sun was blood red and huge; its crimson light poured across broken stone and brick, across streets drifted with sand. Dust hazed the air, which smelled of hot stone and hot brass. Scattered narrow fingers of jagged red stone had grown somehow out of this new desert: a new inhuman architecture of twisted knife-edged towers. These strange cliffs were like nothing Gereint had ever seen. They pierced the streets, shattered townhouses, reached sharp fingers toward the sky. If one had torn its way out of the earth beneath the Anteirden house ... But, though he flinched from the images that presented themselves to his mind, none had. Now the red towers cast long shadows across the shattered city.

Nothing moved among those towers but the creeping shadows and the drifting sand. And the griffins. A dozen or so were in sight at any given moment, though rarely close. But three of them passed overhead as the sky darkened, so near that Gereint imagined he could hear the harsh rush of the wind through the feathers of their wings. He stared upward, trying to stay very small and still against the dubious shelter of his

wall. If the griffins saw him, they did not care: They flew straight as spears across the sky and vanished.

The griffins were larger than he had expected, and ... different in other ways from the creatures he'd imagined, but he could not quite count off those differences in his mind. They looked to him like creatures made by some great metalsmith: feathers of bronze and copper, pelts of gold ... Gereint had heard they bled garnets and rubies. He doubted this. How would anyone find that out? Stick one with a spear and wait around to watch it bleed? That did not seem like something one would be able to write an account of afterward.

Spreading shadows hid the red cliffs, the streets, the kitchen yard where once the garden had grown. Overhead, stars came out. The stars looked oddly hard and distant, but the constellations, thankfully, had not changed. And he thought there was enough light from the stars and the sliver of the moon to see his way, if he was careful.

Gereint stood up. His imagination populated the darkness around him with predatory griffins waiting to pounce like cats after a careless rabbit. But when he stepped cautiously away from the wall, he found nothing but sand and darkness.

He had already drunk as much water as he could from the barrel. Now he picked up his travel sack, slung its strap across his shoulder, and walked out into the empty streets. He carried very little: the candles and a flint to light them, the travel food, one change of clothing and a handful of coins, and the six skins of water. More than he had truly owned for years.

The hot-brass smell of the desert seemed stronger now that he was moving. Heat pressed down from the unseen sky and hammered upward from the barely seen sand under his boots. He had read that the desert was cold at night. Though the furnace heat of the day had eased, this night was far from cold. The heat seemed to weigh down the air in his lungs and drag at his feet. The sand, drifted deep across the streets, was hard to walk through. Both the heat and the sand bothered him far more than he had expected.

He did not head south nor straight east toward the river. Those were the ways the people of Melentser had gone, and above all he did not want to walk up on the heels of any refugees from the city. He walked north and east instead, toward the unpeopled mountains. His greatest fear seemed unfounded: The geas did not stop him choosing his own direction. He could tell that it was still alive, but it was not active. He felt no pull from it at all. Casmantium did not claim the country to the north, the mountains beyond the desert—no one claimed that land. Rugged and barren, snow capped and dragon haunted, men did not find enough of value in the great mountains to draw them into the far north. But a single determined man might make his way quietly through those mountains, meeting no men and disturbing no sleeping monsters, all two hundred miles or more to the border Casmantium shared with Feierabiand. The cold magecraft that shaped geas bonds was not a discipline of gentle Feierabiand: When a geas-bound man crossed into that other country, the geas should ... not merely break. It should vanish. It should be as though it had never been set.

Or so Warichteier said, and Fenescheiren's Analects agreed. Gereint was very interested in testing that claim.

Maps suggested that the foothills of the mountains should be little more than forty miles from Melentser. On a good road in fair weather, a strong man should be able to walk that far in one night. Two at the outside. Across trackless sand, through pounding heat ... three, perhaps? Four? Surely not more than four. How far did the desert now extend around Melentser? All the way to those foothills? He had planned for each skin of water to last for one whole night and day. Now, surrounded by the lingering heat, he suspected that they might not last so long.

While in the ruins of the city, he found it impossible to walk a straight line for any distance: Not only did the streets twist about, but sometimes they were blocked by fallen rubble or by stark red cliffs. Then Gereint had to pick his way through the fallen brick and timbers, or else find a way around, or sometimes actually double back and find a different route through the ruins of the city. He could not go quickly even when the road was clear; there was not enough light. Yet he did not dare light a candle for fear of the attention its glow might draw.

So it took a long time to get out of Melentser; a long time to clamber over and around one last pile of rubble and find himself outside the city walls. A distance that should have taken no more than two hours had required three times that, and how long *were* the nights at this time of year? Not long, not yet. They were nowhere close to the lengthening nights of autumn. How quickly would the heat mount when the sun rose? Gereint studied the constellations once more, took a deep breath of the dry air, drank a mouthful of water, and walked into the desert.

The stars moved across the sky; the thin moon drew a high arc among them. The arrowhead in the constellation of the Bow showed Gereint true east. He set his course well north of east and walked fast. The night had never grown cool. There was a breeze, but it was hot and blew grit against his face. Sometimes he walked with his eyes closed. It was so dark that this made little difference.

Already tired, he found that the heat rising from the sand seemed to lay a glaze across his mind, so that he walked much of the time in a half-blind trance. Twisted pillars and tilted walls of stone sometimes barred his way. Twice, he almost walked straight into such a wall. Each time he was warned at the last moment by the heat radiating into the dark from the stone. Each time he fought himself alert, turned well out of his way to clear the barrier, and then looked for the Bow again. Usually the ground was level, but once, after Gereint had been walking for a long time, he stumbled over rough ground and fell to his knees; the shock woke him from a blank stupor and, blinking at the sky, he realized he had let himself turn west of north, straight into the deep desert. He had no idea how long he had been walking the wrong way.

Then he realized that he could see a tracery of rose gray in the east. And then he realized that he was carrying a waterskin in his hand, and that it was empty. It had not even lasted one entire night.

The sun rose quickly, surely peeking over the horizon more quickly than it would have in a more reasonable land. Its first strong rays ran across the desert sands and fell across Gereint, and as they did, he felt the geas bond to Perech Fellesteden fail. It

snapped all at once, like the links of a chain finally parting under relentless strain. Gereint staggered. Stood still for a moment, incredulous joy running through him like fire.

Then the sun came fully above the horizon, and Gereint immediately discovered that he'd been wrong to believe the desert hot at night. Out here in the open, the power of the sun was overwhelming. Unimaginable. No wonder the sunlight had broken the geas ; Gereint could well believe the sun's power might melt any ordinary human magic. Once well up in the sky, the sun seemed smaller and yet far more fierce than any sun he'd ever known; the sky was a strange metallic shade: not blue, not exactly white. The very light that blazed down around him was implacably hostile to men and all their works. Indeed, hostility was layered all through this desert. It was not an ordinary desert, but a country of fire and stone where nothing of the gentler earth was meant to live. The great poet Anweierchen had written, "The desert is a garden that blooms with time and silence." Gereint would not have called it a garden of any kind. It was a place of death, and it wanted him to die.

He had hoped he might be able to walk for some of the morning. But, faced with the hammer-fierce sun, he did not even try. He went instead to the nearest red cliff and flung himself down in its shade.

The day was unendurable. Gereint endured it only because he had no other option. As the sun moved through its slow arc, he moved with it, shifting around the great twisting pillar of stone to stay in its shade. But even in the shade, heat radiated from the sand underfoot and blazed from the stone. He could not lie down, for the heat from the ground drove him up; he sat instead and bowed his head against his knees. The sleep he managed was more like short periods of unconsciousness; the twin torments of heat and thirst woke him again and again.

He stayed as far from the stone as he could get and yet remain in its shade, but the short shadows of midday drove him within an arm's length of the cliff and then he thought he might simply bake like bread in an oven. The occasional breeze of the night was gone; the air hung heavy and still, very much as it must within an oven. If there were griffins, Gereint did not see them. He saw something else, once, or thought he did: a trio of long-necked animals, like deer, with pelts of gold and long black scimitar horns that flickered with fire. They ran lightly across the sand near him, flames blooming from the ground where their hooves struck the sand. As they came upon Gereint, the deer paused and turned their heads, gazing at him from huge molten eyes, as though utterly amazed to find a human man in their fiery desert. As well they might be, he supposed.

Then the deer startled, enormous ears tilting in response to some sound Gereint could not hear, and flung themselves away in long urgent leaps. They left behind only little tongues of fire dancing in their hoof prints.

But perhaps he only hallucinated the flames. Or the deer. The heat was surely sufficiently intense to create hallucinations. Though he would rather have seen a vision of a quiet lake where graceful willows trailed their leaves ...

He could not eat. The thought of food nauseated him. But Gereint longed for water. His lips had already cracked and swollen. Berentser Gereimarn, poet and natural philosopher, had written that, in a desert, the best place to carry water was in the body; that if a man tried to ration his water, he would weaken himself while the water simply evaporated right from the waterskin and was lost entirely. Gereint wanted very badly to believe this. That would give him every reason to drink all the water in his second waterskin. But Gereimarn had been a better poet than philosopher: His assertions were often unreliable. And the thought of emptying yet another skin of water in his first day, of being trapped in the desert with no water left, was terrifying. Gereint measured the slow movement of the sun and allowed himself three mouthfuls every hour.

Even at midsummer, even in the desert, the sun did have to retreat eventually. Shadows lengthened. The hammering heat eased—not enough, never enough. But it eased. Gereint got to his feet before the sun was quite down and walked away from the stone that had, all day, both sheltered and threatened to kill him. He walked quickly, because now that the heat was not so desperately unendurable, what he really wanted to do was collapse into an exhausted sleep. But if he did that, if he did not use every possible hour for walking, he knew he would never reach the end of the desert.

How long had he estimated for a man to walk forty miles? Fifty, if he could not keep a straight course? He worked out the sums again laboriously in his head. He felt he was trying to think with a mind as thick and slow as molasses, but it helped him stay awake enough to keep his direction clear. He worked the sums a second time, doubting his conclusion, and then a third. How quickly was he walking? Not fast, not once his first burst of speed had been exhausted. Not four miles an hour. As fast as two? That would make it sixteen miles in eight hours. Sixteen? Yes, of course, sixteen. Or if he managed *three* miles in an hour, wouldn't that be ... twenty-four miles? That would surely take him clear of the desert by dawn. Wait, were the nights eight hours long at this time of year? He should know the answer to that ... Anyone would know that ... He could not remember. If he could get to the mountains by morning ... He had to. How fast was he walking?

Gereint stopped, sat down, and finished all the water in the second skin and half the water in the third. He made himself eat some of the cracker and dried beef. He had lived through one day in the desert; he doubted he would survive another. So he needed to walk fast and not let himself fall into a heat-induced trance, and to walk fast he needed strength.

He did feel stronger when he got back to his feet. He found the arrow's head in the Bow and set his direction. Then he counted his steps. He allowed himself a mouthful of water every two hundred steps. He counted in a rhythm to keep himself from slowing down. When he stumbled and caught himself and realized he'd once again been walking in a daze, he began to count by threes. Then by sevens. Then backward from five thousand, by elevens. He told himself that if he lost count, he'd have to start over and forfeit his mouthful of water. That self-imposed threat helped him keep alert.

He finished the third skin of water and began on the fourth. He tried to suck on a pebble, but the pebbles of this desert neither felt nor tasted right in his mouth; they tasted of heat and hot copper and fire. He spat one out quickly, drank an extra

mouthful of water, and tried to fix his thoughts on the northern mountains. There would be streams running down from the heights; it might be raining. He could hardly imagine rain.

It crossed his mind that it might be raining in the south. Perech Fellesteden had intended to take his family all the way south to the luxurious southern city of Abreichan: He had property there. Well, Fellesteden had property everywhere, but his holdings in Abreichan were among the largest.

If Gereint had gone with his master, he would be in the south. Maybe walking through the rain. But ... he would still be with Perech Fellesteden.

Lifting a hand, Gereint traced the brand on his face with the ball of his thumb. Traced it again. Lowered his hand and lengthened his stride.

It occurred to him some time later that the ground was tending somewhat upward.

Then the sun sent its first deceptively gentle rose glow above the eastern horizon.

Gereint stopped and waited, straining his eyes for the first glimpse ahead of the mountains. He felt he was poised at the tip of a moment; that though the sun was rising, time was not actually passing; that the whole desert waited with him for the answer to the question of time and distance.

Then the sun rose, blazing. Heat slammed down across the desert like a smith's hammer on a glowing anvil. Ahead of him, dim in the distance, Gereint saw the first high foothills that led up to the great mountains. As far as he could see, the hills were red with fiery sand. Heat shimmered across them.

Gereint stared at the hills for a long moment. Then he laughed—it was not much of a laugh, but he meant to laugh. He drank the rest of the water in the fourth skin in one draught. Then he threw the skin aside and strode forward, straight into the teeth of the sun.

That burst of defiance lasted only very few minutes. Then, from striding, Gereint found himself suddenly on his hands and knees, with no memory of falling. For a moment he thought he might simply lie down and let the heat finish killing him. But the desert was too profoundly inimical; he could not bring himself simply to give way to it. He crawled instead into the shadow of a narrow bladelike spire that pierced the hot air and collapsed in its meager protection. Red heat beat up through him from the sand and closed down around him from the air, but he did not know it.

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