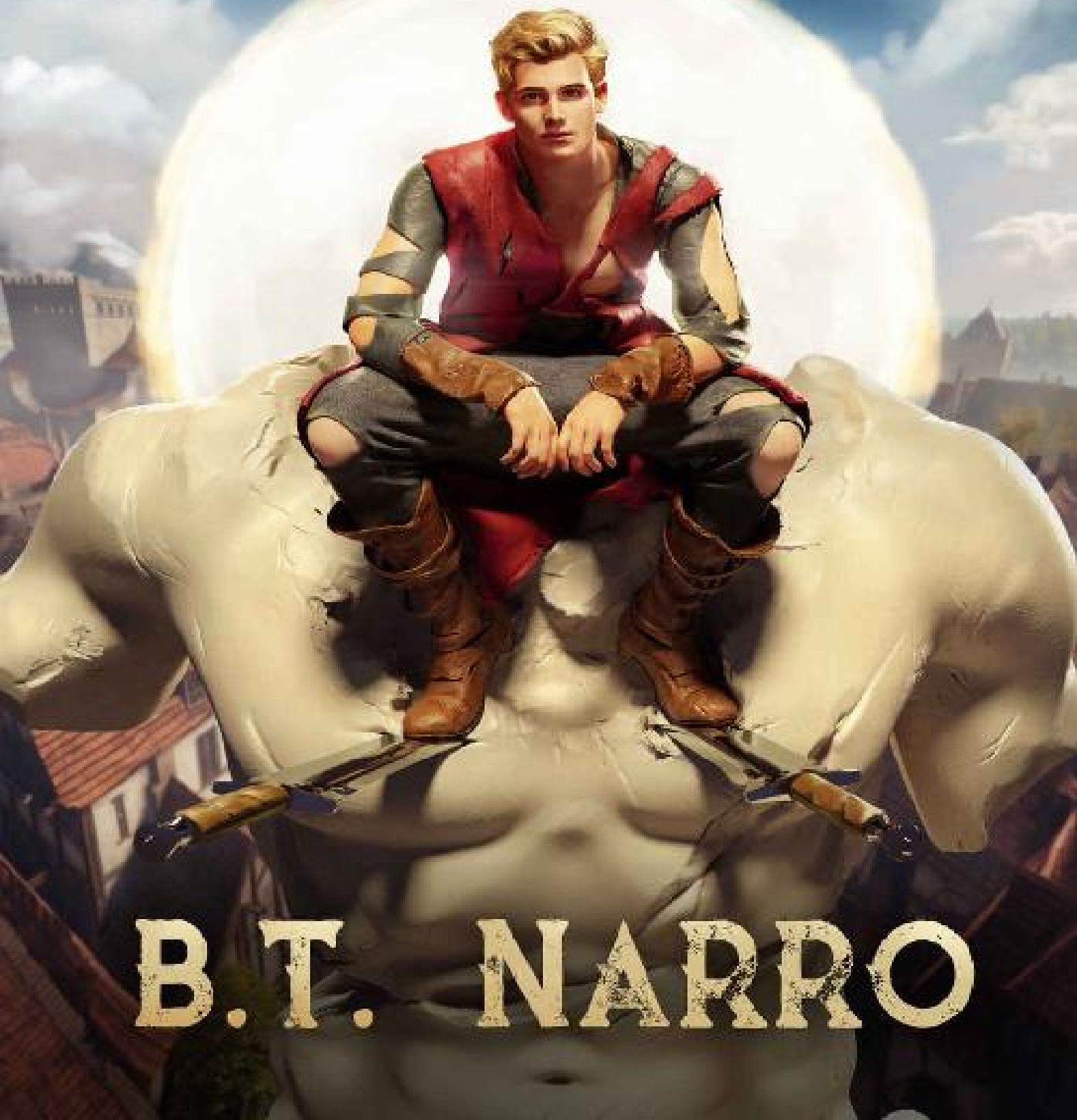


REIGN OF HAVOC



B.T. NARRO

Reign of Havoc
By B.T. Narro

Legends of the Tainted:

Book 2

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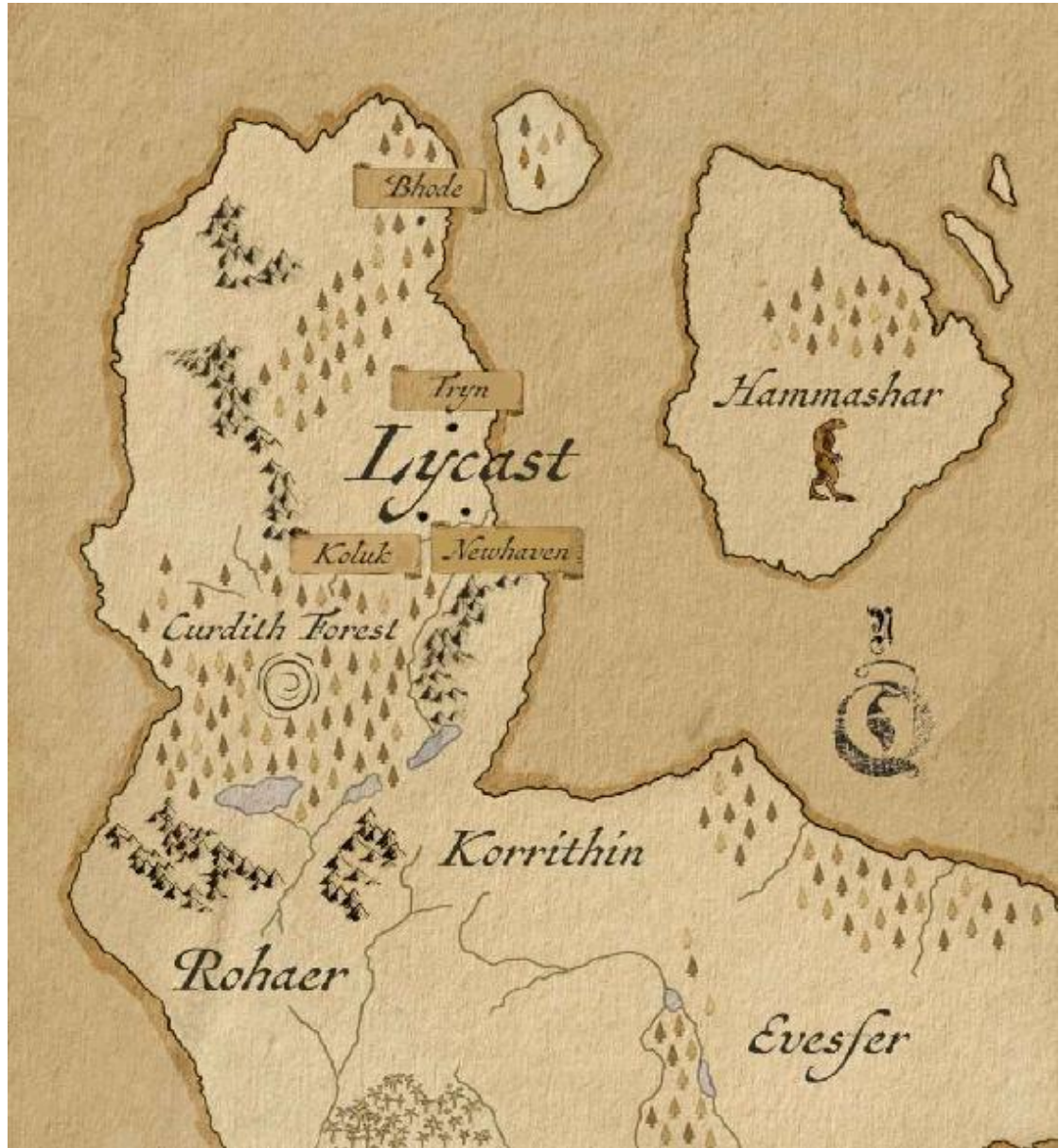
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CHAPTER ONE

The shock of Callie kissing Tarak back had passed. He was just starting to enjoy the feeling of her lips and the excitement of what might come to be when someone tried to open his bedroom door. Tarak and Callie stopped in each other's arms.

"Thank the powers you locked it," Tarak whispered as he leaned in to start from where they'd left off.

She turned her head away. "I have to go."

"That is not funny."

Whoever it was tried the door handle again.

"Tarak, you're not thinking."

"Yes. Please join me." He leaned in. She kissed him all too briefly before leaning away again.

"It's probably one of the castle workers coming to check if you've woken," she explained. "They'll alert my father you've gotten out of bed and locked the door."

"So that gives us some time." He kissed her cheek and then made his way down to her neck.

"Not much time—oh." She moaned. "Ohhh." Callie took his face to direct his lips back onto hers.

He scooped her up and plopped her down on his bed. She pulled him down by his shirt as she kissed him.

Callie suddenly gasped and pulled away to look at the door. Tarak heard it next, a rattling like someone attempting to pick the lock.

"That is not a castle worker!" Callie whispered fearfully as she sat up.

Tarak looked around for his sword. It was probably within the chest next to his desk. There was no time. The lock turned.

Callie, with her nightgown twisted all around her, positioned herself ready to cast at whoever had broken into

Tarak's room. Tarak stepped in front of her protectively, but she moved to his side to face Tarak's attacker with him.

The doorknob turned. A young man who seemed half asleep stumbled in. He grunted in annoyance. He had no weapons.

"Oh gosh!" Callie whispered as she seemed to recognize this person.

"Who are you?" Tarak asked.

"Callie?" he uttered in a deep voice.

"Jon, shut the door!"

Jon? Tarak wondered. *As in the famous Jon Oklar?*

"What is going on in my room?" Jon asked.

Callie waved her hand and a rush of hot air blew back Jon's hair and shut the door behind him. Jon looked back, then at Callie again.

"You've gotten stronger," he muttered as he casually walked toward Tarak's bed. "I'm too tired to care what's happening here. I need to sleep right now, before I pass out."

He sat on the bed, fully clothed. The rude bastard still had his boots on!

"This room and this bed are occupied." Tarak was incredulous that he had to inform Jon of these things.

"The other rooms are freezing." Jon lazily undid the laces enough to kick off one boot. Then he started on the other.

Callie whispered, "Jon, no one can know I was in here."

"Fine." He yanked off his other boot.

"Did anyone see you fly in?" Callie asked him.

"Probably. I'm sorry, but I need to sleep. I just traveled all the way from Rohaer without a break, and I haven't slept in two days. Please leave or be quiet."

Callie hurried toward the door. "I'm sorry, Tarak. Someone is probably coming to check on Jon. I have to go."

“What? Wait.”

“I can’t. I’m sorry,” she whispered, then turned and pulled the door open. She took a quick look each way down the hall, then slipped out and closed the door behind her.

Tarak stood near the bed, his own bed, gawking in confusion at this audacious shit. He had ruined Tarak’s night with Callie and now he was settling underneath Tarak’s covers!

Tarak’s hands hit his hips, and his scowl deepened to a thunderous expression. Any other stranger might have been intimidated.

“Who do you think you are?” Tarak growled.

“Jon Oklar,” he muttered.

“That does not mean anything to me.”

“It’s not supposed to. I’m just telling you who I am.” Jon stretched out on his back, sighed heavily, and closed his eyes.

“Go sleep somewhere else!”

“I told you the other rooms are freezing. They have no fire lit and no sheets or pillows.”

“Then why not break into some other room?”

“I thought at least blankets and pillows would be kept on my bed for when I returned, and that it would be empty.”

“And when you saw the room was occupied?” Tarak asked.

“You can stay. There is plenty of space. I’m going to sleep here. Please don’t keep me up.” Jon’s voice had become hoarse.

“Lord and bane, you are annoying. What kind of man unlocks the door to another man’s room and sleeps in that man’s bed? They should have taken away your key when you left.”

“I didn’t use my key. I unlocked the door with dvinia.”

“The hell is that? Never mind. I do not care, can you see? I only *just* recovered from almost dying! Callie saved my life, and I was about to show her how much I appreciated that when you broke in with this...divine-yah.”

“Da-vin-ya.”

“Whatever!”

Jon wouldn't even open his eyes to look at Tarak anymore. Wait, what was that? Was he already snoring?

“Oh, I cannot believe this,” Tarak muttered. He pushed Jon's shoulder. “Hey.”

Jon grumbled and pushed Tarak's hand off him without seeming to wake up. He turned away to sleep on his side.

Tarak stood there contemplating. He had half a mind to pull Jon out of his bed and drop him onto the floor, but Tarak was so very hungry...he was just beginning to remember.

He would've loved to venture down into the dining hall together with Callie, after showing her how much he'd wanted her all this time. They could've stayed up and spent the whole night indulging every impulse. What a night it would have been, but it was a fantasy. She was engaged to Trevor Chespar. She couldn't be seen with Tarak, as she had said so to Jon.

He decided he would reclaim his bed later. For now, he would eat. He stepped out into the hall and shut the door to his room.

“Tarak,” someone whispered from right behind him.

“Arse-fuck!”

She gasped in shock.

“Sorry, princess but you scared me. Why did you not stay in the room with me?”

“Because I'm panicking. No one can think we were kissing. Now I've come up with a plan of what to say. I was just on my way to check on you after finding you in the other plane. I discovered you just now leaving your room.”

“After *saving* me,” he corrected. “And thank you for that. I wanted to express how—”

Aliana’s door opened.

Tarak did not know the time, but it was dark in the hall at this hour of night. He couldn’t quite make out Aliana, but the size and shape of the silhouette a few steps in front of him seemed to match hers.

They stood staring at each other for a time. Last he had heard her voice, he was pretty much unconscious and losing the battle against esitry poisoning.

“I felt people out here...Tarak?” she asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“My god!” She ran and squeezed him. “Are you all better?”

“I am.”

“Oh thank god.”

“Thank Callie.”

“What do you mean?” She let him go.

“She found me in that other plane. Or I should say she found my mana. She helped me heal.” Aliana still had not responded. “She saved me.”

“How, Callie?” Aliana asked.

“I connected Tarak’s mana to touch the...um, ocean of mana? I’m still not sure what to call it. The system of mana. The spiderweb, as Caarda described it.”

“Oy, Callie. I don’t quite understand it, but I don’t care.” She smacked Tarak’s stomach lightly. “He’s not dead! You had us worried for a while there.”

“There is a righteous shit in my bed.”

Tarak could not see Aliana’s expression, but he imagined she was confused as her head seemed to tilt.

“Tarak, that’s disgusting.”

Callie let out one laugh before she stifled the rest.

“Not literally!” Tarak said. “Can you not feel him?”

Aliana slowly turned to face Tarak’s door and put her hand on it.

“Oh you’re right,” she whispered. “Wait, is that...?” She gasped. “Is that Jon Oklar?”

Callie spoke with a slight chuckle. “Yes, he just returned.”

“That’s wonderful!”

Callie shushed her politely. “He’s sleeping.”

“Then what are we doing talking outside his door? Come on.”

“*His* door?” Tarak asked, though he did follow Aliana and Callie down the hall.

They heard quick footsteps coming from the other way. Callie made light. Rick had a worried expression as he approached. “Someone was sighted flying over the wall matching Jon’s description.”

“It was him,” Aliana confirmed. Tarak could hear her smiling. “He’s asleep in...Tarak’s room,” she corrected herself.

Callie added, “He just came back from Rohaer, and he hasn’t slept in two days. I don’t know what he’s up to, but I think he’ll want to speak with my father at sunrise.”

Tarak told the head guard, “I need a place to sleep, but first I must eat before I collapse.”

“Good to see you alive, Tarak. I’ll have something fixed for you soon. Did Jon heal you?”

“Jon? No, it was Callie.”

“The princess? Are you sure?” Rick seemed to be asking Callie.

“Yes!” Tarak barked.

Everyone shushed him.

Callie touched Tarak's arm. "Jon probably would've healed him if I hadn't helped him heal himself."

"I doubt so," Aliana said. "Remember that Jon could never heal Tarak's ancestors who had the same natural healing as him."

"Oh that's right," Callie replied.

"It was you, Callie," Tarak confirmed. "You deserve some recognition for it, and I deserve to rest in my bed, but I will be a gentleman and settle for another room *tonight*."

"It was Jon's room before it was yours," Aliana informed him.

"I do not care."

"Did he ask you to leave?" Aliana wondered.

"He fell asleep without my permission."

Callie added, "He said Tarak could stay but that he needed to sleep now and didn't want to be woken."

"The other bedrooms are not ready for sleeping," Rick said. "They are cold and lacking pillows and blankets, which remain in storage until they are needed. I don't have the key needed to retrieve bedding as I've had no need for it. I'd rather not wake the workers if it can be helped. Can't you share your bed, Tarak? It is large enough for you and Jon, and it sounds like he wouldn't mind."

"But *I* mind!" Tarak drew his hand through his disheveled hair. "Ah hell, just procure something for me to eat and I will figure out a place to sleep. I expect a large plate with all sorts of tasty scrumptions. I did almost just die."

"I don't know what a scrumption is, but I'll see what I can find. You can come to the dining hall with me and wait at one of the tables. Aliana, Callie, you should go back to bed."

"Good night, Tarak," Aliana said as she returned to her room.

Callie walked with them. "I would like to keep Tarak company in the dining hall."

“Princess...” Rick’s voice held a note of warning.

“What?” She feigned confusion.

“I’m not about to allow that. You should be sleeping.”

“Isn’t it best she makes sure I remain healthy?” Tarak inquired. “She was the one to save me, after all. I might need more saving.”

“We’ll just have to risk it.”

They all made their way down the stairs, Rick leading Callie and Tarak. They walked close, bumping and grazing. She touched his hand with her fingers for a breath, and in that short moment he could feel that he was still on her mind in the same way that she was on his. He remembered the taste of her lips and felt his heart skip in delight at the thought of sampling them again.

They remained silent until they left the apartments. This was where Callie would have to split off to head to the keep. She stopped instead, and Tarak stopped beside her.

“I’m going to sit with Tarak,” she stated. “It’s innocent, Rick. I just want to keep him company and make sure he really is all better.”

She was a good liar.

Rick stopped to stare at the two of them. He seemed to ponder her request as he gave a sigh. “Fine, but I will sit with the two of you until Tarak finishes eating, and then I will see you to your room, princess.”

Now Tarak felt bad for the head guard, who suddenly sounded very tired. He could feel Callie sharing his guilt as well as she let out her breath.

“Or you could go to sleep and let me rest as soon as I find something for Tarak to eat,” Rick suggested.

“Fine, I will go to my room.”

“Thank you, princess.” Rick sounded relieved.

“Goodbye, Tarak.” She hugged him tightly. “I am so glad you’re better.”

“And I am so glad you saved my life.”

They held on to each other a moment longer, then Callie slipped away and drifted off to the keep where Rick’s cousin, Randy, stood guard and looked on with heavy disapproval.

Rick did not speak of it until much later, after he had procured a plate of leftover bread and cheese from supper. Tarak might’ve complained except there was a fair amount of it. Rick surprised him by sitting down across the table and leaning forward.

Tarak found himself leaning back. “I am not sure I want to hear whatever it is you are about to say.”

“No, you don’t, so all I’m going to say instead is that I have to report to the king.”

“You cannot possibly have to report everything you see.”

“Only what I deem important enough for him to know about. He trusts me, and I do not—Tarak—do *not* want to violate that trust by withholding information from him that he would want to know about. I would appreciate it if you do not put me in this difficult position anymore, and I plan on telling the same thing to the princess.” Rick leaned back and swung his legs over the bench to stand up. “Let us not speak of this again. Good night, Tarak. I *am* glad you are better, and I’m not alone in that sentiment. I saw how everyone worried for you while you were sick.”

“Thank you, Rick.”

The head guard started to leave.

“One last thing,” Tarak called out, and Rick stopped. He did not seem too pleased as he turned around.

“Am I really expected to share my bed with a man I have never met before? Is it not *my* room?”

“If Jon sleeping in your bed is such a bother,” Rick said, “then I recommend you spend the night with one of the other boys.”

“Can you not force Jon to sleep with one of his peers?”

“I’m not going to force Jon to do anything. It’s best we don’t disturb him.”

Tarak twinkled his fingers. “Oh, best not to disturb delicate Jon! We must not disturb the virtuous sorcerer of unending renown!”

He regretted his childish remark as he noticed Rick’s annoyed expression.

“Good night, Tarak.”

“Good night, Rick.”

CHAPTER TWO

Tarak had gone to sleep on the floor of his bedroom. The bearskin rug was not the most comfortable place to sleep, especially knowing his bed was right there. But with the pillow he took from the bed and the fire keeping him warm, he slept better than he had on many drunken nights four hundred years ago, when a close barn was the only place he could stumble into before passing out.

He awoke in the morning to find that Jon had already left the room. Tarak was hungry, bitter, and dirty. A sour mood festered. At least the news of him awakening healthy from esitry poisoning would soon be shared among all his peers. Wasn't a celebration promised? He gathered some clothes and went to the bathing quarters.

It was late in the morning. The bathing quarters were empty, the water in the barrels hardly warm. Tarak made his way to the dining quarters when he was done. He stopped in the large doorway and surveyed the room. Everyone seemed to be here except Jon. Perfect. Maybe he had conducted his business and had left the castle already.

The sorcerers stood up at seeing Tarak. He grabbed his tray and headed toward them as they applauded.

Tarak flashed a grin. "Thank you all," he told them.

"You feel well?" Michael asked, gesturing for Tarak to sit between him and Charlie. There was no space now between the groups of boys and the girls.

"I am all better thanks to Callie."

She showed a quick smile.

"She told us," Michael said. "I'm so glad you're alive!" He surprised Tarak with a one-armed hug.

"Thank you."

"We all are," Aliana added.

"We are," Reuben said. "I am glad we have you back. You fought very well, by the way. We all saw."

Every other sorcerer said a little something about being happy to see Tarak out of bed and looking like his old self.

Tarak was a little overwhelmed by everyone's words. Aliana even gave him a squeeze, then Callie practically jumped up and did the same. Charlie followed with an even bigger hug. Tienna went next. Arthur then patted Tarak's back, and then Eden and Reuben did the same.

"Thank you all," Tarak repeated when the accolades finally seemed to be done. "I am glad to be alive as well. Oh, what is this?" He picked up a cylinder of some sort of meat he just noticed on his tray.

"Sausage," Reuben answered. "Careful!" he called out as Tarak grabbed it and bit into it, juices squirting everywhere.

"*Oop!*" Tarak said with a full mouth. "Bursting with flavor it is. Is this part of the celebration?"

There was a bit of chuckling, though he wasn't making a joke.

"No, that's just a sausage," Michael informed him. "We should celebrate, yeah?" He seemed to be asking the group. "Tarak's alive, and Jon's returned!"

There was a small cheer.

Someone asked from the doorway, "What are we cheering about?"

"Jon!" yelled no less than half of the sorcerers. Another applause broke out.

Jon waved his hand down. "Please." Either he was genuinely embarrassed about the attention, or he did well to play the part. He grabbed a tray and sat across the table from Tarak. Just about everyone got up and gathered around him, pestering him with questions.

"Where's Hadley?"

"Where were you all this time?"

"Did you hear about the recent battle?"

There were a few other questions Tarak did not catch. For someone who claimed to be so busy, Jon had still taken the time to shave. His scruffy beard from last night was gone. His cheeks and chin seemed to be sculpted by someone who had designed Jon to be as handsome as possible. His brown hair was combed over on his head and seemed to sit there perfectly, with but a few strands falling down around his striking hazel eyes. Tarak could usually appreciate beauty in all forms, but Jon's handsomeness just made him more annoying.

He watched as Jon cut into the sausage carefully with fork and knife, then took a bite. He barely chewed before swallowing.

"I've missed you all," he said. "Before I answer your questions," Jon glanced at Tarak, "I believe I owe you an apology. I understand you are Tarak, the son of Caarda?"

"I am."

"The king informed me. I'm sorry for taking your bed. I wasn't in my right mind. I needed a place to sleep. I hope you'll forgive me for that."

At least the sorcerer who was supposedly good at everything was also good at apologizing.

"Yeah, Jon. I forgive you."

Jon looked at Tienna next. "And we haven't met." He extended his hand. "Jon Oklar."

"Yes, I know," she said with a slight blush. "It really is a pleasure."

She shook his hand. He was clearly still waiting for her name. Callie nudged her and whispered, "I'm Tienna."

"Oh!" Tienna laughed and blushed deeper. "I'm Tienna."

Jon chuckled a bit.

Leon shouted as he entered the dining hall. "Well, shit a rabbit! Jon really is back!"

"It's good to see you, Leon!"

The castle's chef approached with a delicious-looking pastry of some kind. He put it in front of Jon as Leon set his breakfast tray on the table beside Tarak and swung his legs over the bench to sit down.

"We are all glad to have you back," the chef told Jon. "This is from me."

"Thank you, Chef Irwin," Jon said with a happy grin.

Leon slapped Tarak on the back. "You big bastard! I'm very glad to see you alive. You had me so fucking worried for a while there. Don't you ever do that again, you hear?"

"I will remain alive, Leon! Wait, chef," Tarak called as Irwin was headed back.

"Yes, Tarak?"

"How about a pastry for me? I did almost die."

There were more snickers. Again, he was not joking.

Irwin looked at Leon for permission.

"How many you got?"

"I just had the one made, but I could prepare more. It will take time, however."

"The king wants Tarak to have anything he wants for breakfast."

"He does?" Tarak asked with surprise.

"Of course! I didn't see much of what you did because I was busy dealing with Monrra's gigantic fucker, but Nykal told me after I recovered. You fought damn well, Tarak, and probably saved his life. What will it be?"

"A pastry for everyone as a celebration," Tarak decided.

There was a little cheer, but the chef looked at Leon again. Then everyone quieted and turned to him.

"Why the fuck not? We got time for a little treat."

"And some ale after?" Tarak asked.

"Nah," Leon said. "We drink when Monrra's dead."

“Pastries for all, then,” the chef said and turned to walk back to the kitchen.

Many gave Tarak their thanks.

“You are all welcome.”

“Jon, tell us what the hell you’ve been up to,” Leon said. “I’d rather hear it from you than anyone else.”

“After I left Rohaer with Hadley, we headed south. We stopped in Korrithin and spoke to many analytes, though it was difficult because most didn’t know any common tongue. Then we headed to Evesfer to meet the elves. Eventually we took a boat from there and continued south to Vandav, then Jolrune, and finally Ovira. We stopped everywhere to learn what we could; well, Hadley spent most of her time doing that. I was healing others for the most part. I made sure to let everyone know my actions were on behalf of King Nykal in Lycast.”

Charlie said, “You must be famous everywhere now!”

Jon gave a humble nod.

Leon asked, “Did the change to mana affect you while you were traveling?”

“Yes, we started to notice it on the way to Jolrune. I felt like my spell of dvinia was a little easier to cast, but then it became harder as we traveled farther south.”

“We’re calling it Argil now,” Charlie said. “And it’s in the conjuration tree. We call it that because it involves conjuring something tangible from mana. There are other spells we have learned that you should be able to cast. Do you know any of this yet?”

“I figured there were other spells I could learn now, but I don’t know what they are.”

“We should spend the day figuring that out!” Charlie replied.

“Hold on, Charlie,” Leon said. “Knowing Jon, there’s a reason he’s come back now and not earlier or later.”

“He’s right, Charlie,” Jon said. “I’ll get to that in a moment. Jolrune is unpopulated, but Ovira had some cities that were just as crowded as our capital. Sorcery is very different there. We met a lot of sorcerers. They are much more common there. There’s even a school they call the Academy with the sole purpose of training new sorcerers by the thousands each year.” He made a sour face. “There’s also a lot of krepps, but they seem to have their own territories.”

“The people there speak the same language?” Leon asked.

“Yes, though they have an accent and the currency is different.”

“Jon, I have to ask,” Leon said. “When you were leaving did you even know that manastorms used to prevent travel past Jolrune?”

“Hadley knew, and so did the elves. But the elves had found out that travel was now possible. They’d already sent ships to Ovira, and some have returned. They’ve made contact with elves there.”

“And the analytes?” Leon asked.

“There doesn’t seem to be any of them in or around Ovira.”

“Where is Hadley now?” Callie asked.

Tarak had never heard of Hadley before today, though Jon’s name had been mentioned plenty of times. From what Tarak could gather, Hadley seemed to be Jon’s lover. He figured she was a sorcerer, maybe even the nice witch who Aliana had mentioned a while back.

“Hadley is still in Ovira.”

“You *left* her there?” Leon asked.

“She wanted to stay and learn more. I will get her soon. Well, I won’t exactly be the one bringing her back here, actually. With Hadley staying in Ovira for now, I was able to take a very prestigious sorcerer from Ovira. I dropped him off at Rohaer. He’s there working on establishing a portal from

Rohaer to Ovira. It might take a couple of days, but once it's done, he says he can easily transport people between the territories."

"Jon!" Leon stood with a hand near his head as if he couldn't decide between smacking Jon or putting his hand over his eyes. "We haven't even met this portal-maker!"

Tarak added, "Remember that my father foresaw war and death after Jon returned."

Leon gestured at Tarak. "War and death, Jon!"

Jon stood and pushed out his palms. "This is the start of an alliance, not war. His name is Basen Hiller, and he's the headmaster of the school for sorcery I mentioned. Ovira has been plagued with war for many years, but now the whole continent is finally at peace, and Basen wants to keep it that way. They have sorcerers called 'psychics' there who can tell if someone is lying or telling the truth. They vouch for Basen. I have met many of them. They have gone through more war than we have, even. They want lasting peace and think an alliance might be just the thing needed to sustain it."

Michael suggested, "Isn't Fatholl a psychic? He could question this portal-maker's intentions."

"Not a bad idea, Michael," Leon said. "Jon, what has the king said about all of this? Save me the time of asking him."

"He's a little worried, as you are. He did mention Caarda's warning, but once you all meet Basen I am sure you will see there is nothing to worry about." Jon stuffed his mouth.

Leon asked, "He can really make portals to and from anywhere?"

"No, there are many limitations. Basen needs a day or two, or three to be safe, to set up the portal and connect it to his system of portals in Ovira. He can only make a portal with something called akorell metal, but he needs time to establish a connection and can really only make these connections in specific places. There's a lot more to it, but I'd rather let him explain it. A lot went over my head."

“You should have just brought him straight here,” Leon complained. “Why Rohaer?”

“I wanted to, but he insisted that the portal that connects the continents be in a central location. Rohaer is much more central to our continent than Lycast. Once he’s done connecting Rohaer to Ovira, he can make a portal here that can connect to Rohaer. He says other portal-makers will then be able to use it.” Jon paused and glanced over the small audience for a moment. “Has anyone shown an ability to make portals?”

“No, Jon,” Leon chided. “No one except Tarak’s insufferable grandfather, who we haven’t heard from since he left *with* all the akorell metal. Now I see why he wanted it. I have a bad feeling about all of this. I think it’s time I speak with the king. Jon...” Leon shook his head. “I don’t know about this.”

“It will be good—better than good. It will benefit us greatly. I promise.”

Tarak wondered, “What do you have to say about Caarda’s vision of war and death? He claimed it is of a magnitude so great that neither he nor my grandfather can see anything past it.”

“I...don’t know Caarda that well, and I know your grandfather even less,” Jon replied.

“And what do you know about Ancients and what we have been trying to do here?” Some anger made its way out in Tarak’s tone. He felt the other sorcerers tense up, but this was important to discuss.

“I am just now learning about them.” Jon put on a smile as he extended his palms and glanced around. “Everyone needs to relax. Trust me. This can only be a good thing. There is a very interesting system of sorcery in Ovira, and they have many potions that could benefit the people of Dorrinthal. Just wait until you meet the headmaster. Have him questioned by this psychic you mentioned. I’m sure he won’t mind. But as we wait for the headmaster to be ready, I’m going to travel around through the cities and towns to heal people. It’s been a while, so I’m sure there are many in need.”

“Yes, that is important,” Leon said, “but there is so much more to discuss.”

“I will check back in a few hours. That gives you plenty of time to speak with the king.” Jon got up and looked ready to dart off but something stopped him. “I hear we have an advisor named Zarin now?”

“Yes,” Leon said. “The analyte prince from Korrithin.”

“Is there something else he goes by?” Jon asked.

“Zarin is not so difficult,” Tarak interjected.

“It’s not that. I fought against a Zaran in the war.”

“You learned the names of your enemies?” Tarak asked in disbelief.

“Some.”

“Zarin, the analyte,” Callie specified, “is an ally. It will help you to forget an unpleasant association if you become accustomed to his name.”

“I’m not sure I want to forget.”

Tarak asked, “This Zaran tried to kill you?”

“Yes.”

“Forget him! Lord and bane.”

“There were some good but misguided people on the other side.”

“I trust that, but I cannot say I care.”

“Tarak’s right, Jon,” Leon said. “You can’t save the dead, only the living. Forget those idiots and get to know the prince.”

Jon nodded dutifully but seemingly without agreeing. He jogged off, then lifted himself into the air with what had to be sorcery and flew out of the dining hall.

Leon clicked his tongue and muttered to himself. “I’m not liking the sound of this portal-maker.”

Tarak waited, but Leon didn’t offer anything else.

“Well?” Tarak pressed. “What are you going to do about it?”

“The hell can we do at this point? This portal-maker is already in Rohaer, and it’s not like I can keep Jon on a leash.”

“Relax!” Michael said. “It’s Jon. Come on. When has he ever been wrong?”

“I agree,” Callie echoed to Tarak’s shock. “If Jon trusts this portal-maker, I’m sure he’s someone we can trust as well.”

She must’ve noticed Tarak’s face, because she gave him a look as if he should calm down.

“So no one is worried about my father’s warning?” Tarak tried.

“I am,” Leon said. “But it is Jon, like they say. We’d better give this portal-maker a chance. Basen Hiller can’t possibly be worse than your grandfather, and we’re still giving that old bastard a chance. Fatholl will question Basen.”

The conversation ended as Chef Irwin’s helpers brought out heaps of pastries on trays. Tarak felt his mood lighten.

CHAPTER THREE

Tarak didn't know if it was everything Jon had said, or whether he was still recovering from the esitry poisoning that had nearly killed him, but he felt like he needed to lie down. He retired to his room to take a nap, wondering when he would have the princess to himself again. They had unfinished business. He hoped she felt the same way.

He awoke in time for lunch. Something else besides Callie and Jon was finally on his mind.

What about my weekly stipend?

Tarak did not have even a penny to call his own. Lunch was the one meal each day when he did not often see many other sorcerers in the dining hall. There were usually a few, at least, but today there seemed to be none. Castle workers dined around Tarak as he ate alone and wondered where everyone had gone. Busy, he was certain, probably around the kingdom taking care of business that he was glad didn't involve him.

He went back to sleep after lunch and awoke in time for dinner. Finally, he felt more like himself. The dining hall was filled with many sorcerers, and even the royal table was filled by very important people...and Trevor.

The king sat at one end with the queen to one side of him and the princess to the other. Next to Callie sat Trevor, while the seats on Trevor's other side were occupied by people Tarak didn't know. He assumed them to be nobility, a reminder of how different Callie's world was from Tarak's.

She seemed to notice his gaze and offered a small smile, though she peered sideways and noticed Trevor staring at her and immediately lost her grin. Trevor shifted his suspicious gaze to Tarak, who made a quick turn to sit with his peers at one of the center tables.

Tarak sat next to Michael and noticed that three sorcerers were missing.

"Where are Jon, Charlie, and Leon?" Tarak asked Michael.

“They took their food elsewhere to work on spell writing. Are you feeling better? People say you’ve been sleeping all day.”

“How did they know?” Tarak asked. “Yes, I am.”

“Good. Everyone knows everything that happens inside the castle.”

“Lord and bane I hope that is not true,” Tarak muttered mostly to himself as he started eating.

Michael chuckled. “What have you done now?”

“Nothing,” he answered with a full mouth.

Although Tarak had little interest in being around Jon more than he needed to, he would’ve enjoyed discovering another tree of sorcery with Leon and Charlie. He had done so with the two of them and his father not long ago. It had pretty much taken all day and night, but they had written out nearly every spell of the divination tree. Now with Jon they were surely working on the conjuration tree. Tarak knew very little about it besides that Jon used it and he seemed able to fly and heal.

“Wait,” Tarak told Michael.

“I wasn’t even talking—”

“Are healing and flying really in the same tree of conjuration?”

“You’re talking about Jon?” Michael asked.

Tarak nodded as he filled his mouth again.

“That is part of what they are figuring out right now. It might be, or maybe Jon has access to two different trees.”

“Does anyone else have access to two trees?”

“Let me think. Leon, your father, your grandfather....and maybe Jon. I guess that’s all.”

“So Jon could be as powerful as those three?”

“Well, let me think. Jon’s healing is stronger than Leon’s, and I would say his dvinia spell is stronger than Leon’s spell

of Wind. But Jon doesn't have access to any other spells, and Leon can cast more, like Fire and Water. So I suppose it depends on a few things, but Jon's healing spell makes his sorcery more useful than probably anyone else's, I imagine."

"No one else can heal like him?"

"None."

"Why not?"

"It requires three octaves of F. Almost no one has that range. Oh, there was someone else who could heal like him, but dteria turned him. He was a horrible pain to kill, but we got him eventually."

Tarak grunted in surprise. "You never told me about him when you explained what happened during the war."

Michael gave something between a shake and a tilt of his head. "I forgot about that fucker, believe it or not. That was before the war, anyway. Why are you so curious all of a sudden?"

"I am trying to determine how I am to fit in with everything now that Jon is here. He soaks attention like a great umbrella. I do not know if I even have a bed for tonight."

"I like you, Tarak. Most people would be embarrassed to admit they are bothered by a lack of attention, but not you."

"Part of my charm," Tarak said.

"I'm surprised someone from your time knows what an umbrella is."

"Would it not be more of a surprise that people in my time did nothing to protect themselves from sun or rain? We were not that uncivilized."

"You sure had me fooled."

"*Psh.*" Tarak tossed a hand.

"Just like an umbrella, the shade that Jon casts on the rest of us is a form of protection. You should learn to appreciate it as we all have."

A castle worker approached Tarak. “The king would like to see you.”

Michael uttered, “Tarak, you did do something, didn’t you?”

“How could I when I was asleep all day?” he retorted, then stuffed his mouth completely before standing up from the bench.

“Oh I’m sure you could’ve found the time.”

Tarak gave Michael a friendly slap on the back as he followed the castle worker to the royal table. He dusted some crumbs off his shirt but couldn’t quite swallow everything in his mouth in time as he stepped up onto the dais.

“Tarak,” the king intoned. “I wanted to thank you for fighting and most likely saving my life by keeping me out of that rift. I’m glad to see you are healthy again. We were all worried about you.”

Tarak forced a swallow. “An honor to fight with you, King.” He bowed. “I was surprised to see you take up arms. You would never see a king on the battlefield in my day.”

“You don’t here, either,” said the queen with a lifted eyebrow at her husband. “And we would like to prevent it from happening again. It is a pleasure to finally meet you, Tarak.”

“You as well, Queen. I see where Callie’s beauty comes from.”

Callie had a squiggle of a smile as if his words were inappropriate.

“Thank you,” the queen said with a lift of her voice and a slight chuckle.

Lord Langston gestured at Tarak with his gargantuan hands. “Must everything need to be a lesson for you, Tarak? The king and queen need to be addressed properly, and are you really too thickheaded to realize you are making the rest of us uncomfortable with your flirtatious comments?”

“Flirtatious?” Tarak was surprised. “If I was flirting, you would know it. What of the stipend I am owed, by the way? I have heard nothing about it.”

Lord Langston clicked his tongue and addressed the table, “I apologize for his behavior. He is a good soldier and a natural sorcerer, as expected from the son of Caarda and the grandson of Basael, but you know how we say a man acts as though he grew up in a barn? I believe Tarak might actually have done so.”

There was a bit of laughter from the table. Tarak might have been offended if Lord Langston’s comments weren’t close to the truth. The man put on a nice smile Tarak knew to be false as he turned back to Tarak.

“Come by my office tomorrow for your stipend.”

The fact that there were no questions or remarks about Tarak’s family must mean these other nobles already knew about him.

He did not know what to do with himself now. Was he supposed to return to his table? He did not want Lord Langston to have the last word. A sour taste had remained in his mouth, and he was trying to enjoy his supper.

“It was Callie who saved my life, King...um, sire,” Tarak tried. He had figured addressing them as “king” and “queen” was proper enough, but apparently not.

Callie smiled sheepishly as she looked at her plate.

“She did tell me,” Nykal acknowledged. “We are extremely proud of her.”

“Yes,” Trevor echoed. “She is something special, indeed.” He put his hand on top of hers and leaned over to kiss her cheek. Tarak might have imagined it, but the whole thing appeared possessive to him, especially the way he glanced at Tarak afterward.

“Jon,” the king announced happily as the healer approached the table and took a spot beside Tarak. “Have you finished your meeting with Leon and Charlie?”

“Yes, though I can’t say it was very productive. I apologize for disturbing you all. I just wanted to greet Trevor. It has been a long time since we’ve seen each other.” His gaze went down to the hand that that Trevor had laid upon Callie’s.

“It is good to see you again, Jon,” Trevor said, and seemed to notice Jon’s gaze. “The princess and I are engaged.”

“Oh, I see.” Jon had a quick but malicious look at Tarak.

Tarak wanted to shout at him but kept everything internal. *Save your criticism for later, you lout. There are people watching you!*

Callie spoke quickly. “Trevor is something of a sorcerer himself, if all of you didn’t know. He taught himself to resist elemental magic, especially fire. I’m still waiting on the lesson he promised me as to how he does it.” She squeezed a cute little smile out of her mouth as she looked up at him, and Tarak tried not to show his jealousy.

He did notice, however, that Trevor seemed a bit tense before Callie’s comment, though he loosened as she squeezed his hand tighter. He then told the table, “I wish I had more time to hone the skill, but I have been so busy working with the king to help ensure everyone in the kingdom is fed. The recent drought was very hard for everyone, but especially the poor.”

There were hums of agreement. Tarak noticed Lord Langston trying to shoo him away. He took one last look at Callie and saw a similar expression from her that it was time for Tarak to leave. He was about to turn when Jon gave a bow. “Excuse us.” He put a hand on Tarak’s back as if to force him into a bow.

“Uh, yes, excuse us,” Tarak mimicked.

Heading away from the table, Jon whispered to Tarak, “I cannot believe your relationship with the princess is an affair!”

“Shh! Lord and bane, I could smack you right here.”

Jon veered off toward the space between empty tables, his hand pressing on Tarak’s back tighter. Tarak shrugged it off as they came to a stop.

“When the princess told me not to speak of you kissing her, I thought it was because she was ashamed of you.”

“First of all, you arse! You—”

“But to realize you are jeopardizing her engagement to Trevor Chespar!”

“First of all—”

“Keep your voice down!”

“You keep yours down!” Tarak replied.

“You are clearly taking advantage of the princess. How old are you?”

“Taking advantage, how? I am seventeen and she is sixteen, and she is far too smart to be taken advantage of by me! She was kissing me just as much as I was kissing her. Now shut up about that,” Tarak added as he noticed Michael approaching.

Michael wedged himself between them and put his arms around both of them. “My two best friends. Getting along nicely, are we?”

“You’re good friends with *him*?” Jon pointed at Tarak.

“I was about to ask Michael the same thing about you, oh delicate virtuous sorcerer of unending renown!”

“Delicate what-now?” Jon asked.

“Shh,” Tarak said as he noticed Leon coming toward them. Tarak didn’t know when the Shit Talker had entered the great hall, but he wore the usual expression as if he was bothered he’d soon have to breathe the same air as Tarak and the others near him.

“What are you three pissing about over here? You’re making a scene.”

“Just becoming acquainted with Jon,” Tarak answered.

“You’re acquainted now. Sit down and behave.”

Jon went to fetch a tray with a plate on it, while Tarak and Michael went to sit back down at their original spots.

“You two really should get along better,” Michael muttered as Jon made his way over.

Tarak’s expression turned more mulish. “He is not making that easy.”

“At least try, for me.”

Tarak sighed. “Fine.”

Jon was greeted and smiled at by just about every sorcerer as he took a spot at the end, unfortunately across from Tarak.

“What are you even a sorcerer of?” Jon asked Tarak.

“Gravity and light. What is your sorcery?”

“It was dvinia, when it was named so by your aunt. Charlie has renamed it Argil.”

“What is that? Argil?”

“Basically clay,” Jon answered. “Because the spell turns mana into a claylike material, though mostly invisible still.”

“Let me see you cast it.”

Jon shrugged. He made a sphere of it between them. Through it, Jon appeared distorted as if Tarak was looking through water. Tarak put his hand against it. It felt firm and strong, but not so hard like wood or stone. It was more like stale bread.

“This cannot be what allows you to fly?” Tarak asked.

“Yes, it is strong.”

Michael suggested, “Push against it.” He gestured at Jon with his fork. “Tarak has the Deviant strength.”

Tarak pushed. The ball of mana gave a bit, but then pushed Tarak right back. He stood up.

“Come,” he told Jon. “I want to see how strong.”

Jon stood and made his way around the table without hesitation. “I could push you back with even this small amount.”

“I would like to see that.”

Michael called from his seat, “This is a bad idea!”

They both ignored him.

“Ready?” Jon asked as Tarak crouched slightly.

Tarak leaned against the ball of Argil and put his palms around it for a good grip.

“Count it down, Michael,” Tarak said.

“Why?” Michael asked.

“He wants to,” Jon said.

“Tarak wants to do a lot of things that are based on terrible ideas, Jon. That is not a valid reason.”

“I will count,” Tarak said. “Three, two, one, now!”

He pushed as hard as he could, moving the ball a step. He heard Jon grunt in surprise. The little ball of Argil was stronger than Tarak thought, but not nearly so powerful. Jon then growled with what had to be all his strength.

“Ah!” Tarak squealed as Jon tossed his hand and Tarak soared backward. He crashed down through a table, shattering it and cutting himself all to shit.

The gasps, screams, and the silence that followed made him realize that he really should’ve listened to Michael.

Jon came and pulled him up through the wreckage of wood. Leon shouted as he marched over.

“What the fuck are you idiots doing?” He picked up a piece of the table. “This is fine wood here!”

Tarak ignored Leon. He was honorable enough to admit to his mistake. “Jon, I was wrong to doubt your sorcery.”

“Thank you.”

“That’s what all this is about?” Leon was still shouting. “You had to measure your cranny hunters in the middle of dinner, with company at the royal table?”

“It won’t happen again,” Jon muttered.

“It had best not. Tarak, I’m going to go ahead and assume this is your fault.”

“Why would you assume that?”

“Because I’ve known Jon a long time and he’s never been this stupid. One day with you, and he’s acting like a child.”

“That’s actually true,” Jon seemed to realize.

“My charm,” Tarak said.

“All these charms.” Michael chuckled.

“Do you want me to heal you?” Jon asked and gestured at Tarak’s bloody arms.

“You should try,” Tarak said. “Test Aliana’s theory that you cannot.”

Jon nodded and put his hand near Tarak’s right arm. He soon shook his head and drew back.

“No, I can’t. She’s right.”

“So Callie did save my life after all.”

The castle workers began picking up pieces of the table to take out of the dining hall. Jon and Tarak started helping them and apologizing to the workers.

“It is not my table,” said one of the middle-aged women with a bit of a laugh. “I doubt the king will be too happy, though.”

Tarak chanced a look at the royal table. She was right. The king did not appear pleased. Not pleased at all.

Best not let him find out his daughter and I are playing nasty, or he is really going to be pissed.

Tarak had hoped to steal a moment with Callie that night, but he hadn’t figure out a way to speak with her privately to set anything up. There was a chance to see her *now*, though.

With everyone else having gone to sleep, he climbed out his window and atop the apartments with pebbles in his

pocket. Then he walked over to where the tower of the keep jutted up alongside the roof of the apartments.

He threw the first pebble and struck Callie's window. Then he waited.

It opened. It was too dark to make out Callie's face, but the silhouette of her hair came down around her as she leaned out.

"Tarak?" she whispered.

"May I come up?"

"Yes." She sounded joyful.

She disappeared into her room. He smiled. It would be tricky to maneuver through her window, but where there was a will there was a way. The biggest issue was using his spell of gravity to move close enough to the window without the same spell pulling the glass hard enough to break it. He might have to throw himself from a little ways off.

He was just about to lift himself when he heard someone climbing onto the apartments from the side of the ramparts, where the guards patrolled.

"Shit," he whispered as he scampered across the roof and toward the drop where he'd climbed up. His only hope of not being seen was to return to his room. He wasn't going to make it. He thought about taking himself into the air, but he would be seen flying off and may be mistaken for an enemy intruder.

He turned to face the guard climbing up onto the apartments and played it casually.

"It is just Tarak. I thought I would enjoy a look at the moon. Who is it who has come to join me?"

"It's Rick, Tarak, and I know what you're really doing."

"Whatever could you be talking about?"

Rick approached and stopped in front of Tarak. He looked up toward the window of the princess and waited. Callie, the curious little beauty she was, stuck her head out.

"Oh gosh," she whispered in shock, a little too loudly.

She quickly retracted her head, then closed and latched her window.

Rick shook his head at Tarak. "I warned you. Now I have to tell the king about this."

"Must you?"

"I must."

Tarak wished there was something he could do, but this was his fault. Rick *had* warned him, and Tarak had put Rick in a difficult position nonetheless.

"How is the king going to react?" Tarak asked.

"I really have no idea. I have never had to report an incident like this to him. I do think it's for the best, Tarak. She's engaged."

"To a twenty-five-year-old shitbrain!"

"That doesn't matter. They made an agreement, and you're making things difficult for her."

"So you agree he's a shit?"

"I'm not agreeing to anything, but I will say he's not ideal for her. What I am even more certain about, however, is that she agreed to marry Trevor. She made a choice."

"She clearly does not want to be with him," Tarak said. "It must only be for political gain."

"I'm sure it is, but we all have a part to play in this kingdom. She is to marry him, and the rest of us are to make sure that happens. It's what the king wants."

"You have asked him?" Tarak wondered.

"I have heard enough to know without asking. A marriage to a family like the Chespars is important to the longevity of the royal family's reign over Lycast. I told you earlier that you cannot let me catch you. Did you take the time to think about why that is?"

"Because if you catch me, others will as well."

“That’s exactly right. Your actions might lead to serious consequences. I told this to Callie as well. I have sworn to protect the king from anything harmful, and what you and the princess are doing is likely to cause harm to his family later on when Trevor inevitably finds out. Do you understand?”

“I do.”

“And?”

Tarak let out his breath. “I cannot stop, can you see? I cannot! I know what you say is correct, but so long as she will have me, I do not see how I am supposed to stay away.” He paused as he tried to think of a solution. “I am allegiant to the royal family and this kingdom, but she is the only glass of water in the kingdom and I am dying of thirst.” He grumbled as he realized a solution after all. “Perhaps the king should send me away on business.”

“You’d have to be a lot more independent before he’ll send you anywhere without supervision. Your actions reflect on him, something you should try to remember at all times.”

There was a pause between them.

Tarak asked, “I had always doubted she would really marry Trevor.”

“So had I, but it seems to be the case.” Rick put his hand on Tarak’s shoulder and walked toward the edge of the roof. “Go to sleep, Tarak. I believe the king will want to speak with you tomorrow. You can express your feelings, as you always do. You’re lucky he is not just a good king but a good listener, and wiser than I am. Perhaps he will have a solution. I trust you will return to your room without waking the other sorcerers?”

“Correct.” Tarak dragged his feet and checked on Callie’s window one last time. It stayed shut. Rick watched him until Tarak climbed over the edge and stood on his windowsill.

He pushed open his window and returned to his room. Alone again.

Tarak plopped down on his bed. “Well, that was shit.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Callie knew she would be in trouble this morning. She couldn't see who had stopped Tarak from taking himself up to her room last night, but she had to assume it was either Rick or someone who would tell Rick. After his earlier warning to her, there was now no doubt in her mind her father had heard about this by now.

Callie had breakfast delivered to her quarters in the keep. Seeing as how she was likely to be interrupted, it was better than making a scene in the dining hall.

As she'd expected, a knock came at her door. "Callie, it's your father."

"Come in," she said.

He opened the door but did not step inside. "Your mother and I would like to speak with you."

She hung her head and followed him to the bedchamber of her parents. There was no guard there. They stopped just within the doorway. Nykal closed the door.

"Rick spoke to me," said her father. "I informed your mother of what he told me."

Both her parents appeared displeased, though Nykal seemed more disappointed while Esma appeared worried. The last thing Callie wanted was another awkward conversation with her parents about men, marriage, and sex.

"I know you will not lie to us," Nykal prefaced with no confidence behind his words.

"I won't," she assured to ease their worries.

"How long has this been going on with Tarak?" Nykal asked.

"Nothing has been going on. We kissed two nights ago, when I saved him. That was it."

"Then how do you explain Tarak attempting to enter your bedchamber last night from the roof of the apartments?" her

father asked.

Her mother still had not said anything, and Callie was even more worried about disappointing Esma than Nykal.

“Nothing has been going on,” she confirmed with a gaze at the floor, “but something was most likely going to start.”

Nykal grunted and turned to Esma. Callie’s mother stepped toward her and tilted her head. “Not that long ago, you told us you wanted to marry Trevor.”

She had said that. “I still intend to marry him.”

Both of them expressed disapproval through groans. “Callie,” Nykal chastised. “You cannot expect to marry one man while you spend romantic nights with another. I am not only talking about the honor of it but the danger of what could happen if Trevor finds out. He would be deeply insulted and might wish to take personal revenge against our family. Oh, lord.” Nykal looked around as if for a chair. Esma helped him by pulling one over. He practically fell onto it as he shook his head and glanced down.

“I understand it is risky, but I did not think you would have *this* kind of reaction after finding out,” Callie admitted.

“No, you don’t understand.” He glanced up at her. “Trevor came to me just last evening and expressed worry that something may be happening between you and Tarak. I promised him it wasn’t. I told him the two of you were friends and that was all. I even went so far as to say that you would never dishonor him. Imagine if he found out now? He might assume I knew about this affair and lied to him.”

Esma raised her hand as if to put it on Nykal’s shoulder, but she seemed to stop herself. It wasn’t long ago that Callie had heard news of her father’s very old affair. It was why her mother had gone to live in Tryn for so long. It seemed that she had recently forgiven him, but there was still distance between them that Callie could feel. Knowing her mother, she might never be able to let this go completely.

Trevor wouldn’t, either.

The silence became uncomfortable, not that it was strange to be quiet around her family. What was eerie was that her father seemed unsure what to do. Eventually he composed himself and stood up.

“Do you wish to end the engagement with Trevor?” he asked worriedly.

“No, we need his family’s coin and land. I know the Chespars have access to valuable mines.”

“Then you cannot do anything to jeopardize this engagement. We have gone over this, Callie.” He spoke with restraint, though he couldn’t seem to contain all of his frustration. “The closer to the wedding this becomes, the worse it will be if everything falls apart, especially if through an affair.” He looked at Esmā before returning his gaze to Callie. “Take it from me. There is nothing fun or exciting about dishonoring someone, even if you don’t care about them as much as I care about your mother.”

“I know, Father! It is not the idea of having an affair that excites me. In fact, I hate it. I wish I was not engaged.”

Her father seemed to ignore this statement. “Do you require my help for Tarak to stay away from you?”

“No.”

“So you will tell him.” The king paused as if to allow her to respond.

Callie could not promise this. She wanted time alone with Tarak more than anything she could think of.

He went on, “You cannot be friends if that friendship is going to lead to more.”

“It doesn’t have to,” Callie lied.

“Rick told me otherwise.”

“Callie,” Esmā interjected. “Do you really like Tarak?”

“I do.”

She peered at Nykal. “How much damage do we believe it would cause if we ended the engagement right now?”

Callie gasped. She had never thought either of them would really allow her to end the engagement, which was why she didn't bring it up.

"Some, certainly," Nykal answered. "But it would be a fraction of the damage caused by Trevor finding out there was an affair with Tarak. Do you agree?"

"I do. It might be for the best."

The king sighed. "I am starting to think the same thing."

Callie had thought she could use Trevor as he'd used her and have fun with Tarak at the same time, but it was clear that such a thing was not possible without being caught. Now she just wanted to break it off entirely with Trevor, as she couldn't imagine continuing with this marriage. Her experience with Tarak was all too brief, but she wouldn't forget how it felt. She could never have that with Trevor.

Callie asked, "Could I really end the engagement and start a relationship with Tarak?"

"Of course you can," Esma said. "We would never force you to marry anyone, but we cannot predict how Trevor will respond. You must keep in mind how your actions will affect all of us."

"Yes, I know."

Nykal spoke. "Trevor was already suspicious of Tarak. It is not likely to end well, but I want you to be happy, my daughter. You have expressed that you would not be very happy with Trevor. Know that your mother and I have been talking about this in depth. It makes both of us uncomfortable."

"It does," Esma agreed. "We have been talking about possibly ending the engagement since the last conversation about this, but we decided it needs to be your decision."

Callie thought deeply, though her father interrupted her thoughts again.

"Of course we would want you to be happy with Trevor if possible," he added. "Because that is a relationship that would

provide a lot of leverage to our family, and this leverage may be necessary to remain in power through these difficult times.”

Esma put her hand on his arm to stop him. “She knows this.”

“I thought it was worth mentioning again.”

Callie said, “I know how important it is. Our family is weak right now. Trevor’s is not. It’s because of this weakness that we almost lost power during the rebellion. We probably wouldn’t be able to survive another, would we?”

“No, but the people are happy,” Nykal said firmly. “All the people. They are pleased with the result of the war and understand the difficult times are because of the war and the recent drought. They do not blame me. There seems to be no risk of rebellion right now. It would be later that we need to worry, but that gives us time to prepare. My more immediate fear is what is to happen with Monrra, Basael, and the other Ancients who wish to manipulate mana. There is no telling how much support we will need or where it must come from. We are still allies with the analytes, but the existence of rifts throughout Lycast makes everything more complicated. We must have troops available right now, and we do. We have some of the strongest sorcerers in the world, I believe, especially with Jon returning. The Chespar family has troops, some sorcerers, but mostly power through other means. A marriage to them would nearly rule out rebellion, while an insult to the family could incite one on its own. It would have been better if you had not become involved with Trevor at all, but it is too late for that now.”

Another uncomfortable silence passed as it seemed as if the king did not know what to do. No, he knew what he wanted and that was for her to be happy with Trevor. He had said this. Unfortunately, that was impossible.

She would hate for this burgeoning alliance with the Chespars to fall apart because of her, but could she really marry Trevor and resist Tarak? She wouldn’t feel right for him to be sent away, which seemed like the only alternative.

Esma asked, “What would you like to do, Callie?”

“Let me think.”

She couldn't stand the thought of spending the rest of her life with Trevor, especially when she already had a moment with Tarak. It was enough for her to know when one thing was wrong and the other was so right. But no feeling would be worse than dealing with a rebellion and losing her father because he didn't have the support of the Chespars.

The thought only made her angry. Any good man in Trevor's position would never turn on the royal family, even if an affair ended an engagement. It was too damaging to Lycast. Thousands of innocent people would suffer. Tarak would never do such a thing. Jon would never do such a thing. Neither would Michael, Charlie, nor even Reuben. She was decided now. She could not be with a man who might turn against and even *kill* her father because Callie refused to marry him. It was only a possibility with Trevor, but that possibility was enough.

“I *must* end the engagement. There is no other way.”

Both her parents reacted similarly, with a short sigh, but they composed themselves quickly.

“I will have Trevor notified,” Nykal said.

“No, I should tell him myself. Can you summon him? I should know what I'm going to say by the time he arrives.”

“I will.”

Another silence passed, though it was no longer uncomfortable. Callie feared the conversation she had to have with Trevor, but she looked forward to telling Tarak the news. She already felt a smile crinkling the edges of her mouth. He would probably sweep her up and spin her around with him before kissing her.

“May I ask something personal?” Nykal began.

Callie nodded with hesitance as she lost her smile.

“You would really be happier with *Tarak* than Trevor?”

Callie chuckled. “Yes.”

“We’re not discussing marriage with Tarak, right?”

“No,” she said with another chuckle.

“Well, I suppose I don’t need to understand it.” He paused. “But I just can’t seem to even grasp it. *Tarak*, Callie?”

“Father...” She chastised him now.

“I am trying not to judge, but I am surprised. I didn’t know you found uncouth comments and flatulence funny.”

“He doesn’t fart in front of me, Father,” she said as she felt her cheeks go red.

“No?”

“He has belched, however. And what a belch it was!”

Her father grumbled, but her mother laughed.

“So *belching* and uncouth comments?” Nykal asked.

“Of course there is more to him than that,” Callie insisted.

Esma said, “I understand it.”

“You do?” Nykal asked in disbelief.

“Yes.”

“*What?*” Nykal nearly shouted.

Callie giggled with her mother.

“Explain it for me,” he requested.

Callie gladly let her mother give her opinion.

“He’s brave.”

“Doesn’t know the meaning of fear,” Nykal corrected.

“He’s handsome.”

“Eh, tall.”

“Strong.”

“Not from any semblance of hard work or discipline,” Nykal continued to correct Esma.

“He seems like a lot of fun.”

“That’s your idea of fun?”

“You know, Nykal, we used to have fun as well. Now I cannot even remember the last time you laughed.”

“My beautiful wife...these last few years have been difficult. Have you looked at me very closely recently. I have aged a decade in a year. Of course it is hard to laugh!”

Esma already began to snicker, though Nykal was not done.

“My hair has all but turned gray, and my face is wrinkled as if dried out by a hundred suns! I used to have a shine to my brown locks. I used to exude youth and life, and now I look like a worn-out bag! And you expect me to laugh? Ha!”

Callie laughed with her mother. She had not seen this side of her father in years. She had almost forgotten he existed, but he and her mother used to share laughs like this all the time.

“I would not say that you exuded youth and life,” Esma said as she ran her fingers down his shoulder-length hair. “But I do sometimes miss the shine to your hair, and the color.”

Callie stepped between her parents and put her arms around both of them. The three embraced.

“Thank you,” she told them. “Whatever happens because of this, I will be on your side, Father, and yours, Mother. Tarak and I will be discreet for a while.”

“Callie,” Nykal said as she started to leave. “There is one more very, very important thing.”

“Yes?”

Nykal gestured at Esma. “Would you like to tell our beautiful daughter what she seems oblivious to?”

“I suppose so.” She sounded reluctant. “Callie, you must wait before you start anything with Tarak.”

“But I said we would be discreet.”

“You have only kissed him but one time, and already Rick found out. You are not able to be discreet.”

She groaned because she knew her mother was right. “All right, how long must I wait?”

“A long time,” her father answered. “I would say at least a year.”

“A year?” Callie and her mother answered at the same time.

“No, that is far too long,” Esma continued.

“That is the only way Trevor will not assume she had been involved with Tarak during her engagement.”

“She cannot possibly wait that long,” Esma said.

“She cannot?” Nykal looked at Callie.

“Would you have been able to wait that long if it was you and mother?”

“That is different; your mother and I love each other very much.” His own words seemed to startle him. “Do not tell me you love that boy!”

“Not at this point, no, but—”

“Callie, this *is* short-term, right?”

She held back her answer. He went on.

“I really hope you are not planning on seeing him long enough to develop serious feelings.”

Esma asked, “Would it really be so terrible?”

“I did not tell you some of the things he said in my presence! He talks about breasts as if they are gems, and he jokes about entertaining an orgy with our daughter and the other sorcerers. He does this before his *king*, Esma, as if I’m his tavern buddy six ales deep on a casual night.”

Esma gasped and looked at Callie. “This is true?”

“Well...you make him sound much worse than he is.”

This didn’t seem to take the shock away from her mother’s face. “Answer your father, Callie.”

She grumbled to the floor. "I'm not planning on developing serious feelings, but I am not going to wait a year. I cannot possibly agree to that. How about a week? That should give Trevor plenty of time to overcome his anger, and even then we will be discreet. *More* discreet," she added when she noticed their castigating glowers.

"You must at least wait a month," Esma said.

"At *least*," her father agreed. "Two would be best."

That was not going to be easy, but she knew they were being reasonable. "A month at least."

Nykal said, "And during this time Tarak should not be seen flirting with you, and it should not become clear that he is waiting for a month to pass. Do not speak about this to anyone else but him, and I believe it would be best for him to go about his life as he does normally, which is quite loud and vibrant, drawing attention to everything he does. I mean that he should pursue other girls besides you, as he has."

"Why?" Callie asked. She had figured her father would disapprove of Tarak, but Nykal was speaking about him with such disdain that she worried he'd even try to split them up.

"Trevor will be suspicious about Tarak after this. He already was before. I am not saying Trevor will have spies, but he will want to know what Tarak has been up to. And you as well. He really liked you, Callie. He was looking forward to marriage. I think he is going to be very hurt. Some men have no outward reaction when they are hurt deeply. They close up and fall silent. Others become loud, and some even turn violent. We will have to see what kind of anger Trevor is going to demonstrate, but he may look for proof of his suspicions, and if he finds them...there is bound to be trouble. I know we were jovial earlier, but this is serious now. It is *dangerous*, Callie. Please, please do not give Trevor a reason to be angry more than we already are. Talk to Tarak about this and make sure he understands. He should go about being himself but without visits to the keep in order to see you, during day *or* night."

She had to know. “Did Rick tell you about Tarak’s frequent visits?”

“Everyone noticed that.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Tarak had finished breakfast without seeing Callie or the king. He dreaded the conversation with Callie's father, but how long was he to wait with this feeling? As he convened in the courtyard with the other sorcerers, he approached Leon.

"Has the king asked to speak with me?"

"No. Oh, what did you do now, Tarak?"

"Nothing."

"Right." Leon rolled his eyes. "Just make sure it doesn't land on my lap."

Tarak almost could not believe he had not been summoned to see the king. He glanced around but did not see Rick or the cousin of the head guard, Randy. Could it be that Rick had not told the king after all?

Tarak needed to speak to Callie to have this all sorted out. He headed toward the keep.

"Where are you going?" Leon asked.

"I would like to see the princess."

"All right, but come here first."

Tarak turned around and showed his confusion.

"Come here," Leon demanded.

Tarak walked back to him. Leon smacked him in the back of the head.

"Hey!" Tarak complained.

"Don't be stupid. You need to train."

"Training is boring."

"It didn't used to be for you. Why is it now?"

Tarak wondered if this was supposed to be a lesson.

He wasn't sure why he was so put off by Leon teaching him anything. The man was a very talented sorcerer, and he

had helped Tarak progress considerably. It was probably because Leon was so annoying.

“Because progress is slow. It takes too long.”

“That’s what I thought. Congratulations. You have reached your first milestone, one that most sorcerers never get past. When progress slows, they lose the urge to push themselves. With a spell or two already at their disposal, they don’t see the need to train so hard. But your progress has been faster than most. You may be a gigantic lazy oaf, but you’re lucky because you shouldn’t need to train for very long to reach the next milestone.”

Tarak would not admit that invisibility was what he wanted more than anything. It would only lead to questions that he did not want to answer as to why he wanted that skill.

“And what milestone would that be?”

Leon grew a devilish grin. “To fly, of course!”

He had to know something before he let himself become excited. “Do you mean fly like Michael or fly like Jon?”

“I have never trained or even met a gravity mage before, though I bet you’ll be able to land much easier than us wind mages can. You see, the wind has to come from somewhere and keep us afloat. As we near the ground, it is damn near impossible to control the strength of the wind with the kind of precision we need. Your spell of gravity can remain above you as you land, so I don’t see why you shouldn’t be able to control yourself in the air just as well as Jon can.”

“How am I supposed to go about training to fly?”

“How do you think?”

Tarak lowered his head in question. “Are you telling me to soar around the city? Did you not see what I did to the king’s table when I fell through it? I cannot fathom breaking through someone’s roof, and I might split my head open in the process.”

“You’re not going to shatter anyone’s roof, and you’re not going to split your head open.”

Tarak decided to admit the truth, hoping he could change Leon's mind. "I have made great progress with light. I had hoped to work toward turning invisible." He added quickly, "Imagine what I could do during battle if I cannot be seen."

"Yes, and I can imagine a number of other things you would like to do as well."

"But Leon...invisibility. Imagine. I am serious."

"Invisibility would be a nice skill for one of our sorcerers to have, though I would bestow it upon anyone besides you if I had the power. Let me see something. Can you at least make your hand disappear from sight?"

Tarak had not quite yet figured out how to make anything disappear except for the light from a single candle, but that was different. That was blocking out a source of a light, not making the candle disappear. He could change the color of his hand. He could put a black veil in front of his hand or enclose his hand in a black box. He could even move the image of his hand thirty, even forty yards away, though that trick was very difficult and fatigued him greatly.

"I can see in your eyes that you are thinking of a way to trick me," Leon said as he jabbed his fingers into Tarak's shoulder for a little push. "Admit it. You cannot make your hand disappear."

"No. So help me."

Leon shook his head. "Invisibility was the most difficult and strenuous spell back when mana was changed by Basael and his offspring. It was Nijja who took illusions and adapted them to her specialization of enchantments. We called enchantments and illusions 'ordia,' a form of order. Seeing as how Nijja used illusions constantly in her daily life, she must've made the spells easier to cast. But even a simple illusion was difficult back then. I honestly cannot understand how you, a simple-minded cranny chaser, have figured out how to make illusions in this day, but I'm not going to complain. What I will tell you is that I am fairly certain you are ages away from turning invisible. It's even more difficult than Jon's three-octave healing spell. Believe me."

“It is not just my natural ability that allows me to make illusions. I have come to understand light. I am not ages away. I can feel that I am close. I just need to...what is the word? I need to decipher how to hide something. It is a puzzle.”

“No, you need to unlock it in your mind. It is more than just a puzzle. You asked me earlier to help you, but this proves I cannot. Maybe you are not so simple-minded. But you are lazy, devious, and you seem more interested in food and girls than you are in sorcery. Illusions are complex, Tarak. You might have it in you to become invisible one day, but I do not believe you’re close. Flying, however, now that you have already unlocked because you have become skilled and powerful enough with Gravity Sphere to make it possible. Why are you not more excited about this? Don’t you wish to fly? You only need to practice.”

“You are truly not worried about me killing myself?”

“There are a lot of things I’m worried about more than that.”

Tarak had thought about flying already. He was not sure he wanted to admit that he did find it extremely appealing. Yes, he wished he could fly, and it excited him that Leon thought he was ready. There was one major problem, however. How were they going to use him after he learned to fly? It was difficult to imagine he would have nearly as much leisure time.

“Lifting yourself is easy,” Leon continued. “And we’ve already talked about landing. All you need to practice is moving across the air without losing control. There’s a place where Jon learned to fly just outside the forest to the north. There’s a lot of open land there. Just follow the northwestern road out of the city. Keep west until you see the forest on your left. You’ll come by the open land north of you. Stay away from the path once you get started. I don’t care about you breaking anything, but we can’t have you landing on others going about their business. Stay low so you don’t kill yourself when you inevitably lose control.” Leon stopped. He seemed to be done. “Get going. With someone of your skill, I expect you to be flying safely by lunch.”

“What am I to do with my horse during this time? He might run off.”

“Why would you have your horse with you?”

“How else do you expect me to get there?”

“You fly there. It will be good practice.”

“Over the city?” Tarak asked.

“It is no more than a half-mile to the western wall. Walk if you are that worried, then fly the rest of the way. You are lucky because you heal. You don’t have to be as careful as the rest of us. Break your leg for all I care. Just come back.” Leon fished in his pockets and took out two rings. “Here,” he said as he handed them over. “I’ll have the other calling. Use it only in an emergency. I’m giving you a tracker ring that is enchanted to another tracker ring that remains in the castle at all times, because I think you are dumb enough to get lost.”

“Fine. I will leave soon,” Tarak said, then hoped Leon would walk away.

“What could you possibly have to do that’s more important—? You know what, never mind. I don’t care to keep arguing with you. I tried. If you would rather cause trouble in the keep, so be it.”

Tarak tried to pacify Leon with a gesture. “I am to leave soon, really. I would just like to be paid first. I am owed a stipend, and I believe I have gone long enough without receiving it.”

“So get it when you come back.”

“I would like to have some coin in case I will wish to stop in town for a bite to eat.”

“Is that really the reason?”

“Yes!” Tarak replied in anger.

Leon feigned shock. “Oh, forgive me for remembering all of your bullshit.” He spoke sarcastically. “That’s certainly not your fault!”

“May I fetch my stipend now?” Tarak asked with annoyance.

“Fine, yes, but you should be aware that Lord Langston would’ve probably denied you your stipend if you hadn’t saved the king’s life. I heard you attempted to pay him with counterfeit money. You know doing that is a crime, and all crimes done to lords fetch you even worse punishment. It’s best you stop such antics.”

“The king said I would be paid when I awoke, so I was at least expecting Lord Langston to come to me. He is the one who plays games making me visit his office. I assume he will have another annoying lecture for me, as well.”

Leon tossed a hand as he started to turn away. “Take it up with the master of coin.”

“Who is that?” Tarak asked.

Leon looked back at him as if he was stupid.

“Lord Langston,” Tarak answered himself. “You could have just said that!”

“You should really learn to think before speaking.”

“I could say the same to you. At least I am young. What is your excuse?”

“Come here!” Leon grabbed Tarak in a headlock.

Tarak lifted him up, but Tarak’s own neck got in the way of doing anything spectacular. “Such an honorable fighter to start with a headlock before giving me a warning!”

“For you to complain about honor must be a joke!”

Tarak set Leon back down roughly and tried to pry his arms off. Leon’s strength no longer surprised Tarak, but that didn’t stop him from complaining.

“The only reason you can keep that hold around my neck is with sorcery!”

“So?”

“You cannot use sorcery without expecting me to do the same.”

“It is a little bit of sorcery and only to make this more fair. You are still stronger than me and through no work of your own. Give up yet?”

“Never.” Tarak grunted as he put all of his strength into prying Leon’s arms off. He finally escaped with his head, but Leon had put a foot behind him.

Tarak went down, but he pulled Leon with him. Leon fell on top of him, the two of them smacking their foreheads against each other.

“Fuck!” Leon yelled as he rolled off and held his head.

Tarak saw spots as he moaned in pain, but there was some consolation because he knew he had a very hard skull and Leon sounded to be suffering just as much.

Another voice broke in. “What the hell is happening here?” Jon demanded.

Michael answered from farther off. “Oh, they do that Jon, it’s fine.”

“They fight?”

“Yeah. It’s nothing.”

“Really?” Jon seemed to be asking Leon as he helped him up.

“It’s the only way with Tarak,” Leon explained. “What do you want, Jon?”

Tarak dusted himself off as he waited for his natural healing to take away the pain in his head.

“I finished healing everyone in the city. Now I want to visit the surrounding cities and towns and announce my healing service.”

“A fine idea,” Leon said.

“Is there anything I should know about any of the cities? Like a new lord or a potential enemy somewhere?”

“Do you know that Kataleya is now Lord of Livea?”

“I heard.” He spoke happily. “Anything else?”

“There is another new lord, in Koluk, this ugly fuck of a man. He does seem trustworthy, to my surprise, which reminds me that psyche has made its way here already. I know you spoke about it being prevalent in Ovira. I would hate for it to become that way here, but my hatred for things never seems to make them stop. Have you spoken to the king’s newest advisor yet?”

“Fatholl, the psychic elf?”

“That’s the one.”

“Not yet. Isn’t it dangerous to have a psychic as an advisor?”

Tarak interjected, “We all thought so at first, but he has proven himself in combat.”

“Yeah, he’s right,” Leon agreed. “I’m not saying we trust him completely, but he showed us what it feels like to be manipulated by psyche. I’m almost certain he hasn’t been using it since.”

“I could meet him before I leave,” Jon suggested. “I’m a little more versed in psyche than the rest of you after learning about it in Ovira.”

“No, the elf is in Koluk right now questioning the new lord there. It was my suggestion. I trust the elf, Fatholl, more than I do Orvyn. Considering he’s the only psychic we know, I want to see what Orvyn tells him. The psychics in Ovira could really tell a lie, right?”

“Some could do it easily, but those are rare. Fatholl would have to be very powerful to have the skill.”

“Oh he is.”

Tarak snuck off toward the keep.

“Tarak!” Leon called.

Ugh. He turned around. “Yes?”

“Take Michael with you. Michael, make sure he gets his coin from Langston without wandering off, then help him learn to fly. He has rings already.”

“How am I supposed to help him?” Michael asked without moving from his little practice corner.

Leon rolled his eyes. “I’m sure you’ll figure it out. Meanwhile, I have to help Tienna figure out what the fuck she has been casting that seems to give everyone power, and you’ve been distracting her.”

“I’ve been helping her!”

“Your attempts at flirting are not helping anyone.” Leon gestured for them to shoo toward the keep. “Off you fuck.”

Michael jogged up to Tarak as they headed toward the keep. “I hope you can learn to fly quickly. There is more flirting to be done with Tienna.”

Tarak held back a laugh, but it came out as a snort. He asked, “You two smooch yet?”

“No, I’m scared to ask if she’s interested.”

“Scared of what?” Tarak opened the door to the keep for Michael, then went in after.

“Uh, of embarrassing myself, of making her uncomfortable, of ruining our friendship. Is that enough for you?”

“Embarrassment is nothing but a feeling. You are making her uncomfortable already by flirting if she is not interested. And your friendship is already tainted if one of you wants more than the other. What else?”

“Well, damn. Maybe I will ask if she likes me.”

“Michael,” called a lady from the doorway of the keep.

He and Tarak turned around to find Eden there.

“What?” Michael lost his smile.

Eden was usually beautiful, but her thick hair of black could not seem to be tamed. Her eyes drooped toward dark

circles. A pained look twisted her delicate face.

“Can I speak to you?” she asked.

Michael seemed resigned as he exhaled and walked toward the wall. Eden dragged her feet and hung her head as she followed him over.

Tarak could not hear what was spoken between them, but their expressions said enough. Eden deeply regretted kissing Arthur. She had been miserable without Michael. Michael, on the other hand, arms folded, was not sympathetic to Eden’s plight.

Tarak actually felt a little bad for Eden as she cried. Michael dropped his folded arms. He looked as if he wanted to hold her, but he folded his arms again.

He said something, and Eden nodded without looking up. Then Michael dropped his arms again and returned to join Tarak in walking up the stairs of the keep.

“I don’t understand how she could throw away our relationship so easily and then suffer every day.”

Tarak thought it was best to keep his opinions to himself in this case, but then Michael looked straight at him and asked, “What do you think?”

“It seems like you miss her.”

“Hell, I do.”

“But she broke your trust.”

“She did.”

They reached the top of the stairs. Michael stopped.

“That’s all you have to say? Usually you won’t shut the hell up.”

“Because I usually think I know what is right, but I do not in this case. On one hand, she has made you suffer, and on the other hand she seems to regret her choice and probably would not kiss anyone else. On one hand, she did not seem to value your relationship, and on the other it seems like she does now. On one hand, she could be lying, and on the other we are

young. Most of the time people our age have no idea what we want until it is gone. On one hand—”

“You’re driving me crazy with the hands.” Michael started up again. “Let’s get your damn stipend so we can hurry up and nearly kill ourselves trying to fly.”

They made it to the second set of stairs. Tarak had hoped to see Callie, but it was a large keep and there was not time to search for her as he usually did.

Trevor Chespar came flying around the corner, huffing in rage. He barreled straight toward Tarak.

“Move!” he demanded.

Tarak stepped aside. Both he and Michael looked over their shoulders as Trevor flipped his cloak angrily to keep from tripping on it as he descended the stairs in haste.

Michael showed Tarak a confused expression. Tarak shrugged, and the two of them continued on.

Internally, however, Tarak was burning up as he tried to suppress his glee. There was no denying the hatred Tarak had just seen in Trevor’s eyes when he’d looked at Tarak. Had Callie just broken her engagement with him?

They arrived outside Lord Langston’s office. He appeared to be having his shoes cleaned and shined by one of the castle workers. He also appeared to be in the middle of berating his son, Reuben, about something.

“You are being foolish, Reuben—yes, Tarak and Michael? What do you want?”

Reuben turned around.

Tarak greeted the enchanter with a nod.

Reuben returned one. The enchanter did not stand far within the doorway, as if wanting to escape as soon as he could, and Tarak and Michael took places beside him.

“I have not received my weekly stipend,” Tarak said, “but I can wait until your business is finished with your son.”

“My business with my son is not your business. Regarding your stipend, I am deducting half of it for the table you destroyed. I would consider that generous if I were you.” Lord Langston gestured for Reuben to come. Reuben obliged. His father handed off a key from his pocket. “You know which drawer.”

“Yes, Father,” Reuben muttered.

Tarak made a simple illusion of adding some holes to the lord’s socks that stuck out from his shoes. Tarak’s mana followed his will, presenting the appearance of hairy flesh in place of the cloth. Tarak nudged Michael and pointed as Reuben Langston Senior looked at his son.

The castle worker seemed to notice the holes at the same time, letting out the start of a gasp. He leaned his head down farther. Michael chuckled under his breath.

“Shall I fetch twenty silver?” Reuben asked as he fiddled through a drawer.

“Count it twice,” the lord replied. “Then put it in one of the empty purses.”

As Reuben worked behind the desk, Tarak let his illusion fade. The lord’s socks appeared whole again. Tarak focused on an even better one.

Reuben finished counting out twenty silver coins and walked back with a small purse in hand. By then, Tarak had finished. Michael clearly already noticed the new illusion, putting his hand over his mouth to stifle laughter, but Reuben didn’t seem too interested in looking at his father again.

“Here,” Reuben said.

“Thank you...and thank *you*, lord,” Tarak couldn’t help but smile.

Lord Langston, his shoes shined, stood up and straightened his pants. “You’re welcome, Tarak. If you continue to behave as well-mannered as this, we may not have any problems going forward.”

Reuben glanced at his father and chortled before he could stop himself.

Unfortunately, that sent Michael into a fit of laughter as well.

“What has gotten into you two?” Lord Langston asked.

“Quiet, you fools!” Tarak whispered as he barely contained his own laughter. “Yes, lord. I should be leaving now.”

But the master of coin somehow had the foresight to look at himself in the mirror. He gasped in horror.

Everything about his appearance was mostly the same, except for a pair of large breasts and a bursting coin purse held at his revealing cleavage.

“Tarak!” he yelled.

“Do you have the rest of my coins there?” Tarak pointed.

“Tarak!” he yelled even louder as Tarak darted out of the office and called for Michael to follow him. “Tarak, get back here!”

Tarak did not stop. He heard Langston’s voice continue, “I’m taking away your entire stipend next week, you disrespectful clod! And why are you laughing at this, Reuben? You cannot be this immature! Stop laughing right now!”

Tarak and Michael hurried down the stairs and stopped there for a breath.

Still chuckling, Michael asked, “Was it worth it?”

“Yes.”

“You’d give up a week of payment for that?”

“I imagine I will find some way of obtaining my stipend against his wishes.”

“I finally understand you!”

“You do?”

“Yes, you’ve never had to face any consequences, have you?”

“I suppose not. It is not as if I had a guardian at home to punish me.”

Michael chuckled and shook his head. “Come on. Let’s go.”

As they made their way out of the keep, Michael suddenly gave a laugh without humor.

“What?” Tarak asked.

“I’m actually scared you’re going to kill yourself as you learn to fly. Promise me you’ll at least stay low to the ground, and make sure to avoid trees.”

“I promise. I am not that immune to consequences.”

“Didn’t you almost kill yourself right in the courtyard while experimenting with your spell?”

“That was...Leon was...” He paused to think. “I suppose it was rather close, and that is why I will be careful.”

“Good. Imagine if I had to explain that you’d killed yourself while I was helping. They’d probably throw me out of the castle.”

“Do not be absurd. Leon would celebrate with a drink and Lord Langston would shower you with riches.”

“Hmm. Perhaps they would, but Callie would probably never speak to me again.”

Tarak showed his shock as he stopped and stared at Michael.

Michael whispered, “Yes, yes, we all know there is something happening between you and the princess. Do not be so surprised.”

“Did she say something?”

“No, but it’s obvious.” Michael seemed to realize something as he gasped and pointed.

Tarak had a feeling of what it might be. He pulled Michael into a nearby linen closet and shut the door.

“That was Trevor being broken up with, wasn’t it?” Michael asked.

“That is possible. What do people say about Callie and me?”

“I imagine the same thing people say about Tienna and me.”

“Nobody talks much about the two of you, but I can see your interest in her as plain as day.”

Michael turned over his palm and made a face as if something was obvious.

“Oh,” Tarak replied. “I thought I was more discreet.”

“You, Tarak?” Michael laughed. “Discreet?”

“Do you think Trevor suspects something?”

“I don’t know. *Is* there something to suspect?”

“No.”

“You have to say that, don’t you?”

“Yes, and that is all I will speak on the matter and I urge you, no, I *plead* that you say nothing of this to anyone. Keep it in for Callie if not for me.”

“Tarak, there is nothing I know of that others haven’t figured out already. If you really want to stop people from assuming what seems to be true, you and she had really better learn how to actually be discreet.” Michael laughed and shook his head. “You are really insane.” They were already whispering, but he lowered his voice even more. “The princess, Tarak. The *engaged* princess? It is like you have a death wish!”

“It is not a game with her. She drives me mad. I cannot help myself.”

“Like the way you could not help make an illusion to Lord Langston?”

“That I could help.”

Michael laughed but stopped as they heard someone's footsteps outside the door. Whoever it was seemed to halt.

The door to the closet suddenly opened.

Tarak was horrified to find Leon on the other side. "What in the... *fuck* are you two doing?"

"We were just leaving," Tarak said as he and Michael squeezed past Leon

"I don't even want to know!" Leon called after them as they hurried out of the keep without looking back. "I had better see results, *today*, Tarak! Today! And don't fucking kill yourself!"

Tarak and Michael ran from the keep, through the courtyard, and even past the open drawbridge to leave the castle. The whole time, Tarak couldn't get over his surprise that everyone seemed to know about him and Callie already. This really was dangerous. They might have to spend some time apart after all, especially if Trevor was going to be watching Tarak, as any spiteful ex-betrothed would do.

For now, however, Tarak would fly.

CHAPTER SIX

It was difficult for Tarak to walk out of the city with a fresh coin purse in his pocket and not stop somewhere to spend it. There were plenty of taverns, eateries, and some fine merchandise on display in front of hawkers on the street. It almost felt like there was an endless number of possibilities for fun and potential trouble Tarak could get into, especially with Michael at his side.

Tarak slowed a number of times, but Michael would only chuckle and push him along. “First, you’re going to learn to fly,” Michael said. “Then you can let your impulses take over again.”

“At least let us stop for a drink or two, first.”

“Why?”

“To calm the nerves,” Tarak replied.

“If your nerves were any calmer, you’d be dead. Come on.”

Eventually they left the city. Michael told Tarak, “You remind me a little of Jon sometimes.”

“How!” Tarak replied with a bit too much anger.

“Whoa!” Michael stepped back.

“I apologize,” Tarak said as he controlled himself. “How do I remind you of Jon? I hope not because of his personality.”

“Jon is lovable, Tarak. You will see that eventually. But no, not his *lovable* personality. It’s more that you never seem to be nervous, and you always seem like you want to involve yourself in everything.”

“Do not tell me that he had something with Callie.”

“No, but she did show a lot of interest in him early on.”

“Lord and bane, do not tell me these things!”

“There’s nothing for you to worry about. Nothing ever happened between them. Jon is twenty now.” Michael paused.

“Twenty-one, maybe? My point is that he’s a lot older than you. All of us are. Callie was a fourteen-year-old girl who had just become a princess and went about as if the world was hers for the taking. She’s changed a lot since then, but it’s hard for me to let go of the image of a naive girl trying to fit in with a group of sorcerers much older than her. Now she’s just like one of us, and I’m sure you will be soon.”

“I am not already?”

“You have a ways to go before anyone is going to look at you the same way we look at Jon.”

“I understand his ability to heal benefits the kingdom, but I am yet to see anything lovable about him.”

“Let me think how best to describe him.” Michael had a breath. “Have you ever read a story where—?”

“No.”

“Let me get to the question. Wait.” Michael stopped. “Are you saying you haven’t even read *one* story?”

Tarak felt himself grow defensive. “That is not so strange where I come from!”

“Good god, do you even know how to read?”

“Of course I know how to read, though not very well.”

Michael appeared surprised.

“Again, that is not so strange where I come from!”

“Did you live in a cave?”

“I will smack you.”

“Have you at least heard a story?”

Tarak scoffed. “Of course. Do I not seem like someone who knows how to weave a good tale?”

“I don’t know how to answer that.”

“How can you say that?”

“Because I’m confused about how you phrased your question. I’m going to say, yes?”

“Just tell me what you want to say about Jon.” Tarak started walking again, and Michael hurried to keep up with him.

“In short, Jon is a goddamn hero.”

“*Psh.*”

“I’m serious. I mean, he’s made mistakes. He’s broken bones. He’s almost been killed. He’s smart about some things but completely ignorant about others. I’d even go so far to say he’s been lucky more than a few times that his choices didn’t cause more problems than they fixed, but he always does what’s right no matter how difficult. If he wants something done, he will find a way to do it himself. It might be messy and bloody, but he will get it done no matter the cost to himself, or even to others, at times.”

“And that is supposed to be like me, how?”

“Only one thing, really. Sometimes he could’ve used a little more fear. Like you right now. We’re about to start flying.” They had traveled far enough from the city that there wasn’t much traffic on the road.

Tarak clicked his tongue. “Let me show you what can be accomplished without fear.”

It had been a while since Tarak had made his spell, Gravity Sphere. Many things had happened in that time. He had nearly died, he’d intertwined arms and lips with the princess, and he’d had the displeasure of meeting Jon. But theatrics had gotten involved without him meaning to, and now there was no going back.

Like sprinting after a long hiatus, it was easy to combine the three notes of C, E, and G, but there was a little extra strain on his mind. The black sphere of gravity formed in front of him. He looked up at it as it yanked him off the ground. It was about the size of his head and didn’t need to be any bigger.

He held the spell steady at an equal distance from him, allowing it to pull him farther into the air without separating from it. He even picked up speed as he went, and in the span

of a few breaths, Michael had become very small on the ground.

The land shrank around him. The sky opened. The air took his breath away. He wondered what might happen if he kept going, but he had proven his point.

His eyes stung from the force of the wind. He felt as though he couldn't breathe because opening his mouth sent air rushing down his throat.

The strength of the spell depended on the effort from his mind. He had put everything into his launch, and now it was time to maintain control. He eased up on the spell, careful not to let it slip away from his mind completely, or he would have to reform it.

He slowed and started to drift down as his sphere of gravity no longer beat the natural pull of the earth. He eased down at first, but picked up speed quickly. He was still moving forward too fast, and now he was falling fast as well. He had to shift the location of his sphere.

It was not so easy to move his spell while traveling at this speed. He attempted to shift it up directly above his head, but slightly loosening his hold on its location caused it to slip away completely. In an instant, it was too far from his mind for him to control any longer.

He yelled a curse as he plummeted. He looked down. He was about to hit the ground. Panicked, he made a new spell of gravity right above his head. He had made the mistake once before of yanking himself too strongly and tearing muscles, so he tried to put less of his strength into it this time but still ended up overdoing it. He tensed everything as his downward trajectory jerked to a stop, though he was still shooting forward like an arrow.

Close enough to the ground to stir up dust, he was not about to risk losing control of his spell again if he tried to change its location to behind his head. He thought about pulling himself back up and trying to regain control, but he was already seeing spots and gasping for breath.

“This is going to hurt!” he yelled.

He reduced his strength to ease down over the grass coming fast toward him. *At least it is grass!* Moving faster than a galloping horse, he had no chance of finding purchase with his feet. Instead, he let them slide across the grass in hopes of being slowed, but he found himself touching down for just a brief moment before bouncing back into the air, just out of reach of the tops of the blades. He reduced the strength of his spell again but too hard this time, fatigue winning out.

He fell hard onto the grass. The world flipped around him as he somersaulted and spun. He cursed up a storm as he tried to tuck in his limbs to keep them from breaking.

Finally, he came to a stop. Pain settled in deep. Cuts covered his bare arms, his knuckles, his neck, his face, and the lower half of his legs where his pants had rolled up. His back stung worse than the rest. He reached up behind him and felt blood.

He would heal. He would be fine. His clothes on the other hand...he was uncertain if any amount of washing could completely remove blood and grass stains this deep.

As Tarak sat up to assess the damage, he saw Michael landing hard in front of him. Michael stumbled but did not fall, laughing all the while.

Michael imitated Tarak’s deep voice, “Let me show you what can be accomplished without fear.” Michael could barely finish the sentence before he burst into more laughter. “I see exactly what can be accomplished!”

Tarak was in too much pain to be amused. “You are not angry I nearly killed myself after all?”

“Angry? I’m relieved. I *was* worried you were going to kill yourself, but I’m not anymore. You’ve learned your lesson and will be more cautious.” Michael paused and seemed concerned. “You *did* learn your lesson, right?”

“Yeah,” Tarak muttered and extended his hand for Michael to help him up.

Michael nearly fell as he pulled. “Shit, you’re even heavier than you look!” He pulled harder and helped Tarak up, then wiped dirt from his hand as he looked back at the trail of dented grass in the wake of Tarak’s tumble. “I’m surprised you didn’t crack the earth. You break anything?”

“I did not.”

“Are your bones stronger than normal bones?”

“I have never wondered.” Tarak took a moment. “I cannot say.”

“Well, have you ever broken any bones?”

“I have broken two bones. They take hours to heal.”

“What did you break?” Michael asked.

“I broke my leg and wrist jumping off a cliff.”

“Why did you do that?”

“To impress my friends. A mistake, it was. I could not let them know I had broken anything or they would see how fast I healed and suspect I came from a Deviant, or demigod, as they were called in that time. So I had to limp back to town on my broken leg as if it was a lesser injury.”

“You have to stop trying to impress people.”

“There is no fun in stopping.”

“Well, you sure as hell aren’t succeeding! Now are you finally going to take some advice from someone who knows how to avoid seriously hurting himself while practicing?”

“Yes.”

“You have to be cautious, Tarak—”

Tarak grumbled and swung his head around.

“You do!” Michael continued. “You have to learn gradually. Go slow at first—”

Tarak groaned louder and swung his head harder.

“You do, Tarak!”

“Fine. Fine! I will be cautious.”

“I will try to stay with you in case you need help from my wind.”

“Your flatulence cannot help me.”

Michael pointed his rear at Tarak and let out a sharp fart like a trumpet blast. “How’s that for flatulence?”

Tarak tried to hold in his laughter, but once it slipped out, there was no stopping it. Eventually Michael started laughing with him.

“How old are you” Tarak asked.

“Twenty-one, believe it or not.”

“How is it you had that fart ready?” Tarak needed to know.

“I’m constantly holding them in around you because I’m *trying* to be polite, but you insulted me.” Michael clapped his hands once. “All right! Let’s get started.”

“All right!”

It did not take more than a few hours before Tarak felt comfortable taking off, soaring, and even landing. It turned out that all he really had to learn was how to move his sphere of gravity while he was traveling quickly. Once he mastered that, the rest was easy.

He was hungry by then. “Shall we return to the castle?” he asked Michael, who did not bother to hide his jealousy as he shook his head.

“I still cannot believe how fast you learned. I started nearly a year ago, and I’m still having trouble landing.”

“Wind is harder to control. Leon even said so.”

Michael sighed. “True. If Leon cannot land very well, I don’t know how I could ever hope to do better. Well shit, now I’m sad. I think I’m going to need something to cheer me up.”

Tarak grinned devilishly. “I take it we are not returning to the castle?”

“Come on. We’re flying to Koluk.”

“What is there?”

“You’ll see.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

With flight, Tarak could cover the distance between cities in no time at all. When they settled down outside Koluk, Tarak asked Michael, “How long would it take to reach the city on horseback from where we were?”

“A couple hours at least,” Michael answered. “Hey, do you even know how long an hour is?”

“Yes,” Tarak replied. “We spoke in hours in my time period.”

“What about a minute?”

“I have learned it is much shorter than an hour.”

“How much shorter?”

Tarak shrugged. “A lot. We have been talking for about a minute, have we not?”

Michael gave a laugh. “Not quite. There are sixty minutes in an hour and twenty-four hours in a day.”

“Twenty-four? Not every day.”

Michael laughed harder. “Yes.”

“Are you certain?”

“I am.”

“That cannot be,” Tarak said. “Some days are much shorter than others, especially when the season changes.”

“The days are always the same length, Tarak.”

“Maybe in this time period.”

“In any time period!”

“Agree to disagree.”

Michael walked in silence for a moment, a look on his face between confused and annoyed.

“I don’t know how you could’ve possibly gotten Callie to like you. She’s properly educated about all this stuff, and you are practically a caveman.”

“Charm, my good friend.”

“I am pretty sure that charm will fade if you start trying to make her agree to disagree that some days are shorter than twenty-four hours.”

Perhaps Michael was right. Tarak probably should start watching what he said. Not only was he from the past, but his town was not well known for having the most educated of people. He wondered what his father knew of this. Tarak wasn't sure when he would see Caarda again and have the chance to ask.

During Tarak's time, there probably were more educated people in other parts of the world who knew what Michael did now, but certainly no one in Tarak's circle. They'd all thought some days were shorter than others.

They walked into the city. Many of the buildings looked as if they'd been knocked down and rebuilt recently, with mismatched walls and ceilings but of good quality.

Tarak asked, “Is all of Koluk like this?”

“No, just this side of the city. It was mostly flattened by catapults during the war.”

“Did many people die here?” Tarak asked.

“Not as many as you might think. Most fled before their homes were crushed.”

“Who rebuilt them?”

“The king's coin went into that.”

Tarak had never wondered before, but now he was curious. “How rich is the king?”

“Rich?” Michael laughed. “Most lords are richer than he is. I told you about the war, remember? All of his coin went into the rebellion that led to his coronation, and then he had to make a number of promises just to keep the kingdom defended.”

“I do remember that, but I thought he may have become rich again by taxing people.”

“He does not tax heavily. He wants the people to stay happy, and his lords. Some kings maintain power with the strongest army, but he hopes to lead with loyalty, probably because he has no other choice.”

“He pays us very well,” Tarak commented. “Forty silver a week is enough to make us rich after a year.”

“If you compare it to how much we could make on our own, it is not so much. Sorcery is rare, Tarak. Even as a wind mage, I could probably make twenty silver a week just by vowing to fight for a rich lord. I could make even more by transporting things long distances, important things that are difficult to send safely by horse. A fire or water mage might make even more. And someone like Jon? There are many who would pay him fifty silver a week for his allegiance, and I bet he could make even more by going around and charging for healing, not that he ever would. However, the king does pay us well, and he wants us to be happy. And we are. Aren’t we, Tarak?”

“We are,” he admitted.

They walked deeper into Koluk and soon there were no other signs of damage to the many one-story buildings. There were some places here that looked so short that Tarak would have to crouch to stand within them. Others were taller, some with oddities like diagonal walls or multiple chimneys of different designs. The streets did not seem to be straight, either. There were many short alleyways, some leading to dead ends where discarded things collected.

Michael took Tarak down one of them that had no dead end. Shade fell upon them, and the clanks and voices of the city dulled. It almost felt like someone would soon jump out and threaten them with a knife until they handed over their coins. Tarak would laugh in the man’s face, but they came through the other side without molestation.

Tarak now found himself on a busy street. It seemed even more crowded than the capital here, the smells more pungent. A filthy man sat in between a jeweler’s tiny shop and a business of some type of fancy apparel, with canes and hats on

display behind the front window. Tarak couldn't believe that everyone was passing by someone who desperately needed help. He crouched down in front of the man.

"What is wrong? Are you hurt?" Tarak asked.

"Have any copper to spare?" asked the man. His stench made it difficult for Tarak to remain close to him, but he felt obligated to help.

The stranger had long gray hair and a thick white beard, but he did not appear so old as to have trouble working.

"Tarak," Michael said. "Come on."

"This man clearly needs help."

"No, we don't..." Michael sighed and took out his coin purse. He knelt and dropped a silver in the empty bowl.

"Thank you," said the man as he bowed his head.

"Come on, Tarak."

Tarak ignored Michael for a moment. "What is wrong, sir?" Tarak asked.

"Please, I don't want trouble." The man picked up his bowl after pocketing Michael's silver. He hurried off with a look over his shoulder.

"This has to be a jest, Tarak," Michael said, apparently unamused. "There had to be beggars in your time and you are trying to fool me."

"*He* was a beggar? No, well yes, there were beggars in my time, but they never looked like that. Lord and bane, I have begged a few times, and I never looked like that. I had thought he injured himself or was afflicted by some sickness. Begging in my time was temporary and done door to door, but for that man it seemed like he had been begging for months."

"Of course you were a beggar," Michael chuckled. "I think I even remember you begging me to buy you an ale the last time we went to a tavern. And that man has probably been begging for years."

“Years?” Tarak shook his head. “I lived in a very small town compared to this. We all knew each other. When one person needed help, they found it. Here, there are so many people, but none help him except for you? I do not understand it.”

“There are hundreds of them. You cannot help them all.”

“Hundreds? How?”

Michael shrugged. “If I had to take a guess it would be because many of them have a problem with ale or gambling, or some disaster like a fire took their home...really it could be anything. Luckily, that’s a problem for the lord to figure out, not us.”

It turned out that Michael was right. They passed by two other beggars on the next street. Tarak handed off a silver to each one, but he couldn’t keep this up. There would be no coin left for him.

Their destination turned out to be a quaint bakery on a much quieter street toward the center of the city.

“This is what took us to Koluk?” Tarak asked.

“It sure is.”

The man behind the counter called out, “Michael!”

“Josey!”

The man wore a baker’s hat above dark eyebrows. He set a heavy gave on Michael’s hand. “Still not married?”

“Married?” Tarak asked.

Michael ignored him. “I always tell you, Josey, I’m just here for the bread.”

“You have not even met my daughter. I tell you, she’s beautiful, but you eat my bread and leave before I can fetch her.”

“Speaking of, I’ll have two of those flakey bits of heaven. One for my friend, here.”

Tarak watched the exchange of Michael setting down one silver and receiving only six coppers in return.

As the baker headed into the kitchen behind him and called over his shoulder that Michael would have to meet his daughter one day, Tarak asked, “How much bread did you just purchase for four copper? I do not want to eat solely bread for lunch.”

“The pieces are small.”

“For two copper each?”

“They are worth it.”

Tarak shrugged. “It is your coin.”

The baker returned with layered bread, flaky and puffy, that actually looked quite delicious. “Here you are, Michael. Will you be eating here?”

“Only if you promise you will not be fetching anyone for me to meet. I told you I am involved with someone.”

“Only until you meet my daughter. You are lucky that she is across town right now.”

Tarak followed Michael to one of the small tables. They sat, and Tarak leaned forward and whispered, “Why is he intent on matching you with his daughter?”

“Because I’m a sorcerer of the king. You haven’t received any marriage proposals yet?”

“I have not.”

“You will. All of us have been getting them, especially more since the end of the war. Mine are not as frequent as some of the other sorcerers. I heard Jon cannot even go a day without having to deny some proposal.”

“Do the girls ever propose, or is it only their fathers?”

“It is usually their fathers, but that is not customary in our time, in case you’re curious.”

“What is customary?” Tarak took a bite of the bread. He let out his delight audibly.

Michael lifted his eyebrows and grinned knowingly.

Tarak stood up to face the baker. “My good sir, this is superb!”

“Thank you, young man. Are you a sorcerer as well?” His gaze landed on Tarak’s hand.

“Not I,” Tarak lied. “Just a friend to this lad.” He slapped Michael’s shoulder and gave it a squeeze.

“You speak like a nobleman,” the baker commented.

“Arse, is that darn accent coming out again? I can assure you I am the farthest thing from noble.”

The baker gave a chuckle without humor. “I see.”

He sat back down with Michael, who whispered, “I probably should have lied as well.”

“Or you should meet his daughter and be done with it.”

“That must be a jest. I could never show my face here again.”

“You could,” Tarak advised.

Michael took a moment to chew and swallow. “It must be nice sometimes to have no shame.”

“It is nice all the time.”

The baker called out from behind the counter, “How are the other sorcerers, Michael?”

“They are well.”

“I haven’t seen any of them for a while.”

“Business has not taken any of us through Koluk as much as it used to.”

The baker nodded and returned to the kitchen.

Tarak asked Michael, “The lot of you used to have business in this wretched town?”

“For a while, yes. Most of us spent more time here than we wanted to, but it was Leon who made it the most miserable

for us. If you think he's bad now, imagine what it was like to be stuck with him in Koluk, the city he hates the most."

"It is hard to imagine him any less tolerable."

"He can be much worse. Fortunately, Jennava was here as well."

"She is the woman who was Leon's only friend?"

"Yes. She can be tough, but everyone liked her. The city has been and still is her home. It's almost like a child to her. She wants to see it grow into something magnificent. She sure as hell has invested a lot already. Years ago, she became a dteria user in order to trick the most powerful sorcerer known at the time, Cason Clay. He controlled the city during the era of dteria, and she had won his trust enough to spy for the rest of us."

"Can you explain something?" Tarak asked.

"What?"

"How can Leon have a friend?"

"I know, it is surprising! I wouldn't say 'friend' is the most accurate description. I think it's more that they have history. They care about each other and found a way not to piss each other off anymore."

"That's a better friendship than many."

Michael pondered for a moment. "I suppose it is."

Tarak and Michael spent a while in the bakery. They spoke about Eden a little, but it didn't seem like Michael wanted to disparage her or speak highly of her, so there wasn't much that could be said. Michael seemed more interested in Tarak's burgeoning relationship with Callie, but Tarak said the only place he would speak about it was high in the air where not a soul could possibly hear them.

"Or someplace equally private," Tarak added at seeing Michael's disappointment.

A few people came looking to purchase bread, but it seemed that the baker had stepped out for a while. Just as

Tarak and Michael were about to venture out to look for a more hearty meal, the baker returned with a lady Tarak presumed to be the baker's daughter.

Her blond hair was thin, nearly white. She had high cheekbones and a bit of a suspicious gaze as she glanced at Michael and then at Tarak without a smile.

"Which one is the king's sorcerer?" she asked. Her father stood behind her with a wide grin.

"I am, my lady." Michael spoke apologetically. "But—"

"Have you come to do something about the lord here?" she interrupted.

"The lord?" Michael asked in surprise.

"Be courteous," her father whispered.

"Father, he is clearly not interested in marriage, and neither am I. You know I am with someone."

"That slob is a disrespectful farmer! Michael is a sorcerer of the king! He fought in the war. He has coin. He shows respect. There is a world of difference!"

"I apologize for my father," the girl told Michael. "I came here to speak to you about Orvyn, and nothing more."

"I welcome the discussion," Michael said politely. "I am not interested in marriage, either." He shifted his gaze to the baker. "I'm sorry, but I have warned you."

The baker swatted his hand down with an "ah" and went back to his kitchen.

"Orvyn is using sorcery to influence people's thoughts and feelings," the young woman reported. "Is the king aware?"

"Uh."

Tarak studied Michael. This was the first Tarak had heard about it, and it appeared to be a surprise to Michael as well.

A couple walked in no doubt looking for bread.

"Let's talk out here." Michael motioned for the others to follow him out of the small shop.

The young woman went on as soon as they were outside, “Everyone knows what Orvyn is doing now, and we are angry. This has gone on too long.”

Someone walking by must’ve overheard. The older gentleman stopped. “Are you talking about the new lord of Koluk?”

A woman and a man stopped as well and made their way over.

“We are,” the baker’s daughter said as she pointed at Michael. “I was informing this sorcerer of the king.”

“He must go!” said the old man.

The other two agreed.

Michael seemed to catch sight of something behind Tarak. “Jennava,” he called out.

Tarak turned to see a familiar woman. He had never formally met her, but she had fought on the same battlefield as Tarak against Monrra and her summoned creature. She did not appear old, though she did have gray hair. There was a tough look about her face, which became tougher as she noticed the crowd around Michael.

“Let me guess, Orvyn?” she asked as she approached.

The small crowd affirmed her suspicion.

The times really had changed. Tarak could not believe people speaking on the street about their lord in this way. Even if Orvyn was influencing their thoughts with sorcery, Tarak expected they would be scared to speak up against him.

Another woman passing by must’ve overheard and joined the conversation. “He’s manipulating people’s minds!” she said. “Does the king know?”

The baker’s daughter answered, “That’s what we’re trying to find out.”

“The king is aware and is taking steps to rectify the situation,” Jennava announced.

A number of questions shot out from the growing crowd. They wanted to know what steps were being taken, when the king had found out, and when the lord would be removed.

Jennava tried to raise her hands to quiet them, but it was the sight of something else that silenced the crowd quickly.

CHAPTER EIGHT

A bald man approached with a furious gait. He had deep wrinkles leading out from the sides of his pale eyes and a few veins bulging from his temples.

Orvyn's name was whispered throughout the crowd. For a group of people who seemed unafraid to voice their opinions, it seemed strange to now see them all scatter like critters sensing a threat.

It was probably what they saw behind Orvyn, a retinue of maybe thirty guardsmen. They wore hard leather armor, their holstered weapons clanking above the thud of their boots.

"Jennava, a word in private," Orvyn demanded, a scratch in his voice that made him as unpleasant to listen to as it was to stare into his pale blue eyes.

"These are sorcerers of the king," Jennava said. "They can be privy to whatever you have to say."

"Just get in here." He stomped into the bakery. Tarak followed Jennava with Michael.

The baker looked up nervously.

"Out," Orvyn ordered, and the baker fled.

The guardsmen waited outside as Orvyn shut the door. "Names." Orvyn pointed at Michael and Tarak.

Tarak could not help but feel fear. He gave his name after Michael.

"Tarak and Michael, you will be silent as I speak with Jennava."

Jennava stepped forward and pointed a finger under Orvyn's chin. "Stop using psyche." She spoke through her teeth. "This is why you are in trouble."

Tarak immediately felt more relaxed. He realized there was nothing to fear about Orvyn. The feeling had been manufactured.

"Step back," Orvyn demanded.

Jennava did, though her furious expression did not change.

“So it was you who has been lying to the king?” Orvyn questioned.

“I lie to no one.”

“You openly plot against me! I could have you hung for treason.”

Tarak stepped between them, but then Michael put himself between Tarak and Orvyn.

“Everyone relax,” Michael said. He gently pushed Tarak back. Tarak obliged, Jennava moving with him.

Michael turned to face Orvyn. “What happened? Why are you so angry?”

“I was just questioned by an elf I’ve never met or even heard of before.” Orvyn leaned around Michael to talk at Jennava. “This elf even used sorcery on me! An *elf*, Jennava. And he is an advisor to the king! He is treated more respectfully than am I, who has brought back both Lycast and Rohaer from the brink of starvation. What could he have done? Nothing, that’s what. The elves only care about themselves. I demand to speak to the king.”

“Orvyn, listen to me. Everyone knows now that you are using sorcery to influence their emotions. The whole city is talking about it. Haven’t you noticed that everyone is afraid to talk to you now?”

Orvyn didn’t respond.

“You have lost the trust of the people,” Jennava said. “But we are trying to protect you. Syrah and I have been in discussion about what can be done.”

Tarak leaned over and whispered to Michael, “Who is Syrah?”

“The leader of The Bracket, the constables of the city.” Michael’s tone was as if he had already told this to Tarak, and it was true, Tarak remembered now. The constables of the city used to be the Thieves’ Guild, but that was when dteria

reigned. They resorted to thieving to take power away from dark mages and later proved themselves to be allegiant to the current king, hence their new name.

It was The Bracket who had marched into the forest behind Jennava and helped defeat Monrra alongside the king's sorcerers. Syrah had probably been among them, but Tarak had never met her.

"We just informed the king of the issue this morning," Jennava continued. "That is not treason, and I do not care to explain that again. Do not use that word so lightly."

"Syrah has wanted to take lordship from me. You are undermining my power by aiding her."

"Syrah has wanted nothing but the best for Koluk since long before you came here," Jennava replied. "I did not know his majesty had sent an elf to question you, but I do know of the elf. He fought with us while you remained in Koluk. He risked his life for us. He has proven his loyalty. I am in support of having you questioned. In fact, this should be known to everyone in Koluk. The people are quickly turning against you. I have never heard of a city turning on its lord as fast as they are now. You are the topic of every conversation. What did the elf tell you?"

"He questioned me and left. He said nothing. Do not speak of this city as if I am its enemy. You have seen the improvements made because of my efforts. You even notified the king, you told me, not long ago."

"I did, and I don't know what's changed since then, but you have lost the people, Orvyn. I have no reason to make this up. Syrah and I want to protect you. We considered enacting a law that would prohibit the use of psyche, but that would severely limit the potential growth among other sorcerers who might choose the same path, and psyche could be incredibly valuable against our future enemies. It is not the right choice."

"I have everything under control."

"You don't. The people think you have complete power over their minds."

“They are fools.”

“No, they are scared and unsure of your power. Even the rest of us who know more about mana do not know your limitations. You have not been forthcoming about what you can and cannot do. You told no one about your psychic ability, not even the king, but the people figured it out. Perhaps you don’t know this, but once you have manipulated someone’s emotions, the manipulation ends after you leave. It was only a matter of time before this caught up to you. You may want the best for the city, but that doesn’t matter anymore.”

Jennava stepped toward him, her face softening.

“I think it’s best if you leave Koluk before anything happens to you. You should go to the castle and speak to the king directly about this.”

“After everything I’ve done for this city, I am not leaving. Have the people speak to me, and I will assure them that I will no longer use psyche on them.”

“It is too *late* for that.”

“It is not!”

“Orvyn!”

“I am your lord and you will follow my order! I have this under control.”

Jennava gritted her teeth. “Orvyn...” A storm threatened to come out in her tone. “I am not just worried about your safety. There are a number of reasons we cannot risk an uprising. It would be terrible for the future of not only the city but the kingdom of Lycast. You know it is Koluk that provides many crucial supplies, especially metal. You know that lords are powerful right now and the king needs all the support he can get. Even worse, everyone knows that. If the city becomes vulnerable, there may be someone who might want to take it by force and fortify an army here. We cannot even allow the *chance* of that happening. The king took a risk by trusting you with lordship over such a crucial place, and I believe all of us are starting to realize that you probably used psyche to ensure it happened. Go back to the castle and grovel for forgiveness.”

“Grovel!” He laughed with anger. “You should grovel after everything I’ve done. Yes, I have used psyche but for good, Jennava, for good! Thousands would’ve starved without my help. I took grain from where it was more plentiful and distributed it to those who needed it the most, and I have molded Koluk into a city burgeoning with greatness.”

“And that is why you will be utilized still. You must leave, Orvyn.”

“I am not going anywhere.”

Tarak couldn’t remember the last time he had gone this long without speaking, but Jennava seemed to have this handled.

She calmly warned Orvyn, “If you do not speak to the king directly about this, I will have to send him a message that he must take immediate action. In fact, I imagine the elf is on his way to the castle to tell the king the same thing.”

“Jennava.” Orvyn put on a smile and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Everything is fine,” he said.

His voice soothed Tarak. He could feel the tension drain from the room. Jennava’s shoulder relaxed.

“Are you sure?” Jennava asked.

“Yes, I have everything under control. By the end of the day, the people will love me again. Just wait, all right?”

“All right.”

“Tarak, Michael?” Orvyn asked.

They nodded and spoke in unison. “All right.”

Orvyn left.

Tarak felt a little confused about what to do now.

“I am hungry,” he told Michael. “Take me somewhere with a hearty meal.”

“I like the sound of that. Jennava, do you want to come with us?”

“I suppose. I can’t remember what else I was supposed to be doing.”

Tarak could not remember, either. It was strange to forget not only what he planned to do that day but what he was doing just before Orvyn left.

He had a leisurely meal with Michael and Jennava. Michael asked questions about Jennava’s past, and Tarak enjoyed hearing about the history of Koluk. She was born here, and it was in this city where she met Leon for the first time. Their paths crossed many times after, usually with far from enjoyable experiences, but they helped each other learn sorcery. They put up with each other’s difficulties and soon found themselves on the side against dteria as it started to spread.

They finished their meal and were back on the street when another woman with gray hair approached Jennava. The two of them might have been the same age, but the years did not appear as kind to her as they did to Jennava, with deep wrinkles fissuring from the corners of her eyes.

“I was waiting for you to return,” the woman told Jennava.

“You were?”

“Of course. You said you would.” The woman glanced at Tarak.

He bowed slightly and gave his name.

“Ah yes, the son of Caarda. I’m Syrah. We never met, but I was there with The Bracket.”

“I think I remember seeing you from afar. My gratitude for your help.”

“No, you have our gratitude. I heard you saved the king’s life by stopping Monrra from pushing him into one of her rifts. I would love to buy you an ale—”

“I gladly accept.”

“But,” she continued, “I have pressing matters with Jennava.”

“My apologies.”

“Orvyn, Jennava. Don’t you remember? Or did he use psyche on you?”

Jennava gasped, then her face twisted as she took on a spiteful look. “He did! And I warned him. That is the last warning he is going to receive. It’s time to inform the king that he must be removed.”

Oh that arselicker! Tarak remembered everything. He felt as though he’d been lied to. No, worse. At least when someone lied to him, he had the choice to believe them.

Orvyn must not realize how easily his psyche wore off once he was no longer present. It did take some time in this instance, but that just made the realization even more infuriating.

A sharp whistle captured everyone’s attention.

A man stood atop a roof of a tall building a stone’s throw away. He whistled three more times, one long, one short, and then another long.

“Our warnings were too late.” Syrah spoke urgently. She put two fingers in her mouth and whistled back one time, loud and strong. The man found her and then disappeared back onto the roof.

Syrah ran in the direction of the building. Jennava followed. “Come on,” she told Michael and Tarak.

“What’s happening?” Michael asked.

His question went unanswered.

They followed Jennava and Syrah. Commoners of all types rushed in the same direction, the air laden with aggression.

Syrah met on the street with the man from the roof. “They’re storming the lord’s manor,” he informed her. “Sorcerers?” he asked as he looked at Michael and Tarak.

“Of the king, yes,” Jennava said. “Is Orvyn there?”

“He is.”

“Is it too late?”

“I don’t think so.”

Jennava, Syrah, and even this man who seemed to be part of The Bracket all fell silent as if to ponder if action should be taken.

Syrah eventually spoke. “We agreed a rebellion would be the worst thing for Koluk.”

Jennava replied, “Yes, but it’s too late to stop the rebellion. Now the question is if it’s better for Koluk to save Orvyn. We’ll need to use force to keep him alive, which means people might perish.”

The man said, “The decision to save him must be made now, or that choice will be taken away from us.”

“Is it even possible?” Syrah asked.

“I’m not sure. Half the city could be there by the time we arrive,” the man replied.

Jennava asked, “Michael, could you get him out on your back?”

“I can barely land on my own without injuring myself. I might kill myself in the process of trying, and Orvyn for that matter. But Tarak—”

“No!”

“He can fly quite well, and he’s strong.”

“No, no—” Tarak tried to interrupt, but Michael didn’t stop.

“I’m sure he could handle Orvyn on his back.”

“No, no, no.”

Every gaze fell upon him.

“I don’t think we have another choice,” Jennava said.

“He manipulated us with sorcery and ignored our advice!” Tarak argued. “I am not about to risk my life saving him. He did this to himself.”

“You’d rather watch him die a gruesome death?” Michael asked.

Tarak shrugged. “We do not have to watch.”

The man told the two women, “Time is against us. It could be too late already.”

“Tarak, you’re going,” Jennava ordered. “I would say to take us in hopes of pacifying the situation, but we will be stranded there with no ability to fly. Go with him, Michael. At least you can get out of there when Tarak has Orvyn on his back. Go. Go!”

“Oh god damn above!” Tarak growled as he prepared his spell.

“Follow me,” Michael said as he shot into the air with a gust of wind that knocked down everyone but Tarak.

Tarak followed Michael through the air.

It was a good thing that the flight was short, or Tarak surely would’ve lost Michael as they soared over the city. Michael suddenly stopped and looked around as a torrent of wind kept him up.

Tarak moved the sphere of gravity slightly behind and above his head as he’d practiced, slowing his speed, but it was not enough.

“Tarak, stop, stop! Stop!” Michael yelled as Tarak nearly collided with him in the air.

Tarak’s gravity pulled Michael as Michael’s wind lifted Tarak. Soaring higher and still unable to stop, Tarak could only hope Michael would be all right because Tarak had himself to worry about. His spell of gravity pulled him backward, disorienting him. It was still not such a simple task to shift the positioning of his spell while moving, but he managed to position it straight above his head as he decreased the strength of his mana.

Eventually he stopped lifting higher and started to sink. Slow at first, but in control. Tarak caught sight of the lord’s manor just ahead. It was a large building of rectangular shape,

at least three stories, with a square tower at the center. What looked like a hard roof with a chimney on each end would be difficult to land on because of the slopes, but the tower was flat and guarded by parapets.

Tarak was unable to locate Michael in the air. There wasn't time to keep checking. A large garden surrounded the building. At least Tarak assumed it was a garden. There were too many people packed together on top of it to really tell, and all seemed to have weapons.

Tarak slowly let himself down over the lord's manor as the swell of shouts invaded his ears. A few voices were clearly yelling for the flying sorcerer to leave Orvyn to the people. Hopefully arrows wouldn't soon follow.

He came close enough to the top of the tower to see a bald man coming up through a trap door. Hands reached up and tried to pull him back, but he gestured at them and seemed to cast a spell of psyche that caused each to scream in agony.

He made it through and slammed the door shut and bolted it. Tarak landed next to him.

"Where are your guards?" Tarak asked.

"Most fled, some were killed."

Tarak looked over the edge. There were a whole mess of people getting bows ready. Orvyn looked over. An arrow nearly struck him.

"Michael?" Tarak yelled as he looked up. He tried again, "Michael!"

Tarak caught sight of Michael coming down. A few arrows nearly got him, but he seemed too preoccupied with landing to notice.

Michael screamed as he tumbled down through the air and smacked into the tower with the side of his body. His head hit, but at least he'd seemed to get his hands down underneath it.

He groaned as he slowly got himself up. "You nearly killed me, Tarak."

Uprising citizens beat against the trap door, but the bolt was thick. It didn't seem as if it would break anytime soon.

"I am sorry. I still need some practice. They have archers, Michael."

"Oh really?" Michael turned and showed Tarak a rip across his shoulder with blood seeping out. "I hadn't noticed." He shoved Orvyn and imitated his scratchy voice. "I have this under control. Do you still? Do you? Perhaps we should leave you and let you control the situation. What do you think about that?"

"Just get me out of here!"

"You are lucky that I am compassionate," Michael said. "Now get on Tarak's back, and I'll fly out after the danger has passed."

"Very compassionate," Tarak remarked as he turned and knelt for Orvyn. "You'd better hold on for your life because I am not going back for you if you fall."

Orvyn would not get on. "What kind of sorcerer are you? I didn't see how you landed."

"The kind who will not hesitate to leave you here, and you had best not use psyche on me again. I *will* drop you once I realize it. You must see by now that your spell fades after you leave. Lord and bane, you are dumb. How could you think you could manipulate all these people without anyone noticing?"

"Tarak—Tarak!" Michael was interrupting until he had Tarak's attention. "You can belittle him on the way to the castle," Michael finished.

"The castle? You cannot be serious."

"Were you just going to drop him out on the open land? What the hell is he going to do then?"

Tarak grumbled, then shot a nasty look over his shoulder at Orvyn, who stood there with his hands fluttering and a dumb look on his face. "Are you getting on or not? I am about to leave."

“Do *not* drop me, sorcerer.” He climbed onto Tarak’s back.

Tarak took a few breaths to let out his anger. He needed all of his focus.

He lifted himself and Orvyn with a powerful spell of gravity, but the extra weight made their ascent slower than usual.

“Faster, faster!” Orvyn yelled as arrows stormed around them.

“Shut up, shut up!”

Orvyn screamed in Tarak’s ear as if he’d been shot.

“Shut up!” Tarak yelled, his anger returning twofold.

“They shot me in the ass!”

“Better you than me.”

Soon Tarak seemed to be high enough that none of the archers had much of a chance anymore. But then a lucky arrow found Tarak’s thigh.

He growled through gritted teeth and ripped out the arrow.

Orvyn screamed, “They shot me again!”

“If you scream in my ear one more time I will drop you. They shot me as well.”

“My back...” Orvyn groaned. “Get me to the healer at the castle. Hurry!”

CHAPTER NINE

Leon met Tienna in the courtyard for their daily lesson. Leon used to conduct the entire lesson in the courtyard, but soon they'd transitioned to asses in chairs and diagrams on a table between them because Tienna hadn't been able to cast shit. Eventually, however, that had changed.

Leon had been surprised when Tienna finally cast a spell before him and it was one he had not known existed. When she had first come to the castle, she had no skill with sorcery. She had been as far from a sorcerer as Tarak was from a lord. Her range was shit, barely half an octave, but she was determined. Even better than determined, she had a plethora of time to do nothing but improve. That was the greatest luxury of all to learning sorcery, and something just about no man or woman had unless they were already rich and had little use for it.

Her range had increased more than the damn price of ale during the drought. It now covered nearly a whole octave. She had already learned one spell and was now working on discovering a second. It taught Leon that maybe these farmers, these bakers, these commoners bustling about by the hundreds just might follow the same path if any of them had the dedication and time that Tienna did.

More of them should be trained. Not by Leon, though. He didn't have the patience or the time...or even the right temperament, if he was honest with himself. They needed someone like Jennava, someone who understood mana and knew how to coach people without cussing, or storming off to keep himself from cussing. It was too bad Jennava was so busy with Koluk these days, but Leon understood why. The city would turn into liquid shit without her.

The problem with Tienna's first spell was that it did nothing on its own. Leon had asked her many times what she felt while casting it, but her experience seemed to be similar to any caster forming and holding any spell. It drained her both physically and mentally. The spell, however, was not like any other. It empowered another spell nearby. Or perhaps it did not

empower the *spell*, specifically, but the caster—the mana transferring between person and spell. It increased the duration, the intensity, the strength, everything about the spell. It was power, raw power. It may even replenish fatigue.

But what *was* this power? It was clearly some form of mana—every spell was. But what kind of mana could alter other mana in such a way that made casting easier and more intense? These were important questions because they would lead to important answers. If one spell could empower another, then it should be possible to weaken others. It might even be possible to completely disable an enemy sorcerer if one could learn how to control someone else’s mana. Leon had wondered many times not if but how his sorcerers could even go so far as to prevent mana from being used at all.

The witch who had left with Jon, Hadley, had discovered a curse using a disgusting ingredient—essence of man, which could only be taken from a corpse—and just the right stone to contain it. This curse would disable mana in the vicinity. Hadley was far across the ocean waiting for a portal to return to them. Her spell had been a form of dteria, a school of magic that no longer existed, but the possibility still had to be there.

Leon had grown frustrated many times trying to figure out these answers with Tienna and Charlie, but Tienna could not seem to disempower mana in any way, only empower it. Still useful, but not helpful in terms of knowledge of how it all worked.

Leon had told Tienna she needed to test every individual note. One just might be a spell on its own. That had been a couple of days ago.

“Well?” he asked.

“Every note feels the same,” she said. She had a habit of moving the bangs of her brown hair out of her eyes when she was frustrated, which seemed to be happening more and more. The girl needed a haircut, but she hadn’t allowed herself the time. “I have wasted two days on this. What’s next for me?”

Tienna looked older than her age of eighteen. Like her father, the king, her eyes showed the wear on her soul. Her

mother's doing, no doubt, drinking herself to death with the coin the king paid her to keep quiet about his affair. Tienna was ten at the time her mother died. Leon had seen worse shit. She was fine.

Tienna didn't have the same charm to her appearance as her half-sister, Callie. There was nothing soft about her chin or cheeks. She was built sturdier as well, with a strong will. Leon might've appreciated how tough she was if he wasn't the one having to deal with her lack of natural talent.

He was supposed to be her cousin. That was the story. He had supposedly promised her mother he would take care of her. It was a smart lie Tienna had told to get what she wanted. Nykal had warned Leon that she would manipulate to get what she wanted, just like her mother had, but Leon hadn't seen any of that since her lie. She just seemed like a young woman who wanted very badly to be part of something, and she had shit to show for her life until now.

"You felt nothing, really?" Leon questioned, unsure he believed her. "Not a sense of *anything* from *any* note?"

"I might've felt something from a few of them, but nothing close to a spell."

"You have to expand on that feeling to make sure. I have told you this. Charlie's spell of Mitalia is one note and so is Aliana's spell of Earth. It took both of them years of fooling with their mana before they realized they could do anything with these notes."

Tienna balled her fists. "I don't have years to waste!"

"I'm not telling you to spend years on each one! Don't be dense. I'm telling you to experiment with each note with more *depth*. When you feel something, explore that. Delve deeper. Talk to your mana. Even if you do not discover something, you will at least learn to communicate with your mana better. You're the only one who seems to be using this tree of magic. It's your responsibility to discover what you can."

Callie approached, and Tienna visibly relaxed. Callie smiled at her.

“Hello, Tienna.”

Tienna gave a small curtsy. “Princess.”

“Leon, I would like to discuss mana with you when you have time today,” Callie said. “I believe I have made progress.”

“The king decides how I am to spend my time with each sorcerer. Ask him.”

Callie looked akin to Tienna as she scrunched her mouth together in frustration. “I am sure he is fine with it, and he is very busy. Can’t you just spend a little time instructing me without making everything so difficult?”

Leon had no problem telling people no. He did feel guilt sometimes, but it always went away fairly quickly. However, Callie was trying to learn psyche. She had already proven she could find people in this realm of mana, or whatever they were calling it. She could even communicate through it, possibly over long distances. This was a valuable tool, not so much for right now, but it would surely pay off later.

Basael also had claimed that Callie had the same natural talent as Illia, the crazy analyte who’d arrived through a portal and had demonstrated how powerful even an unskilled and out of control psychic could be. If Basael was right, Callie might eventually learn the same skill. Seeing how powerful it could be, the king would not only need psychics but a way to resist their skill.

“I’ll find some time today,” Leon promised. “Or if I can’t, I’ll send Charlie.”

“Before supper?”

“Yes.”

She broke into a smile. “Thank you.”

Charlie was not as busy these days now that armor had been remade for every sorcerer. Much of it had needed repairs after the battle against Monrra in the forest, but he should be pretty much done with them by now.

Tienna seemed to be watching Callie skip off happily. Leon had chosen not to ask the princess about Trevor. Just about everyone had seen him storm out of the castle as if he were a child expecting a treat only to receive a bag of shit. If something important had caused his anger, Leon would hear about it from the king. If not, even better, because then Leon wouldn't be bothered.

Leon didn't like Trevor. His father was a traitor. Trevor eventually had done the right thing by turning against his father, but it had taken him too damn long. He wasn't exactly a coward, but he was something. Leon didn't know what. He could be an ally or an enemy, and it made Leon nervous that the deciding factor would probably be Callie. If it were up to Leon, Trevor would've been stripped of his land and power after the war and certainly would have nothing to do with the princess. But Leon tended to make enemies, while Nykal made allies. So long as Leon was ready for betrayals, having allies could pay off.

There was something else that made Leon even more nervous. He asked Tienna, "Are you ever going to reveal the truth to your half-sister?"

"I have no plan to." She continued to watch Callie go.

"Don't lie to me. I need to be ready for the damage this will cause. When are you planning on telling her?"

She finally looked at Leon. "I would never do it without the king's permission."

Another lie, he thought.

"Just don't fuck things up for everyone if you must do it, all right? And give me some damn warning."

"Leon, I'm not going to!" She sounded more sincere this time, but everyone could lie more convincingly after failing a few times.

Leon noticed Zarin heading out of the keep as Callie was headed in. Zarin looked at Leon as if he'd come all this way to fetch him, but he turned to Callie first. They gave each other a

smile, him a bit of a bow, her a bit of a curtsy, then Zarin limped over in Leon's direction.

The analyte had an ugly gait and a mean expression as he seemed to constantly be in pain, but as sore of a sight as it all was, he still usually turned a few heads of the girls he passed. His violet hair sat atop his head like a wave about to break, making Leon feel the same could be said about Zarin's pent up frustration. He wore glasses, because the poor bastard also suffered from terrible eyesight, apparently. Really, he was dealt a shit hand even if he was handsome.

He was young, nineteen, but he had provided valuable counsel so far that was surely important in staying on good terms for the fresh alliance with his people. As it seemed that he was on the way to tell something to Leon, Leon decided to meet him halfway.

"What's so important that they sent you out to get me?" Leon asked.

"I volunteered," Zarin said with a bit of a grin.

"Why the hell did you go and do that? Send a goddamn messenger and I'll meet you in the keep."

"I've been sitting all morning. I need to use my leg at times, or the pain will be worse."

"Worse?"

Zarin did not seem like he wanted to talk about it, so Leon kept the rest of his thoughts to himself.

"What's happening?" Leon asked.

"The king requests your presence for a meeting."

"Shit." That usually meant something bad. "I'll meet you there, Zarin," he said to give Zarin a head start. Otherwise Leon would have to walk beside the limping analyte all the way, and as much as Leon pitied the young man, he didn't have that kind of patience.

As Zarin headed back toward the keep, Leon told Tienna, "Don't bullshit me. Are you going to continue to work on each note or try to do something on your own?"

“Do something on my own.”

“And what would that be?”

“I don’t know.” She glanced around the courtyard as if wondering who she could bother for help. Michael had already given her too much time, but that wouldn’t stop Michael from continuing. Given the smiles and laughs Leon usually saw before they noticed him and quickly changed their demeanor, there was probably more flirting going on than actual training. It was a good thing Michael was gone with Tarak for most of the day. With the two shitbirds away, everyone else could focus.

Leon had been surprised to learn that it was actually Tarak who had given Tienna the kind of advice she’d apparently needed to successfully cast her spell for the first time. Leon was even more shocked to find out what Tarak had told her. Thinking of the three notes as one thing, a face, was something new to Leon. It had been so long since he had learned how to cast that it was difficult to remember what it was like before then. Leon liked to think he was not the worst teacher, but people had certainly let him know he wasn’t the goddamn best, either. He often found himself wishing Jennava would finish her damn business in Koluk and come back to the castle so Leon could spend his time elsewhere, but not in Koluk. He hated that rat nest.

“You are looking for help but you’re not going to find it,” Leon told Tienna.

“Why not? Everyone seems to know more than I do.”

Aliana was out acting as a constable again now that her mother fucking half-brother, Wolf, was dead and no one else seemed intent on killing her. She had become a friend to Tienna, it seemed, but Aliana knew the least about mana.

Eden the Stubborn had somehow talked the king into allowing her to spend most of her days near the open rift in the cavern beneath the forest. Leon received progress updates from her as she trained her flying rat, dragon, or whatever the hell it was, to withstand the slight poisoning it received every time it entered their realm. Apparently, the lizard with wings

was becoming more resilient each day, but it wasn't growing very fast. This probably had to do with how time passed much slower in the dark realm, the home of these creatures. Leon didn't understand how that was possible, but there were lots of things he didn't understand that he had come to realize were true, such as why rich men like Lord Langston only seemed to become more powerful as the years went on, even when they were nothing but idiots.

Seeing as how Eden had kissed Arthur and created an impassable shit between the entire group of girls and boys, she was probably the last person who would want to help Tienna, who openly flirted with the flatulent mage.

Arthur had a gift with water, and he had studied mana during his privileged upbringing, but those studies had come to a halt. Seeing as how he had to deal with a dark mage traitor within his own family, and his father was killed during the process, it was obvious why his studies had ended. He seemed to be too busy with his own affairs since then to learn about the changes of mana.

So it had really pissed Leon off that Arthur had taken time out of his tight ass schedule in hopes of spreading a new religion that worshiped that dumb fuck Basael. How stupid could these people be? They hadn't known this "new Ancient" was Basael, but even after that information came to light, so many of them still followed him. At least Arthur had admitted to Leon recently that he no longer believed Basael to be anything more than human. It was Arthur's uncle who deserved the brunt of Leon's wrath. Leon had never met the man, and for Arthur's sake, Leon hoped he never would.

Basael had left with Caarda and most of these followers, including Arthur's idiot uncle who apparently had started this new religion. By now, Basael had most likely shown this group how much of a fool he really was. Would these morons recognize idiocy when it presented itself plain as day? Probably not. They were too far up their own ass to recognize they were following not a god but a maniac who would throw all of them off a cliff if their bodies paved the way for more power.

Leon had no idea where they were now. If anyone could find out, it would be Callie because she seemed able to communicate with Basael through the realm of mana.

Callie was probably the only person who might be able to help Tienna while Leon or Charlie were busy, but Leon didn't feel comfortable with the two of them spending so much time together. While they did not look alike, there were a few ways they carried themselves that seemed slightly similar. There was also a similarity between Tienna's eyes and the king's, not identical, but close enough when looking to tell that they were related. It would only be a matter of time before Callie figured it out, or before Tienna couldn't keep it in any longer. What was she really waiting for?

The last sorcerer, Reuben, was not so much a pain in the ass as when he first came to the castle. He was gone most days, transporting goods and overseeing the conditions of the roads between the cities. He told Leon he was working on his enchanting during these long trips, and he did seem to have a few surprises up his sleeve. The old Reuben would've flaunted his new accomplishments, but the newer Reuben was more reserved, probably because he finally had a lady who actually liked him for more than his coin purse for the first time in his damn life.

"Reuben might be able to offer some advice if I'm pulled away for a while," Leon concluded. "His perspective might be better anyway if your spell tree resembles more the tree of enchanting than the elemental tree, which I'm most familiar with. We still have no idea, and we're expecting your help with finding out more."

"I want to be paid more now that I can cast a spell."

"Take that up with the master of coin."

She grumbled.

Leon didn't blame her. He hated dealing with Reuben's father as much as the rest of them.

He had given Zarin enough of a head start and made his way toward the keep. Leon hoped to be wrong about this being

bad news. He wanted to ask Gwen Forrester to marry him as soon as he could plan out a proper wedding and vacation for them. If Monrra had been killed, now might be the time, but the summoner was still fucking alive. She seemed capable of transporting herself from wherever she was into the dark realm, whenever she wanted. This wouldn't matter except that she had found a way to go from the dark realm to Lycast, meaning she could return at any point with more monsters. She had to die, and the sooner the better.

CHAPTER TEN

Leon entered the council chambers at the same time as Zarin. Leon had grown to hate coming here, so he could not imagine how much the king and his advisers despised it because they seemed to be here all the goddamn time.

It was the same room that the citizens of Lycast visited when summoned to the castle to bicker about their legal issues and receive a cursory resolution. The place was empty now except for Nykal, Zarin, Lord Langston, Fatholl, and the queen. Esma Lennox had been absent from the castle after learning of Nykal's affair, but she seemed to be more directly involved these days, now sitting beside her husband at the center table.

In this crowded chamber of chairs, there were more places for asses than there were for feet. A throne sat against the far wall with seats for the king's advisers on either side. These now empty seats looked upon the rest of the room, where chairs were fastened together in neat rows that spanned the length of the long space. It all revolved around the center table. The people of Lycast who came to discuss their issues and await judgment usually moved to this table, spoke for a very short time, and then listened to their lives being changed with not an ounce of power to do anything about it.

From the little Leon had seen, most fortunately seemed pleased with the king's decisions. He was a fair man, for the most part. In fact, looking at his frustrated expression now made Leon ponder if wanting to be fair was the exact reason he had summoned Leon. Usually, he only enlisted Leon's help when the matter related to sorcery and especially when right and wrong were not so clear.

Leon sat in the empty seat on the opposite end of the table as the king. He realized his mistake when everyone looked at him with a bother to their gaze. He had assumed more importance than he had apparently earned, sitting at the head of the table.

“The only other seat is next to the psychic,” Leon explained.

The king seemed satisfied enough with his answer to let Leon remain as he began. “Kataleya of Livea has received a report of a disturbance of mana coming from underneath part of Livea. Considering the rift in the forest was discovered in an underground cavern and Basael told us that rifts and portals have destroyed entire cities, it is worth sending Aliana to investigate today. Do we all agree?”

“Aye,” they all answered in unison, Leon with them.

Basael was a pain in the ass, but it seemed that most of the things he had told them had turned out to be true. It would be unwise to ignore his advice, as much as it bothered Leon to admit.

“A problem,” Leon said. “Even Basael couldn’t close the rift under the forest. If we find one under Livea, what are we supposed to do about it?”

“We are still waiting for someone to come forward with control over artistry,” the king said. “None of the sorcerers have shown any progress?”

“No. We don’t even know what tree it’s in. I have a feeling it’s in the tree Tienna uses for her empowerment spell, but even that we cannot verify because we’d need someone exceptional to show more results by now, and she is far from it.”

Lord Langston asked, “Did Jon encounter anyone familiar with artistry in Ovira?”

“No,” the king said. “However mana was manipulated there, artistry seems to have been taken away. Monrra came from Aathon. We may need to enlist help from someone there, but a trip to Aathon and back could take over two months. If it is indeed a rift beneath Livea, it could collapse before then.”

“Sending Jon would be the fastest way to make contact,” Leon said. “But we don’t even know if they speak the same language, and Jon’s already involved with this portal-maker from Ovira. It would be unwise to send him off now.”

“My people may have an artistry sorcerer by now,” Zarin said. “But it is still a long trip there and back without a mage who can fly, and the venture may prove fruitless.”

The queen added, “And it is no guarantee that just any sorcerer of artistry can close the rift. Didn’t Basael also mention that we could destroy the rift by dumping heavy materials into it, like collapsing the land above?”

“He did,” the king said. “But it could also cause the rift to burst in the same way as when it becomes unstable.”

“Is it burst or implode?” Leon asked.

“I guess we cannot be sure.” The king gave a long sigh. “There *is* a right answer, but there is too much we don’t know to figure it out. We’ll investigate the rift for now using Aliana.”

Leon asked, “Isn’t Jennava supposed to be recruiting potential sorcerers from Koluk?”

“She has been too busy dealing with Orvyn, which we will get to in a moment,” the king replied. “First, something of less importance that can be handled quickly. Kataleya has also requested to see Jon and Callie, her old friends. I have already spoken with my daughter. She will attend dinner at Kataleya’s estate, and I suspect Jon will agree to go as well.” He gave the briefest of pauses. “Kataleya has also mentioned that her unmarried cousin wishes to meet Tarak.”

“Why?” Leon blurted.

“Her cousin seems interested in Tarak as a suitor, and I am going to send him. That is the least important detail of this already unimportant matter. I only bring it up because Jon will most likely be unavailable this evening and night, so we should all be aware of that going forward with the rest of our planning.”

Zarin asked, “Would a marriage take Tarak away from his duties?”

“I would say anything and everything Tarak does takes him away from his duties,” Lord Langston commented under his breath.

“A marriage is unlikely to make a difference,” the king replied.

“Hold on,” Leon said. “Who’s Kataleya’s cousin?”

“Why does it matter?” the king asked. He sounded strangely defensive.

“Well, if she’s a noble like Kataleya, then do we really want Tarak going there as a sorcerer of the king and making a fool of himself?”

Lord Langston leaned toward the king and asked, “Which cousin? Justina Gesh?”

“It is,” the king answered and seemed content to ignore Leon’s question.

“I’m all for it,” Lord Langston said as he folded his hands on the table.

Leon resisted the urge to stand up. “Gesh? How the hell is she related to Endell Gesh?” This was the traitor responsible for the murder of Kataleya’s father, his own brother. “Don’t tell me she’s his daughter?”

“She is, but she had nothing to do with her father’s heinous act,” the king answered all too calmly.

“How can you possibly know that she wasn’t at least aware of what was going to happen?” Leon challenged.

Lord Langston replied, “My son has a good relationship with Kataleya and sees her often during his important task of transporting grain. He has spoken with Kataleya at length about Justina and reported back to the king. Justina has apologized to Kataleya many times, but she had no idea what her father had planned. The poor girl had always been afraid of her father because of his anger problem, as I’m sure you can relate to, *Leon*. She stayed away from Endell as much as she could and does not mourn his death. Kataleya forgave her eventually, but they stopped talking. After the war was over, however, Kataleya received reports of problems in the city where Justina’s father was lord, so Kataleya reached out to Justina, who still lives there with her mother. Justina admitted she had been too ashamed to ask for help because of what her

father had done. Like Kataleya, both of their mothers are not well-equipped to be lords and both girls must take responsibility, but Justina does not have Kataleya's ability to lead and make tough decisions as a lord must."

"There's some sort of scheme here," Leon realized. "What else is going on? How does Tarak fit into this?"

"I have no idea what you're insinuating," Lord Langston replied. "I have met Justina along with her mother and her father. She is nothing like him. Tarak would be lucky to have a cultured woman who may even teach him a thing or two about manners. But seeing as how she is likely to lose interest in him as soon as she realizes he has no more culture than a cellar mouse, we have already spent enough time on this. Send Tarak off. At least it will occupy him for a day and a night and keep us in good graces with the Gesh family for accepting her request, but do so with a warning, I advise."

"When he arrives, Jon can discreetly issue a warning on our behalf," the king said. "The only other detail to determine is the logistics of their travel. Leon, will Tarak have learned to fly safely by this evening?"

"Yes."

"You are confident?"

"Yes."

"How do you know?"

"Because I know Tarak. He may be as stupid as he is tall, but he has a gift. He's either dead by now, or he can fly just fine. Give him a carrier harness and have him take Aliana. It will be good practice for him to learn how to start transporting someone else in addition to his gigantic self. Jon can take the princess. God knows she would distract Tarak anyway, being straddled to his—" Leon cut himself off. *My fucking mouth.* "Back. I was going to say back. Make sure Jon flies near enough that if Tarak has an accident, he can heal them. Forget what I said about the princess. That was out of line."

"Now that you have brought that up..." Lord Langston turned to the king and queen. "We should address that Tarak is

always flirting with the princess, your majesties. I am not sure if you are aware. His actions have progressed to being totally reprehensible. He represents our castle, but it does not have to be that way. He may be a talented sorcerer, but he's doing damage in ways that none of us can repair."

The king put up his palm to stop Reuben. "There is no damage to be done. You should be aware that Callie has requested our permission to end the engagement to Trevor, and her mother and I gave our blessing. I emphasize this has nothing to do with Tarak."

"We did," the queen added.

"What? But your majesties—the Chespars. They are... there is no better suitor, and their influence can make them dangerous if they are not our ally."

The queen took over the conversation. "We are aware, but it's Callie's decision. She knows what she is doing, and she has our counsel to make sure of it. The matter is closed, so there is no point in wasting more time discussing it. Regarding Tarak, my daughter is not involved with him, and it will remain that way. They are friends, perhaps, but that is it."

Leon glanced at the psychic, but Fatholl just looked like he was watching a tepid play.

"Even to remain friends with Tarak, especially during this time with Trevor embarrassed as he surely must be—"

"The matter is closed," the king said with a stern look at Reuben. "As the queen already mentioned."

Lord Langston did not appear to take the rebuke kindly as his eyes flamed, though at least the cheap bastard knew to lower his head and mutter an apology.

The elf could detect lies, but was he using psyche right now? He had not said a word the entire time. He'd barely even moved as he sat a little too relaxed, his hands folded in his lap.

"Why have you not said anything?" Leon asked.

Fatholl shrugged. "I have nothing to add."

"Are you using psyche on any of us?"

“I have vowed not to, and I keep all my vows.”

Fatholl then seemed to communicate something with the king as he looked over. Nykal gave a nod.

“That brings us to the other matter,” Nykal said. “The queen and I made a decision regarding Orvyn Nyvro.”

Zarin seemed to check on Lord Langston before allowing himself to have a reaction, and when he noticed Lord Langston leaning forward and turning his head to look at the king with angst, Zarin seemed not to care much that this decision was made without his counsel.

“We have received reports that the people in Koluk are unhappy with Orvyn,” Nykal continued. “They claim he is manipulating them with psyche.”

“As we had suspected,” Lord Langston commented.

“Yes, but I’m not sure any of us could have predicted the collective anger of the people of the city. I called this meeting as soon as Fatholl returned from Koluk. He went there to investigate Orvyn’s motives. Tell us what you found.”

Fatholl leaned forward and rested his arms on the table. “Orvyn has become a problem. Allow me to explain. I informed him of the people’s anger with him, and he was genuinely surprised. I asked him if he would like to have his interrogation public and verified by the king, an easy way to show the people he means well. He refused. I then asked Orvyn’s permission to question him privately. He refused. So I questioned him without his permission. I wanted to find his motives and see if it is worth supporting him, which may mean going against the people of Koluk, if they want Orvyn gone.”

“Wait,” Lord Langston said. He was shaking his head. “What do you mean you questioned him without permission?”

“I used psyche to fetch answers that he was not otherwise willing to give.”

“Oh god.” Lord Langston waved his hand. “I am strongly against this. It is likely to turn Orvyn into an enemy when he has been valuable. Koluk is producing better than it ever has before. The people have always been unhappy, anyway. Orvyn

has also provided our kingdom with food for months now. He has been our ally for much longer than Fatholl, who might be using psyche to sway your mind, sire.”

“I am not,” Fatholl said. “Besides, it was the king and queen who came to me. I did not know about the state of Koluk.”

“We have felt what psyche is like,” Nykal said. “These decisions were made without its influence.”

“I apologize, sire, but how can you really know?”

Leon swung a thumb at Langston. “I surprisingly agree. We don’t know enough about psyche for you to be sure, sire. Sure, we can tell when the psyche is powerful, but what if it’s subtle?”

Fatholl laughed without humor. “I apologize, but it is difficult to keep my mouth shut when I am the only one who seems to know how this works. Rather than explain it, it might be best if I leave and let the rest of you come to a decision. I promise I am not influencing any thoughts, but with me out of the room at least all of you could feel assured.”

“You will stay,” the king said. “Reuben, Leon, you have both met Orvyn, and you have both met Fatholl. Think about who we can trust more, and remember that Fatholl fought beside us against Monrra.”

The queen directed her next comment to Reuben. “Have your suspicions, but let the rest of this meeting go without interruption. We have been here long enough already. Continue, Fatholl. What did you learn from Orvyn?”

Leon feared the elf was already inside their minds, but what could he do about it? He trusted Orvyn even less than Fatholl. At least it sounded like they would be getting rid of one psychic soon enough.

“Orvyn has been using psyche to influence people’s behavior, but he does mean well. He wants the city to be more cohesive, peaceful, and yield more. What’s more is that Orvyn wants to be king of Rohaer eventually, but he does intend to lead Koluk to a thriving state before then.”

“That is not a surprise,” Nykal said. “I had figured he was working up to requesting kingship, but he is not the right person, considering the people of Koluk seem to be turning against him. I could not trust an entire kingdom to him. Anything else, Fatholl?”

“I stopped the interrogation after that. He then became enraged. He would not be able to kill or imprison me no matter how many guards he had, but I thought it better to leave before his anger caused him to make a decision he would regret.”

“All right,” the king said. “We can make a decision about Koluk in a moment. First I have a proposition for the rest of you. I believe all of you should volunteer to be questioned right here and now.”

“By the elf?” Lord Langston asked incredulously.

“Yes, but unlike Orvyn I will not force anyone to answer, though you should know that it will reflect poorly on you if you refuse.”

Langston stood. “This is preposterous. The elf has gotten into your mind!”

The queen said, “Fatholl knew nothing of this request prior to now.”

Langston glared at Fatholl, who gave another shrug. “This is the first time I am hearing about it.”

Langston sat down and leaned toward the king. “Sire, do you not trust me?”

“I do, or I never would have made you an advisor.”

“Then why question me, and with a foreigner’s influence?”

“Lord, there are two foreigners in this room,” Zarin said, “and there are likely to be more when Jon brings the portal-maker from Ovira. There is nothing inherently wrong with a foreigner, a concept that seems to be lost on you. I will go first, your majesties. Ask whatever you wish.”

“Thank you, Zarin,” the queen said. “We believe this can be done quickly with cooperation.”

Fatholl stood up. Zarin stood with a grimace and grabbed his cane, but Fatholl put up a hand. “It’s better if you remain seated and stay comfortable.”

Fatholl took his chair with him and positioned it near Zarin. He sat down and looked as relaxed as he had since the beginning of this meeting.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

One of the benefits of being a proud asshole was that Leon did not fear speaking honestly. Everyone already knew what he thought. He leaned back and put his arms behind his head.

“This should be good.” He even gave a laugh as he noticed Lord Shithead looking at the door as if envisioning an escape.

But Zarin would go first. Leon had no idea what the analyte would reveal, but he had never feared the young man was a traitor. His biggest problem was that he was young, inexperienced, and yet he seemed to have a better head on his shoulders than many nobles with more years to their name.

“You can ask questions, sire,” Fatholl said. “He’s ready.”

Zarin appeared relaxed, almost drunk as he sat with a little smile. He said something in analyse and laughed.

“This is not natural!” Reuben Langston stood up again. “Sire, look at him. This is not right. You know this is not right.”

“He volunteered,” the queen said.

“You are distracting him.” Fatholl pointed at Reuben’s empty chair. “Sit and be quiet.”

Reuben remained standing, shaking his head as he waited for the king.

“Sit, Reuben,” the king said with a soft tone. “You don’t have to volunteer if you are afraid.”

Reuben reluctantly sat. The king stood up and crouched in front of Zarin. “Would you like to answer my questions honestly?”

“I would.”

“Do you have any secrets that we might want to know about?”

“Just one.”

“What is it?”

“I think Callie could capture my heart if I let her, but I won’t. She is beautiful, smart, and determined. I think you should include her more, your majesties. She has a unique perspective because she is one of the sorcerers but also part of your royal family. I have written her a number of notes, telling her of the details of some of our meetings. I told no one because I didn’t think anyone would understand, but I know what it is like to be her, to be excluded when you want to be part of the very thing you are removed from. I have felt it everywhere my whole life. She doesn’t deserve that feeling. No one does.”

He hung his head. His eyes glistened.

Fatholl made sounds of effort as he lifted his hand.

Zarin put his head up and seemed confused, then angry, then a little sleepy again.

“What’s happening?” the king asked.

“He’s feeling overwhelming sadness. Psyche doesn’t work as well when someone already feels something so strongly. I’m having trouble keeping his mind at ease.”

The queen got up and put her hand on her husband’s back. “This might be a mistake.”

“It might. Fatholl, stop the psyche.”

Reuben let out a breath. “Thank god.”

Zarin seemed a bit embarrassed as his cheeks reddened. But in a few breaths, the redness faded. “I would like to continue to answer any other questions you have.”

“Are you sure?” Nykal asked.

“I have already admitted what I am most embarrassed about. It cannot be any worse.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Fatholl said.

The queen and king whispered to each other for a moment. Nykal began to nod.

“Psyche is no longer necessary, Zarin,” he said. “Thank you for volunteering.”

Zarin stood and gave a slight bow.

The queen said, “Your admiration for my daughter is appreciated, and so is your refrain from acting on these feelings. With the engagement and the recent annulment, it’s best she is not involved with anyone for a time.”

“I understand that. I have no plans to act on my feelings now or in the future.”

The king asked, “Regarding the notes to my daughter, have they ceased?”

“They have.”

“Thank you. We will consider your advice, but you don’t know Callie as well as you think. She is a bit headstrong. Once she has an idea in her head, it’s sometimes impossible to change her mind.”

“And she is still very young,” the queen added. “We believe she needs to mature somewhat and focus on her studies, but we will involve her more when she is older.”

“I understand. I was not going to mention anything, but the psyche. I do apologize about the letters. They have stopped permanently.”

“Reuben?” the king asked.

“I will take my turn after Leon.”

Leon turned his hands over. “I am an open book.”

The king said, “That’s a book none of us wants to read, but for the sake of transparency I think it’s important to ask at least one thing.” He gestured for Fatholl.

“This should be interesting,” Leon muttered.

Fatholl pulled over his chair, sat down, and leaned toward Leon.

Leon remembered little about how he felt before as he noticed himself smiling but unable to stop. It was akin to his

pipe smoking days, early on for the most part when he had a loose grip on how much he could handle. There wasn't a worry in the world, and not just for Leon, but for anyone or anything. He couldn't even remember what it was like to worry about something. What was the point to worry? Everything would work out. All he wanted was to find Gwen and share this with her.

“Get on with it. I've got a woman to dance with, and I usually hate dancing.”

“He's ready,” Fatholl said.

“You already know what I think. All of you can be idiots, some more than others.” He swung a finger in Reuben Langston's direction. “I don't know Fatholl well enough to call him an idiot, but Zarin is too young to be anything but an idiot. What Zarin does know is his people, and that's valuable. I suppose Fatholl is also valuable because he knows a lot of things we don't, but psyche usually makes me too nervous to care about any of that, except right now it doesn't bother me. I still think we should get rid of Fatholl as soon as we know enough about psyche and the other continents, and that should happen soon after Jon brings the portal-maker here. The fewer people whispering in your ear, Nykal, the better. It's not that I'm worried about them right now, but I used to be, and they still annoy me.”

“Leon, we haven't even asked you a question yet,” Nykal said.

“I don't care. I've been wanting to say that for a while now. What do you even want, Fatholl? I'm curious. Fuck, you're annoying. Are you going to answer me or just stare at me like I told you to shit me a gold coin?”

Fatholl leaned back in his chair. “Strange. His energy tells me he's completely at ease, yet he's still bothered by many things.”

“There is no changing that,” Nykal said.

“Gwen finds a way to work out the annoyance, and fuck is she good. She does this thing—”

“All right,” the queen, king, and even Fatholl said nearly at the same time. Fatholl waved his hand.

“The spell is over,” concluded the elf.

Although Leon had not felt the spell affecting him until it was too late, he did feel himself jolt back to sobriety. It was unpleasant, like a surge of adrenaline pulling him out of a drunken stupor.

At least he realized that he should be able to tell when psyche was influencing him so heavily, because this was not subtle.

Fatholl stood up. “I would like to address something. The portal-maker you all speak of is a man I know quite well. Basen Hiller and I were at war at one time.”

“*War?*” Leon yelled, then noticed that the queen appeared more surprised about Leon’s reaction than Fatholl’s statement. She motioned for him to sit back down, although he did not remember standing. He plopped back in his chair and tried not to yell as he continued. “Well who the fuck won?”

“He did. It was because of him that I could not fulfill the goal I set out to accomplish, and it was the only time in my life that happened. I hold no anger. Basen is an honorable man. He sticks to his vows, as I do. We might have even been friends if our situations had been different, but I fear he might not feel the same way toward me that I do toward him. He was my prisoner for a while, but I never disrespected him. I made promises to him that I kept.”

Leon had a feeling that Fatholl could go on for hours about this complicated history, and yet he chose to stop there, with having barely told anything. Leon glanced at the king to see not just concern but confusion crinkled across his already wrinkled forehead. Hell, the man looked even older when he was unpleasantly surprised.

“You’re going to have to elaborate,” Nykal told Fatholl.

“I could, but there is not much point. I did not get a chance to speak to Basen before my exile. I cannot be sure how he might react when he sees me again. I told you, sire,

that I have traveled the sea as an experienced trader. That is true, but I left out that I once led thousands of elves, first in Greenedge and then in Ovira. Under my command, we accomplished things that no one else could accomplish, but I used psyche to influence their emotions. It was not the way Orvyn did it. I only changed feelings slightly. Most of them were psychics like myself, so I was not be able to get away with more. It was still something I should not have done, and I have made a vow not to use psyche again when commanding anyone. My days of leadership are over. Now I only wish to stop the Ancients. I hoped I could convince Basen of this, but he met a different version of me, when I was intent on obtaining akorell metal that he wanted.”

“This is messy,” Leon said. “I don’t like it.”

“Yes,” the king agreed. “Fatholl, you’re going to tell me everything about this war after this meeting is concluded. You mentioned akorell metal earlier; soon you will elaborate on it. To fight an entire war over it makes no sense to me, so clearly I am missing something. Esma, do you have time to join us?”

“I should.”

He showed a hint of a smile before what Leon thought of as the king’s business demeanor took over again.

“We aren’t concluding anything until this fucker is questioned like the rest of us.” Leon gestured at Lord Langston.

“With a mouth like yours, you should consider yourself lucky we have even allowed you in this room,” Langston retorted. “Sire, you should see even more now that Fatholl shouldn’t be manipulating our minds with psyche. He’s a foreigner with a sordid past. We barely know him.”

“I don’t want to discuss this any longer. Are you refusing to cooperate? That is your answer?”

“I do not refuse.” The square-faced lord had a raspy breath. “I agree under protest.”

Fatholl brought his chair over and sat in front of Langston. The lord slowly shifted his gaze to the elf, but he

couldn't seem to hold it there. He looked at a far wall.

Slowly, however, his tight mouth loosened. His cheeks relaxed. His eyebrows separated. He even grew a wry smile that did not seem to sit right on his face.

"Let me question him," Leon suggested.

"There is absolutely no chance of that," Nykal said. "Keep your questions to yourself."

"Please, sire. In all of our time together, how much have I asked of you?"

"A lot."

Fatholl interrupted. "We shouldn't waste time."

Leon supposed the king was right. He was always making small requests of Nykal, but that was only to keep from going completely insane with frustration and boredom, something neither of them wanted.

But then the king asked a similar question to what Leon wanted to know.

"What do you want that you do not have, Lord Langston?"

"Oh, I like this," Leon mumbled then hurried to shut up so he could listen.

"Things that are impossible," Langston answered.

"Like what?" the king asked.

"They are personal."

The king was not the only one to show shock. Fatholl seemed to be at a constant strain.

"We will keep them a secret," Nykal told Langston.

"Then why even ask?" The lord's smile had faded.

"What the fuck is this?" Leon asked. "Your psyche is doing nothing to him."

"Hold on, his reluctance is almost unbreakable. I need everyone to be quiet for a moment." Fatholl turned Langston's

chair and leaned close to his face, making it impossible for the lord to see anything else. “Relax, there is no need to keep anything from us. We are your closest allies, and anything you tell us will remain between us. We just want to make sure we can trust you. You can understand that, can’t you?”

Reuben nodded and grew an even wider smile than before.

“This should be easy to answer, Reuben,” Nykal said. “Do you want anything that only I could give you?”

“Yes.”

Good question, Leon thought. He wanted to know what Reuben expected out of acting as an advisor. Leon was almost certain the lord wanted to be king of Rohaer, but maybe there was even more to it. Did he long to rule over Lycast, pushing Nykal out of the way? That would make him more dangerous than Monrra, but it seemed that even the psychic elf might not be able to get that information out of him, for the bastard said nothing.

“What do you want that I can give you?” Nykal asked again.

“You could make me king of Rohaer.”

“I knew it,” Leon grumbled under his breath, but Fatholl lifted a hand to silence Leon.

“Is there anything you want more than that?” Nykal asked.

“Yes.”

“Is it something I can give you?”

“In a way.”

“What is it?”

“You should reward the nobility who have been good to you. Visit with me and my wife in my estate. Let us have a monthly party with exquisite drink and food. Let us enjoy our coin and power in ways only the highest nobility can enjoy. It bothers me that you never do this. You never take advantage of

your power or gift any perquisites to those just beneath you, like me. I only wish so strongly to be king of Rohaer because I would know how to enjoy the power, which is something you seem incapable of doing.”

Nykal sighed as if disappointed in Langston, but Leon just held in a laugh. This was not a secret. Anyone who had known Langston for more than a day could have figured that this was what he wanted.

“Is there anything you want less than those things that I can do for you?” Nykal asked.

“Yes, demote Tarak. For him to be paid as much as your other sorcerers, like my son, is an insult to the rest of them. They are paid very highly, my dear friend.”

“Dear friend?” Leon blurted, but Fatholl waved another hand to silence him.

“Tarak does not deserve to be paid so highly. He probably never will. He spends our coin on frivolous things.”

Our coin? At least Leon was able to hold in this comment. *This is even more revealing.*

“I know men like him. They care only about their joy in the very moment they live. Tarak is trouble walking. The only difference between him and an animal is language, and even then there is not much of a difference.”

“If it wasn’t for Tarak,” Nykal said, “we might have been looking at battle against Basael, but now he is our ally. Tarak also saved my life at nearly the expense of his own. What do you say to this?”

“He is trouble,” Reuben repeated.

Fatholl turned and whispered over his shoulder, “His reasoning skills are not as they should be.”

The king nodded, then quickly asked, “Do you feel this way because of a personal grudge? Tarak has defied you openly, and I know you wanted worse punishment for him than I allowed.”

“Yes, I have been personally insulted by Tarak. I have punished others more severely for much less than Tarak has done. He will continue to be trouble until he is reprimanded appropriately. You dishonor me by refusing to do so.”

This is yielding nothing interesting.

Leon asked, “What else do you want in your personal life, unrelated to Tarak?”

“Leon—” the king began, but Langston answered.

“I wish my son would break off his relationship with the tavern wench he seems to be infatuated with. He should accept any of the better suitors I have discussed with him. If he does not, some drastic measures may need to be taken.”

All right, here we go. Leon was looking for a reason for the king to dismiss this advisor. “What kind of drastic measures?”

“Bribes should work.”

“And if they don’t?” Leon asked.

Langston lost the look of indifference. He always had the face of someone refusing a beggar for possibly the last time before lashing out. “Enough of this!” he yelled. “I have answered more questions than anyone.”

“You have, and thank you,” Nykal said, then signaled for Fatholl to stop.

The elf gave a nod and returned to his chair.

“Onto the last matter,” Nykal announced. “We need a replacement for Orvyn and what we will do with him now.”

The door to the council chambers swung open. Rick rushed in. “My apologies for not knocking—”

Orvyn stumbled in. “I’m dying!” He fell flat on the floor, an arrow sticking out of his ass and another one protruding from his back.

Tarak walked in after him, a rip in the thigh of his pants and blood soaked around the opening. “I very much doubt he is actually dying as quickly as he makes it seem, but best heal

him just in case, unless of course you want him dead? The people of Koluk certainly do.”

“Help me!” Orvyn craned his neck and crawled toward the advisors, who had all jumped up except Leon.

Leon leaned a bit to see that the arrow coming out of Orvyn’s back was low and to the side. The ugly bastard probably would die eventually without a healer, but a punctured organ was not something Leon could do anything about.

“Leon!” the queen yelled. Bless her ignorant heart.

“I can’t heal that,” he muttered.

“Call for Jon,” the king said urgently but without panic.

Rick turned as if to rush out, but Jon Oklar stepped into the room. “I saw two men flying in, one with arrows coming out of him.” Jon pointed at Orvyn. “Is he an ally?”

“That depends,” Leon said.

“Yes,” Nykal disagreed. “Heal him.”

“All right.” Jon knelt over Orvyn.

“You were here lounging about this whole time?” Tarak complained. “You could have been the one to rescue him, but it had to be me, and now I have another ruined pair of pants.”

“I had just returned.” Jon yanked out the arrow in Orvyn’s back.

Orvyn screamed. “Heal me! Hurry!”

“You’ll be fine.” Jon pulled out the arrow in Orvyn’s ass. “I’ve healed a lot of people in a worse state than you. This is going to hurt, so hold still.”

“It’s already agon—!” Orvyn interrupted himself with a piercing yelp as Jon held his hands over both wounds on Orvyn’s body.

Orvyn squirmed as he shrieked, but soon it was over. Orvyn panted as he sprawled on the floor.

“What happened, Tarak?” Nykal asked.

“Nearly the whole city stormed his little lordy castle. He escaped to the roof and locked himself up there, but it was only a matter of time before they would reach him. Jennava and Syrah told me to rescue him, so I took him out on my back, but there were a number of archers among the people.”

Orvyn finally stood up. “I have done nothing but help the people of Koluk, and they turned against me from one day to the next. Jennava and Syrah must’ve had something to do with it. You know Syrah wants my position.”

“She doesn’t,” Fatholl said. “I asked her. She only wants what’s best for the city.”

Orvyn gasped. “This elf.” He pointed. “This elf, sire! This elf is already your most trusted advisor, as I am thrown to the wolves! I demand justice. I should be here by your side, my king. I know both Rohaer and Lycast. I am responsible for seeing both kingdoms through the drought! Put your faith back in me, and I will rid Koluk of the rebels and rule the city as it should be ruled.”

“With what?” Leon questioned. “With psyche? With fear? The people of Koluk have already turned against you. You’re not going anywhere near that place again.”

“The people need to be dealt with! They cannot turn on their lord and expect no repercussions.”

“I’ve heard enough, Orvyn,” Nykal said. “You will be quiet and listen to me. You will not have lordship over anyone in any of my cities.”

“Sire, allow me to explain.”

“Silence! You used psyche without anyone’s permission, and now you have lost the trust of not only my people but my trust as well. Word will spread about you. The only place fit for you now is far from here. Rohaer, and not as king as you desire. You will never be my allied king, so remove that thought from your head and consider yourself lucky you were not killed by the people of Koluk or imprisoned for unauthorized use of sorcery. Return to your home in Rohaer. Report to the steward king. He will be notified of accounts

here, including a warning about psyche. Refrain from using it, or there will be repercussions. If you can prove to be an asset as you once were, we will discuss making you lord of something else. You will be questioned by Fatholl again eventually. If you have any desire to rebel, you'd best flee and never come back, or you will be hung when the truth comes out."

Orvyn turned and stormed out of the room. Tarak stepped out of his way.

As soon as he was gone, Jon turned as if to leave as well. "I'll be in the dining hall."

"Same." Tarak started after him. "A late lunch just might turn around this wretched day."

"A moment, Jon," the king said. "You, too, Tarak."

They stopped.

"The two of you will be going with Callie and Aliana to Livea tonight. Kataleya has sent an invitation for the four of you. It is not only for leisure. There have been reports of a disturbance of mana coming from underground that may be a rift. Aliana is to investigate. Tarak, you are now one of my sorcerers and you must act the part. Kataleya is nobility, and so is her cousin, who wants to meet you. Behave, understand?"

Tarak scratched his head. He whispered to Jon, "I have heard of Kataleya of Livea, but who is this mysterious cousin?"

"Don't ask me. I don't know."

"Her name is Justina Gesh," the king said.

"How old is she?"

"Seventeen."

"Married?" Tarak asked.

"No."

"Does she have a fancy-man?"

"A what?"

“A sweetheart? A dear? A flame? Or even just a wooer?”

“I believe not. Now we have other—”

“Then I see what this is!” Tarak shook his finger and laughed as if discovering a plot.

“You will go and behave yourself, or we may never let you go anywhere again. Think of it as a test if you must. Now let us return to our business. With the recent rebellion against Orvyn, there is a lot more to discuss.”

Zarin stood up. “I apologize, but may I ask something first, your majesty?”

“Go ahead, Zarin.”

He limped around the table. “Jon, I have been told you can heal any injury. Would you care to look at my leg when there is time? I doubt anything can be done, but I must ask just in case.”

Jon shrugged and headed toward Zarin. “I’ll heal it right now in just a moment.”

Tarak went with Jon. “This I have to see.”

Jon crouched and investigated Zarin’s leg, specifically his knee. He grumbled a few times as if displeased by what he felt.

“This is a tricky one, but I’m sure I can heal it. We might need a mallet, though.”

“A mallet?” Zarin’s face went white.

“The problem is that your body has healed it as much as it can, but something went wrong. We’re going to have to damage it again, severely, but then I’m confident I can fix it properly.”

Zarin breathed heavily as he looked as if he might faint. He fell into his chair. “What if you cannot heal it after you strike it with a mallet?”

“I’m sure I can. I’ve done it before.”

“Let me think on it.”

“What’s there to think about? Your leg is going to give you pain the rest of your life, and I can fix it in less than a minute.”

“I am worried you may be wrong.”

“I’m not.”

Zarin put up his hands. “Let me think on it.”

Jon put his hand on Zarin’s shoulder. “You can trust me. I promise you I can heal it. Come to me when you’re ready.”

He turned to leave. Tarak followed him. “I thought you could heal anything.”

“Some things take a little finesse.”

Tarak gave a laugh. “Finesse? A mallet to the knee is finesse?”

“Well, what would you call it?”

“I would call that barbaric.”

The king spoke over them. “We need a new lord of Koluk. Syrah would do well, but she doesn’t want the position. The people know Jennava. They would follow and trust her. Leon, you know her. Do you believe she could handle the position and, just as importantly, would want it? We all know the troubles of Koluk.”

Leon was having difficulty focusing on the question as the two daisies by the door made a commotion.

Tarak had opened the door for Jon, but Jon had told him to go ahead.

“I opened it for you,” Tarak complained, still holding the door.

“And I said you should go first.”

“But I opened it! I insist.”

“Just go, Tarak.”

Leon stood up and yelled, “Will you two idiots get out of here?”

Tarak and Jon tried to get through the door at the same time. They bumped into each other and the door frame, barely squeezing through. Their argument continued on the other side as neither thought to close the door after them.

“Are you *sure* you’re the son of Caarda?” Jon asked.

“Are you sure you are not an arse?”

“Don’t touch me.”

“Then get out of my way.”

“You’re in *my* way!”

Leon walked a few steps toward the door, then used wind to slam it shut.

He sat down and responded to the king. “The people who don’t want to lead usually make the best leaders, but Jennava still might refuse. I think she’d rather help Koluk as she has been, among the people, not lording over them. If Syrah won’t do it, then I say Tedson Faulk. His Time spell is useful, and he’s proven that he cares more about the kingdom than we thought, enough to risk his life.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Nykal said, “but I fear people might not trust him.”

“Then have a public interrogation with psyche like we wanted with Orvyn,” Leon responded.

“People don’t know or trust psyche yet.”

Leon was sick of this long meeting, but it seemed that no one else had any good ideas. He tried another.

“Then we use a magical contract like we used to. The younger Reuben has learned how.”

The king nodded and pointed. “Yes, a public signing should suffice, especially with Syrah and Jennava’s public support during the signing.” Perhaps he was just as eager as Leon to be done with this.

“What is this magical contract you speak of?” Fatholl asked.

The queen explained, “It uses an enchantment spell that compels the signer to hold to their word.”

Fatholl’s eyes went wide. “I am very intrigued about this type of sorcery.”

Leon whispered to Zarin, “How long do these meetings usually last?”

“A lot longer than this.”

No. I can't do it.

“It sounds like psyche,” Fatholl said, “but it holds even after the sorcerer is not present?”

“It’s not psyche.” Leon stood up. “It could never hold someone to something they don’t want to do. Think of it more like a nagging mother. It could interrupt just about any activity and stop just about anyone for a moment, but if they are completely against the message, they can ignore it with enough willpower. It’s not easy, though. To live in contradiction to the magical contract would be a life of annoyance and may even cause madness.”

“How does it work?” Fatholl asked.

“For all that is holy, I have to get out of here. Make Tedson lord. That is my recommendation.” Leon headed toward the door.

“Perhaps a recess would be best,” the queen said.

“A recess it is,” the king agreed.

Leon headed out first, but then he heard Fatholl calling after him.

“Leon, please explain these magical contracts in more depth.”

Do not swear at the elf. He doesn't deserve it after making Langston look like a fool.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tarak walked through the keep beside Jon. They headed toward the stairway still debating, arguing.

“If you are completely confident you can heal Zarin’s leg, then why were you not more forceful about it? The man is in constant pain.”

“I will be forceful if he is too afraid, but I need his cooperation before I take a mallet to his knee.”

“You could strike while he sleeps,” Tarak suggested, only to see what Jon would say.

“It may take more than one strike, and it’s best if his leg is not against something soft on the other side.”

“Lord and bane.” Tarak sucked air through his teeth. “How did you figure out that works for injuries like his?”

“Because I understand how my mana works.”

“You still had to test it on someone.”

“Yes, a desperate man with a break that did not heal correctly.”

“Is there any injury you cannot heal?”

Jon appeared a bit confused. “Doesn’t your natural healing have the same limitations?”

“I am trying to find that out. Can you regrow a severed limb?”

“No, I tried to regrow a man’s finger, but I couldn’t figure out how. That was before the changes to sorcery. The healing spell feels a bit different now. I wonder if it might be possible. Do your limbs grow back?”

“I cannot say. I have never lost one, and I do not care to test it. I have wondered, though. I have wondered a lot.”

“Tarak, Jon!” Callie called from behind.

They were just about to descend the stairs but stopped and turned to her.

“I thought I heard Tarak’s voice,” she said with a cute smile. Her eyes traveled down to the rip and hanging fabric around the thigh of Tarak’s bloody pants. She pointed at the opening. “What happened here?”

“There was an uprising in Koluk against Orvyn. I had to fly him out, but I was shot on the way.”

“What?” She looked at him as if in disbelief.

“It is not a jest,” Tarak added. “The people turned against him because they realized he was using psyche. He had a couple of arrows in him, but Jon healed him.”

“You’re telling me that there was an uprising in Koluk, the people almost killed Orvyn and maybe even you, but you saved him and brought him back here, and...you can fly, by the way?”

“I had a busy morning.”

She laughed and touched his arm. He smiled as he resisted the urge to wrap her up.

“We have a lot to discuss,” she whispered.

“Is discuss all we have to do?” Tarak whispered back, painfully aware of Jon rolling his eyes.

“I’m headed to the dining hall, but not before I say this just one time, Callie. I really don’t think you should be involved with anyone when you are engaged to Trevor. If I caught the two of you already, I can imagine others will. Word will get back to him.” Jon leaned down to match Callie’s eye level as he lectured her. “And it’s not right.”

Tarak resisted the urge to punch Jon. “Not right? I suppose you would know better than anyone about what is not right, barging into my room and scolding a young woman who surely knows herself better than you do.”

Callie gently took Tarak’s hands. “It’s all right, Tarak,” she said. “Jon’s just worried about me, but this is not the place to discuss any of this.”

A castle worker looked to be headed down their hallway, though she was still too far to overhear anything. She pushed a

cart of covered trays, probably food for those in the meeting room where Tarak had come from. Callie quickly dropped Tarak's hands.

"I'm not going to mention it again," Jon said. He started to turn.

"You should know one thing, Jon," Callie said. "I'm not engaged to Trevor anymore."

Anger crossed Jon's face. "Oh god, you must've had something to do with this, Tarak." He seemed to try to stand tall as he faced Tarak, but he barely came up to Tarak's chin.

"Jon," Callie hushed as she now grabbed at Jon's arm. "No one is to know about Tarak."

They all went quiet as the castle worker came close. There was a long silence as they waited for her to cross by and make a turn.

Tarak couldn't help beaming with the widest grin his face could make. "You broke the engagement for me?" he whispered.

"Yes." She matched his smile.

Lord and bane, how he wanted to kiss her, but the risk was too great.

"You are endangering this kingdom, Tarak," Jon warned. "Princess, I'm disappointed. I will keep your secret out of respect, but I don't approve of it. Trevor is a good man, and Tarak is...well, I don't know what Tarak is yet, but he's not like Trevor. I believe he may have taken advantage of you."

"Tarak could never take advantage of me," she seethed. "But Trevor has, Jon! I cannot believe you would lecture me about something you know nothing about!"

"He has?" Jon sounded surprised.

"I care about you, Jon," Callie said.

"You do?" Tarak blurted.

She shot him a look to show she wasn't finished, then returned her attention back to Jon. "Which is why I'm not

going to stay angry with you, but you need to know I was miserable with Trevor. He is not an honorable man. Not at all. I am not going to explain myself further. I don't need to, and you don't need to worry about me. Let's leave it at that."

Jon took a few breaths as he seemed to ponder her words. "I was gone a long time," he uttered. "It was wrong of me to assume anything. I trust you." A suspicious glance shifted to Tarak. "Even if I don't understand it or believe Tarak to be any more honorable."

"Are there not people who need healing somewhere?" Tarak pushed.

"Yes, after I eat."

"I hope you eat quickly, because I am headed there soon and I do not wish to see you."

Jon grunted as he left.

Tarak smiled as he looked down at Callie. She was a bit shorter than the girls he had been involved with in the past, but it was easy to forget that because of her fierce personality.

"I am wondering where we may be able to speak privately," she said.

"Your room would suffice." He put a hint behind his tone.

"We can't. I cannot have anyone know you are alone with me in my room."

"So we sneak."

"Someone might see you come in or out, or someone might come there to look for me, and there is no escape from my window without being seen."

Tarak smiled again. "You have thought about this."

Callie squished his chin. "You have to stop being flirtatious. We cannot be caught. That's what I need to speak to you about. Come with me."

She led him down the hall, by the hand first, but she seemed to realize what she was doing as she soon let go. Tarak kept hoping she would take him into one of the rooms they

passed so he could show her how much his lips missed her, but she kept going until they came to another long hallway. She stopped here.

“This area is not as busy because it’s far from the stairs, but I still should not be seen alone with you. This has to be the last time we are alone together for at least a month.”

“Are you serious?”

“I am.”

“A month? A month?” He couldn’t believe it.

“At least,” she said, then backed up against the wall and gestured for him to come close. “Can you cloak us with an illusion?”

He pressed himself against her, breathing in her lovely scent. He tore his mind away from her soft lips as he focused on creating an illusion of the wall bending around them. He had to extend it far so the slope of the wall was gradual, but it would still be easy to notice if anyone came close and paid attention.

They raced to meet each other’s lips. She moved her hands through his hair. He took her by the sides and held her close.

She suddenly pulled away. “Tarak, the illusion,” she whispered.

“Shit,” he grumbled. When had it faded? “A moment.”

But Callie slipped out from between him and the wall. She stepped back to create distance. “This is too risky.”

“I am certain I can keep up the illusion longer.”

“But even then, someone might discover us. We can’t do this, not for a month.”

“You ask me to sit in front of the most beautiful plate of food I have ever seen, hungry, and tell me not to eat for a month. It is impossible.”

“No, you would die in that scenario, but you are not going to in this one.”

“I might!”

She laughed. “We have to resist. It will become easier as time goes on.”

“Pfft.”

“All right, maybe not, but we have to try. If Trevor finds out, it could cause serious harm to my family and even to the kingdom. We are talking about the possible death of my father.”

Tarak was dumbfounded. “What? How?”

“Imagine how you would feel if we were to be married and I ended the engagement.”

“I would feel many things, but anger toward your father I would not have.”

“Now imagine you found out I ended the engagement because I had started a relationship with someone else while we were supposed to be engaged. Jon, for example.”

“Jon?” Tarak could barely keep from yelling. “Are you telling me you *are* drawn to that boring bastard?”

“No, but see how you feel?”

He took a breath to calm his anger.

“Now imagine you had an army at your disposal,” she said, “and more coin than my father, and you felt that the crown was your right, only for it to be taken away by Jon, me, and by the king allowing me to make such a terrible choice. You might not be the type of person to act on this anger, but some men are. Trevor may be one of them.”

“Ah.” He knew he should not ask the following question, but it seemed to force its way out. “But are you sure you have no feelings for Jon?”

“No, Tarak!”

“Not for Trevor, either?”

“Only you.”

He found himself taking her hands as he smiled. She grinned back at him, but she pulled her hands out of his grasp. They had stepped toward each other, Tarak realized, but now she made the same distance as before.

“We were never together,” she stated. “We are not together, and you have no interest in me. Be yourself, like you were when we first met.”

“I was flirting with you even then!”

She let out a slight laugh. “I suppose you were. But you were also with Illia later, and word spread about the kind of young man you are.”

“And what kind of young man is that?” he wondered.

“You prioritize a lady’s affection over most else.”

“Hmm.” It was fascinating to hear the impression others had of him. He had never thought of himself that way, but there was truth to it. “Wait, are you saying I should chase after *other* girls?”

“Could you have the appearance of doing so without actually...engaging in any activities with them?”

“Can you train a dog with only the *illusion* of treats? No, they would soon become frustrated and quit.”

Her face soured. “Sometimes I don’t know why I’m so taken by you.”

Tarak shrugged. “A handsome face and strong hands go a long way toward gradating vulgarity into charm.”

She laughed heartily.

“It was a bad example,” he admitted. “My point is I would rather not partake in the chase at all, or I may hurt an innocent girl.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“One problem, princess. I believe your father may know of your interest.”

Callie gave a sad nod. “I felt like I had to tell him and my mother this morning. They needed to know why I was ending the engagement with Trevor.”

“Oh lord, now I am certain. Your father hopes to split us up. He has manufactured a situation in hopes of setting me up with some cousin of the lord of Livea.”

“Kataleya’s cousin? Who?”

“Something Gesh.”

“Justina?”

“That sounds right. You will be there as well, and so will Aliana and Jon.”

“My father does dislike you.” Callie put her hand to her chin as her eyes squinted. “I think you may be right, but why would the rest of us be there?”

“There is some sort of disturbance of mana coming from underground. It sounds like another rift is the cause. Aliana is to investigate, but apparently the lord also wishes to see you and Jon. You are friends?”

“We are, yes.”

“And apparently the king wants me to woo this cousin, who is interested in meeting the son of Caarda, but do not fret. She will be strongly disappointed. She will be drawn to my charm and handsomeness, but I will not woo her.”

“I am not too worried about her, but I am about Jon.”

“Him again!”

“About *you* and him, the relationship between you two. Do try to behave around him. He is beloved by all for a reason. I can’t have you fighting and breaking tables. You will be blamed every time...and I have to say that Jon has never acted this way before.”

“That was not a fight but a test, and he is the one who interrupted our only night together for what will be a month! *And* he usurped my bed when I was still recovering!”

“He apologized for those things.”

“Fine, then I will apologize, too.”

“You will?”

“Yes, right after I punch him in the nose.”

“*Please*, try to be kind to him. For me?”

“For you? I will.”

“Thank you.” Her smile dissolved all his frustrations. But then she shoved a dagger in his stomach with her next statement. “We really cannot even be flirtatious tonight, at all, Tarak. Not even for a moment. Kataleya is friends with Trevor, and she isn’t the only one. He has many loyal people in Livea who would gladly report anything they see happening between us. Please tell me you understand this is serious?”

“Lord and bane, Trevor is very much starting to grind my bones!”

“He is even angrier toward you. He suspects it is you who has come between us, and my father had previously promised him that wasn’t the case.”

A castle worker started down their quiet hall. She seemed to be discussing business with Rick. Tarak rolled his eyes.

“I had better head to the dining hall. Do me a favor. Please keep yourself covered as much as possible so I may have at least a tiny chance to focus on something besides you.”

“I’ll wear a cloak and a hood during the whole dinner,” she teased. “How about that?”

“Throw a mask on as well, and you will have to sit far from me because you smell as sweet as a pastry. It is probably best if I eat in another room.”

“We can put a plate outside with the dogs.”

“Perfect. I should not even need a fork in that kind of company.”

“Why even bother with the plate?”

“Hey,” he feigned insult. “I have some dignity.”

She laughed.

Rick reproached from afar, “Tarak!”

He sped off like a little boy caught in the midst of mischief. Perhaps that was not too far off.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Tarak was so late for lunch that he wondered if he may just be early for supper. Jon sat alone in the dining hall, something special in front of him.

“Is that a meat pie?” Tarak sat down next to Jon, who scooted over with his food as if worried Tarak might lean over and take a bite.

“Yes,” Jon answered with a full mouth.

Tarak hurried over to the door that separated the hall from the kitchen. “Chef Irwin!” he called out. “Chef!”

The chef opened the door and did not seem too pleased to find out it was Tarak calling his name. “Yes?”

“I will have a meat pie, the biggest you have back there.”

“Jon has the last one, but I can prepare some potato soup for you.”

“No, I will—Jon!” Tarak turned and ran back to Jon, who had foregone his fork and now shoveled the contents of the pie into his mouth. “Stop! There is only one left!”

“I know,” he answered with another full mouth.

“You will not share?”

“I’m hungry. Have the soup, it’s delicious.”

“You have the soup! The meat pie is my favorite.”

“Mine, too.”

“Stop eating until we settle this like gentlemen!”

Jon pushed the meat pie aside, away from Tarak’s approach.

“We wrestle arms for it.” Tarak sat in front of Jon and set his elbow down on the table.

“No, but I’ll duel you for it.”

“Duel as in wrestle?”

“No, sword fighting with wooden swords.”

“That will take too long.”

“No it won’t,” Jon answered with insulting confidence. “That’s all I’m going to offer you.”

Tarak flipped his hand. “Bah! I don’t have the patience for you.”

“Strange, because everyone else I’ve met seems to tolerate me pretty well.”

“Oh yes, Jon Oklar, beloved by all. But let me ask you, did you steal the bed and ruin what might have been the best night of anyone else’s life?”

Jon dragged the meat pie back in front of him and resumed eating. “I apologized for that.”

“How about I take your lunch and eat it, then apologize after?”

“You can try.”

As Tarak thought about taking Jon up on his offer, Chef Irwin called out, “Tarak, I’ll bring you the soup. Don’t do anything drastic.”

The burgeoning desire to fight Jon left him as he realized he was inconveniencing someone innocent. “Yes, thank you.”

There was also Callie’s request. He’d promised he would try to be kind to Jon...even if Jon wasn’t kind to him. He realized he was standing and sat back down in front of Jon.

“I apologize for my outburst.”

Jon’s eyebrow lifted. “You’re calm?”

“Yes.”

“Then I want to tell you something that I hope you’ll take seriously. I am not trying to offend, but I don’t think you should go to Livea to meet Kataleya’s cousin. You are likely to ruin dinner for everyone. If you must meet her, at least go when I’m not there.”

“Why don’t you go another time?” Tarak countered.

“Because I have not visited the city since my return. I have to go there sooner rather than later to heal the suffering people, then I have to return to Rohaer. You don’t seem to have to do anything important. You might as well go another time.”

“Nothing important? I saved the king’s life during the battle you were absent from, and before that I unearthed the deep rift that Aliana had sensed beneath the ground. I then saved her from certain death as well, as we were chased by heaps of archers and sorcerers on horseback.”

“You don’t want to hear me list everything I have done, or we will be here all night. I speak of the present times. I am extremely busy healing everyone in the entire kingdom, while you frolic around with Callie.”

“You...” Tarak pointed as he grinded his teeth, but he stopped himself. Jon seemed too annoyed to even continue eating.

Both of them forced themselves to relax as the chef brought out Tarak’s soup and set it in front of him.

“Thank you, Chef Irwin. I am certain it will be as delicious as everything you have made so far.”

The chef gave a slight bow of his head, then hurried back to the kitchen.

Tarak had a few bites and realized he was not angry anymore.

The fight seemed to drain from Jon as well, and the two of them ate silently for a time.

“Jon,” Tarak eased into the conversation. “It seems like you and I might be seeing a lot of each other. Are you enjoying the time we spend together?”

“I am not.”

“Neither am I.”

“What are you proposing?” Jon asked.

“Callie does not seem to like this little rivalry we have, and I would like to do something about changing that. Can we agree to act like gentlemen around each other?”

“I can. Can you?”

The question was asked without malice, almost rhetorical.

“I am not sure but I believe it should be easy,” Tarak answered honestly.

“You have never *tried*?”

“I have not.”

“For god’s sake, why not? Never mind.” Jon shook his palms. “I always behave. It’s only something about you that brings out a childish side I didn’t even know I had.”

“Yes, that is my charm.”

“I can be a gentleman easily around you if you are one around me. I think you should practice before dinner.”

“I will, starting now.”

Leon strode in with a gait as if the dining hall belonged to him and an expression as if Tarak was a trespasser. “Haven’t you bothered Jon enough today, Tarak?”

Tarak was about to argue, but he figured a gentleman would not do so. What would a gentleman say to an insult like this?

“You insult me!”

“Oh really? I was trying to compliment you.” Leon sat beside Jon with a bit of distance between them. Chef Irwin came out with a meat pie, to Tarak’s surprise. He walked over a little nervously as he eyed Tarak, then put it in front of Leon.

“Thank you,” Leon said. “This looks delicious.”

“You’re welcome.”

Tarak could not keep himself from speaking. “You told me there was only one left!” he yelled, then finally felt the strength to fix his tone as the chef turned with a worried look.

“I mean...I was under the impression, my fine sir, that there was but one pie left, and Jon requested it before I.”

“Leon had his lunch reserved,” the chef explained. “It was saved until he was ready.” He headed back to the kitchen.

Tarak sat down beside Leon, who shot him a nasty look.

“Care to share?” Tarak asked politely.

“No.”

“Please, Leon?” he asked sweetly.

“No! Why are you speaking like that? You’re making me uncomfortable.”

“I am being a gentleman.”

“Be a gentleman to someone else.”

Tarak groaned as he returned to his potato soup.

Charlie entered soon after. “Jon! I’ve been looking for you. Have you thought more about your conjuration tree?”

“I haven’t had time.”

“You have time right now.”

Jon ran his finger along his bowl and slurped up the last remnants of his meat pie from his finger. “Actually, I have to go.”

“One minute, Jon, please!”

“I need to heal everyone I can past the outskirts of Newhaven. I’m going to Livea this evening, then to Rohaer tomorrow.”

“Just one thing.” Charlie put himself in front of Jon. “Confirm my suspicion that your healing spell is different.”

“I think so, but I told you I don’t know how to confirm it.”

“I do, now.” Charlie pulled a dagger out of his pocket and held out his bare arm.

“Charlie, you’re going to make a mess!” Leon yelled, stopping him.

Charlie glanced over disappointedly as he held the knife ready over his arm.

“Use something blunt instead. Here, let me.” Leon stood up and hoisted up the long bench he had been sitting on.

“Duck, Jon,” Leon said as he swung the bench toward Jon and Charlie.

Jon ducked, and so did Charlie—Tarak realized too late as the bench swung over the table and cracked him in the side of the head.

Tarak came to on the floor with a ringing in his ears and a pain in his head like nothing he’d felt before.

“You *stupid* arselicker!” he groaned as he struggled to sit up.

“Charlie, why did you duck?” Leon yelled. “I was going to hit you in the shoulder!”

“I don’t know. I got scared. It looked like it was really going to hurt.”

Tarak managed to get his forearm on his bench and partially pulled himself up. “Fucking right it did. Could have lost a tooth, Leon, you goddamn fool!”

Leon helped Tarak up. “Ah, you’ll be fine.”

“I’m sorry, Charlie,” Jon said as he headed out. “I have to go.”

Charlie turned his attention to Tarak. “Have you recovered yet?”

“No, but what do you need?”

“I want to find out what we could not figure out from the divination tree earlier. I remember your range is IC to uC, and with your ability to learn quickly you should be able to find out what IC, IE, and IG do. It might be something really useful.”

Leon said, “Tarak already has more than his distracted mind can handle with light and gravity, and stop bothering Jon as well. He’s too busy improving the lives of hundreds of

people each day to help you learn more about a tree that's working just fine for Jon. A lot of people have fallen sick or injured in the time since he's been away."

Tarak specified, "You cannot heal a single one of them, Leon?"

"I can't heal sickness, infections, or wounds more than skin deep, and I don't have the patience to spend every moment of my day treating shit that most people could have avoided if they weren't so stupid. Lunch is long over, Tarak. Return to your training."

He practiced his gentlemanly voice again. "I already learned to fly today, and I saved the life of Lord Orvyn. I require rest, fine sir. I would like to be fresh for the nobility in Livea."

"Too bad. You're a sorcerer of the king first and a bachelor second, and stop talking like that to me."

"Do not forget that you struck me in the face with a bench not long ago, you arse. You owe me something for that, and all I request is a little rest."

"It doesn't matter what I owe you. Jon's bringing a portal-maker here soon enough, and we have a lot of plans after. You need to be training as much as you can."

Tarak realized something. "I can fly now, so I do not see how you expect to hold me in this castle like a bird in a cage. There is no roof to keep me in."

"It's more like how a dog follows its master's command. Master knows best, and master has treats."

Tarak supposed there were many treats that could be taken away, but by whom?

"Are you the master, or is the king?"

"Me. Now train until Aliana is ready, and leave your master alone."

Tarak headed out of the dining hall, glad he would soon be out of Leon's grating presence.

“Illusions, Tarak! And they’d better be useful ones.”

Tarak turned around and cast his spell with an exaggerated twiddle of his fingers. Leon stood up and looked down at the illusion of his pants around his ankles, a white loincloth tied tightly against his bare legs and leaving no presence of a bulge.

“Oh very funny!” Leon yelled as he walked after Tarak, but the image of him scurrying across the floor with his pants around his ankles made it even better.

Tarak turned as he laughed and was glad to see Michael coming in at the same time. He gasped. “Leon!”

“It’s an illusion, you idiot. Tarak, I swear you will regret this.”

“No, now we are settled for the bench.”

“Just get out of here!”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Tarak caught Michael up on the events that had passed since Tarak rescued Orvyn. He found out that Michael had taken until now to return not because of distractions or laziness, as Tarak might have assumed, but because he was just that much slower at flying. Even with Orvyn on Tarak's back, he had made the trip from Koluk to the castle in what seemed to be half the time as Michael.

Although Tarak felt blessed to have such a gift, it seemed that Michael felt the opposite. "You just learned to fly today and you're already that much faster than me. Meanwhile, I've been practicing for months. And Leon wonders why I don't have the drive to push myself harder than I already am. It should be obvious."

"You have many strengths," Tarak told him as they stopped in the courtyard.

"Like?"

"You are a good friend."

"That's not a strength. What else?"

"Um. You are brave!"

"Am I?"

"You are scared most of the time, are you not?"

"Not really."

"Then I suppose you are not brave but strong-willed." Tarak made a fist as if this was a grand compliment.

"Great, I'm strong-willed. They're going to write stories about me."

"If you do not like what they would say, then change it."

"How? You expect me to learn a whole new spell? It's taken me almost a decade to get where I am with Wind."

"Then is it not better to start now?"

“Maybe, or I could have a drink and eat something delicious. That sounds much more rewarding than failing to cast for an hour.”

“It does,” Tarak agreed. “But Leon is in there.”

Michael made a sound of disgust. He glanced around. “Where’s Tienna?”

“I cannot say, but Leon wants me to train, and I do not want him to bother me again today.”

“I hear you. Best of luck with everything tonight. I really hope there’s no story to tell of your night with nobility. Behave, yeah? I worry, with Callie there, that your emotions or even just your mouth is going to get more than just you into trouble.”

“I will be a gentleman. I have been practicing.”

“You have? For how long?”

“I just started before you showed up.”

“You’ll need more time than that. Do you even know what a gentleman is?”

“Someone who uses manners to mask their real thoughts.”

“No, they...” Michael paused. “Wait.” He scratched his head.

Rick approached them. “Leon says to train, Tarak.”

Tarak spun around, but Leon was nowhere in sight. “How could he know I was not?”

“Probably a guess, but you’d better get to it. Michael.” Rick gestured for him to leave.

“Yeah, all right.”

Tarak spent the rest of the afternoon training. He very much wanted to learn how to turn invisible, but he didn’t quite know how to proceed. He felt a little like Michael, as if the time might have been completely wasted.

His progress really had slowed. He wondered if it was because he was distracted or if invisibility was that much harder than the previous illusions he had taught himself.

Eventually, Jon landed in the courtyard and told Tarak he was ready to go. He would fetch Aliana and Callie.

Soon the three of them came out. Aliana carried a harness that would be used to strap her to Tarak's body to keep her safe during flight, while Callie had hold of what seemed to be an identical one for Jon.

"Would you not prefer to go with Jon?" Tarak asked Aliana. *Then I could take Callie.*

"Trust me I would, but this is what the king wants."

Callie set down her harness and stepped over it to stand in an opening. Jon seemed to do the same with the adjacent opening. They both bent down and started pulling straps and closing buckles.

"How many times have you two shared a harness?" Tarak asked.

"Never," Callie said. "But all of us were told how to use the harness in case it came up in an emergency."

That made Tarak feel a little better. Aliana showed him how to use it. By the end, she was on his back and held snugly against him, her annoying breath in his ear.

He looked over to see Callie's arms and legs wrapped around Jon as their harness held them together in the same fashion. Tarak kept his comments to himself. Seeing as how this was only the beginning of what would be a frustrating evening, he'd better learn quickly to deal with it.

Be a gentleman.

"I'll go slow to make sure I don't lose you," Jon told Tarak. "In case you fall and Aliana needs healing."

Tarak gave a nod.

"And stay low to the ground. We can't have you killing Aliana if you mess up your spell."

“She will remain alive.”

“I’d better,” Aliana tacked on.

Tarak made a powerful spell of gravity. It pulled him and Aliana off the ground. They picked up speed as it remained the same distance above and in front of Tarak’s head.

He looked forward to the spell becoming natural to him so he could enjoy the intense feeling of the lurch into the air and the subsequent soaring at a deafening speed, but he had too many things to worry about right now, especially with Aliana yelling in his ear.

“Tarak, this is high enough. Tarak!”

He shifted the location of his spell down a bit and lessened the strength. They slowed too much.

After some give-and-take, he eventually found the right amount of force to maintain a steady speed. He was just about to look down at the city they passed over and enjoy the view when Jon shot by with Callie all wrapped about him; she squealed happily.

Jon came to a stop in the air. He turned and waited for Tarak to catch up.

“Braggart,” Tarak told him as he flew by.

Jon matched his speed. “Is that as fast as you can go comfortably? I don’t want you to drop Aliana, but it’s going to take a long time to reach Livea this way.”

“Don’t entice him,” Aliana said.

Tarak ignored her as he put more power into his spell. They cleared the tallest buildings in the city. Tarak thought he heard people shouting or perhaps cheering from below, but again, he could not enjoy it. One slip would mean serious injury for them and potential damage to whatever they hit.

Soon the city was behind them. Tarak and Jon both lowered closer to the ground. They were not high enough to fly over most trees, so they stuck to flying over the road.

Maintaining Gravity Sphere felt akin to jogging with a dagger. There was just about no chance of Tarak slipping and falling so terribly that he would kill himself, but that chance would go up from none to very high depending on how fast he went.

Jon would fly ahead and stop, then sometimes jitter around as he waited. It was as if he was bored with the whole ordeal. Tarak was not used to being humbled, and he did not take it well. He challenged himself to go faster, past the point of Aliana suggesting he slowed down. His spell emitted two sounds, a whoosh like air moving and a deep hum like something large and heavy grinding at a steady rate.

The faster Tarak went, the faster Jon went, always staying ahead. Eventually Tarak realized he was tiring himself too quickly and had to land for a break. He could not fly as fast as Jon, and he did not have as much control. He needed to face these facts for everyone's sake.

"One day I will be ready to race you," he told Jon as the delicate sorcerer of unending renown landed in front of him. "And I will beat you."

"That sounds like fun. Now how many years until you'll be ready for this race?"

"Weeks," Tarak replied, then dabbed his sweaty forehead with his handkerchief.

"Jon, will you stop?" Aliana asked as she took her hands off Tarak. "I'm pretty much attached to him, and he's getting all sweaty."

Callie removed her hands from Jon's shoulders. "Actually, he is as well. It's a little gross. Sorry, Jon."

"Flying is a lot of work!" Tarak said over his shoulder.

"And it's hot out," Jon complained to Callie. "We can go back for your horses right now."

"No, it's fine," she said in a tone as if it wasn't. "Just tell me how much more sweaty you're going to get."

Jon straightened and grumbled, “Much more.” He shook his head. “Let’s go, Tarak.”

“Unappreciative, you both are,” Tarak muttered as he took himself and Aliana into the air again. “A little sweat cannot hurt you.”

“This is only a little?” Aliana asked rhetorically as she wiped one hand against her pants. “I don’t want to see what a lot of sweat is to you.”

“You will!”

“Oy, no. Please.”

By the time they reached Livea, Tarak was thoroughly exhausted, and thoroughly sweaty. He set himself and Aliana down beside Jon and Callie near the entrance of the city.

“That was disgusting,” Aliana said as she undid the straps to their harness. “I could actually feel your sweat coming off you and sticking to me with all the wind you created.”

“It was the same for me,” Callie said. “I need a bath before we show up at Kataleya’s manor.”

Callie set down Jon’s bag that she’d worn on her back. Aliana did the same for Tarak. Then the two young women walked off together.

“Not one mention of gratitude?” Tarak called after them.

“Thank you,” Callie said without turning around.

Tarak found himself sharing a look with Jon, both shaking their heads.

“The weather is hot,” Tarak said. “And we carried them on our backs like animals.”

“I completely agree.”

The two of them finished removing their harnesses.

“But I am *very* sweaty,” Tarak said.

“I am absolutely disgusting right now.”

“Where can we procure a bath before we change our attire?”

“I know a place.”

Tarak walked with Jon through what turned out to be a beautiful city, more pleasant than the capital in every way. Tarak had seen the walled town from the air. He gathered he could probably run from one end to the other in a shorter time than it took for him to eat a meal, and he prided himself on both eating and running very quickly if he wanted to.

Hills gave the illusion that the town was vaster than it actually was. There was a sense of peace that Tarak felt not only from Jon but from the people who soon started fawning all over the healer.

Dozens of them came to greet him. They addressed him by his name, not by “healer” or “sorcerer.” He didn’t seem to remember much about any of them, but they knew him well. They asked where he’d been, how many people he’d healed, or if he’d done any other fighting. He gave short answers: He’d been traveling all around, he’d healed thousands of people, and no, he had not done any other fighting since the war.

Many looked at his hands, and Tarak soon figured out why. They were checking for a ring to see if Jon was taken. Not only ladies checked but older men as well. Some even went so far as to ask if Jon would meet their daughter. In other cases, their daughter was right there and even introduced herself with a bow.

Jon announced, “I am taken, but Tarak here is the newest sorcerer to the king. One look at his height can confirm that he’s the son of Caarda.”

After gasps of shock, Tarak soon became the focus of most everyone’s attention. Unfortunately, they didn’t seem to fawn over him like they had Jon. No, they were more interested in Caarda.

Tarak tried to answer questions at first but soon gave up. He stopped and lifted his arms.

“Jon and I would like to discuss our business in private.”

Some left, but others asked about their business. Tarak was about to become a little angrier and a little ruder, but a blonde woman who didn't appear much older than Jon whistled from just ahead of them.

"All right, that's enough for now," she announced. "Jon will heal anyone who needs it tomorrow, in front of the church. You can hold your questions until then, but there had better not be any more talk of coupling with either of these sorcerers, or I will hear about it."

Jon seemed relieved as the crowd cleared. The young woman approached with her gaze stuck on Jon as if she'd spent the day without water and he had a cup of it ready for her.

She had blonde hair, gray eyes bordering on green, and a charm to her somewhat crooked smile that made her look like a gal who valued fun. She walked up to Jon and settled into him for an embrace that looked more than friendly to Tarak.

"I need a bath," he warned her as his hands hovered.

"You know I don't care."

Jon then wrapped her in a hug. Now Tarak was certain that they were more than just friends, at least from her side.

"I've missed you," she said. She held on as if he might run away the moment she let go.

"I'm glad to be back." They separated. Jon asked her, "Is there anyone in desperate need of healing?"

"No. Everyone has been relatively healthy, thankfully. You'll mostly be taking care of aches tomorrow."

"I'm glad to hear that." Jon gestured to his side. "This is Tarak."

"Kataleya?" Tarak asked.

She extended her hand with a nod. "It's a pleasure to meet you, son of Caarda."

"Call me Tarak."

“Tarak what? I’ve been wanting to ask. Caarda had no surname that we know of.”

“I have none as well. The king has papers ready for me once I decide on a proper last name. Any suggestions?”

“Perhaps we might think of one by the end of the night, once we get to know you better.”

Jon said, “We were hoping to have a bath before meeting you.”

“You’re not likely to have a moment of privacy,” Kataleya said. “Come back to my house. I will have baths drawn.”

“We would not want to impose,” Jon said.

“Hey now,” Tarak said. “That was an invite. Imposing is off the table. I would be happy for a bath at your estate, and Jon would as well. I am gathering it might not be the first time he has undressed over there, eh?”

Jon turned red with clear anger and looked at Tarak as if his hands might go for Tarak’s throat.

But Kataleya just gave a laugh. “You’re a troublemaker, aren’t you?”

Through his teeth, Jon commented, “He promised he would be a gentleman.”

“Shit, I forgot about that.” Tarak put up a palm. “I will be going forward, but there is something here, is there not?” He gestured between them.

“A gentleman would not put his nose where it does not belong,” Jon practically growled.

“He would not?”

“No.”

“Then care to explain your lectures about my personal affairs?”

“Your...*personal affairs* are causing trouble for many people. That makes it my business.”

“Hold on,” Kataleya interrupted and looked at Tarak. “I was told by the king that you’re not involved with anyone.”

“I am not,” Tarak said.

“Then what could you be talking about?”

“Nothing,” Jon grumbled.

“Yes, it is nothing,” Tarak agreed.

“It doesn’t sound like nothing.”

Kataleya waited, her brows raised, but no one filled her in, to Tarak’s relief. He should not have opened his mouth in the first place, but how could he not when Jon was being such a hypocrite?

Kataleya gestured for them to follow her. She spoke casually as they walked. “Enough ale can turn big nothings into little somethings, and even more ale can turn little nothings into huge somethings. I just hope when nothing become something, it isn’t going to hurt anyone.”

Tarak asked, “What does your cousin expect from me?”

“Marriage and children of course, and right away.”

“She is mad!”

Kataleya showed him a smirk.

“Oh, you jest. Now who is the troublemaker?”

“Why do you think I recognized it so quickly in you?”

Jon asked Tarak, “You really thought Justina could want to marry you so quickly?”

“How can I say what a noblewoman is like? I know nothing about them.”

“None of them would be ready to marry you after one encounter.”

Kataleya said, “You might be surprised, Jon. Justina has really talked herself into a state.”

“Tarak will talk her out of it pretty soon after she meets him.”

“That is true. I will.”

Kataleya laughed. “Just be kind, all right? She has been through a lot.”

“I am always kind.”

Now Jon was the one who laughed.

“It was not a jest, Jon.”

“Should’ve been.”

“On a serious note, where are Aliana and Callie?” Kataleya asked. “I want Aliana to investigate the disturbance of mana I’ve felt.”

“They went to bathe,” Jon explained. “I assume they’ll meet you at your place when they’re done.”

“Then let’s hurry back. There is a lot to discuss before dinner.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Tarak walked beside Jon and Kataleya and enjoyed the beauty of the city. A river ran through the center. Tarak gawked at the massive windmill on the northern side of the river. There had been one in his town, but it was dilapidated and small in comparison. Farms separated by fences filled most of the space in between the more impressive structures, the next being the stone forge of a blacksmith. Tarak could see a large man working inside on this hot day, hammering away.

Trees were scattered along the river. Between them, many paths twisted out to pass by lovely homes situated beside the farmland. Some of these trees even had hanging fruit that was unmolested and surrounded by crops, not something Tarak was used to seeing even where he came from. In fact, he was often the one stealing an apple or two during the night.

“Is there any crime here?” Tarak asked Kataleya.

“Not much,” she answered proudly. “Most disputes are over contracts that go unfulfilled because of disagreements or arguments, but the people of Livea really came together to provide for the rest of the kingdom during the drought.”

“I’m sure that was mostly your doing,” Jon said, then told Tarak, “She’s the best water mage in the kingdom.”

“Better than Arthur?” Tarak asked her.

“Reuben has told me he’s very good as well,” Kataleya said. “I haven’t had the chance to meet him. But I’m better.”

“I like your confidence.”

She winked.

Tarak had almost forgotten this was the place he was to visit with Reuben before he was thieved and nearly murdered by a group of analytes. He had tracked them back to the capital and taken vengeance. Two were dead, and the last one was in the dungeon of the castle.

Their path went slightly uphill, twisting around a massive statue on an already large pedestal. It was of a giant holding

what seemed to be a gigantic and very real sword of metal that looked impossible to wield even for Tarak.

“Who is this supposed to be?” Tarak asked Kataleya.

“I wanted to ask you. Do you recognize him?”

Tarak cupped his hand over his eyes to block out the hot sun as he peered at the stoic expression of the statue’s face.

“No.”

“It’s supposed to be your uncle, Airinold. Although the statue is much bigger than he was, it does resemble him.”

“I never met any of my uncles or aunts, but I did have the unfortunate luck of dealing with Basael recently.”

“I’d heard that, but I wasn’t sure it was true. I have many questions, but I’m sure Justina will ask the same and more. She’s very interested.”

“I hope you have a lot of ale.”

“I do, why?”

“Because that is the only way I will be able to answer more than a few questions about my family.”

They continued on, but he looked back at the statue and now could see the inscription on the pedestal. “Airinold, son of Basael, brother of Caarda.”

While Tarak was growing up, Caarda had warned Tarak never to reveal his identity to anyone, especially not to an aunt or uncle. Airinold was the only one who Caarda seemed fond of, but a relationship with him was out of the question. Just like the other demigods, as they were called at the time, each one of them was heavily involved in the affairs of the others.

Tarak was still getting used to the idea that they weren’t around anymore. Even though he didn’t ever see them, not a day used to go by without one of them being brought up, sometimes even by the people in Tarak’s small circle. None of them were very fond of the demigods, but they all knew it was prudent to be aware of what the demigods were up to. They fought with each other, and some even seemed intent on going

to war against another until one lay dead. Tarak was never so fortunate for that to happen during his time.

He was glad to arrive at Kataleya's large estate, where he was finally given some privacy. Although he enjoyed people for the most part, they could be exhausting.

It was always important for a person to have time alone. How else could they prepare for the next show?

He soaked in the bath for a while, closing his eyes and letting his thoughts take him to another place. He went back to growing up in a small house and hardly seeing his father. Caarda would drop by with food and sometimes coin, but Tarak was often out so Caarda would leave it on the table.

He remembered his frustrating lessons of sorcery with his father. He wondered how his father and grandfather were faring. Had they reached new land by now? They had followers who left with them, so that had to mean they took a boat. Where did they obtain one? Was it safe?

Eventually Tarak felt anew. He dried then dressed in the clean clothing he'd brought for this occasion. It was a nice silken shirt that did well to highlight his broad shoulders and chest, and snug pants that did well to emphasize his arse. Upon leaving the private bathing chambers, he heard from one of Kataleya's servants that she and Jon had just left to investigate the disturbance of mana with Aliana and Callie. Tarak asked where, and the servant told him it was near the well toward the center of the city.

Tarak had seen that the well was close to the statue of Airinold. He could walk there, but he decided to fly. It was a short enough trip that he should not sweat. Besides, the sun was setting. Soon it would be time for supper, and he felt that he could have three plates at least. He would tolerate this Justina fine with ale and food. However, it might be easier if Callie was not there to distract him with her beauty.

A month. Lord and bane, that hurt worse than a kick between the legs.

Tarak arrived at the well ahead of the other four sorcerers, who were probably walking there. He took one more look at the statue of Airinold now that he'd had more time to think about his uncle. From everything Tarak had heard from Michael about the war, Airinold sounded like someone brave and willing to take a stand against injustice. Tarak hadn't known any of his aunts and uncles to be like that. It had even been hard to imagine his father taking a stand against something. He was always calm and peaceful, avoiding conflict and teaching Tarak to do so as if it was the right path.

Tarak didn't exactly enjoy conflict, but he was not so naive as to think he could go through life avoiding it. He would've liked to have met the brother Caarda was most fond of. Where was Airinold now? He had promised to leave Dorrinthal with the other Deviants, but how far away was he? What was he doing? What were any of them doing? Tarak never cared to know until recently, and he didn't know exactly why that was. Perhaps because he had already dealt with Basael and he couldn't imagine any of them being worse except Souriff, who had killed his mother. Tarak could not imagine what he would feel upon meeting her, besides the obvious anger.

He leaned over the well to see if he could feel this disturbance of mana Kataleya had mentioned. There was a smell of old water, but nothing came to his senses about mana.

Callie arrived with Jon, Aliana, and Kataleya. Tarak asked Aliana, "Do you feel something?"

"I felt it as soon as we landed in Livea, but I couldn't be certain until now. It's a rift." She told Kataleya, "I am certain."

"I thought it might be. Even I felt something strange, and I'm not used to picking up changes in mana. That's why I sent the report to the king."

"How bad is this?" Jon asked.

"I'm not sure," Aliana said.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

Aliana asked Kataleya, “Have you heard of everything that’s happened since the discovery of the rift in the forest?”

“I have, and I’m sorry I wasn’t there to fight with all of you. Sometimes I feel too far removed from everything.”

Callie said, “Without your help providing water for the crops here, many people would have starved.”

Kataleya nodded, though it seemed to be with sadness.

“I don’t think the rift is beneath the well but somewhere to the side.” Aliana pointed at the ground nearby.

“That would make sense,” Kataleya replied. “I’ve been putting water in the well, but it seems to be leaking out somewhere because it never fills up. I figured there was a cavern like the one I heard about under the forest.”

“Most likely,” Aliana said. “I think the best thing to do is dig up all of this ground and have a look for ourselves. Then we can decide what to do about it.” She glanced at Tarak.

“You cannot possibly expect me to do that right now. I have just bathed and I am hungry! Look at my fine clothes, Aliana! To unearth all of this—”

“In the morning then,” Aliana interrupted.

“Fine.”

“Ali,” Kataleya muttered. “What can be done if the rift appears to be the same as the one under the forest?”

“We are still trying to figure that out.”

“Should I be concerned? There are rumors that rifts all eventually explode.”

“We have not been able to confirm that,” Aliana replied.

Jon said, “There were no rifts of any kind in Ovira, only portals. Can you be certain it’s not one of them?”

“I thought portals were only opened by the portal-maker,” Aliana said, “and they required an immense amount of strength because they naturally wanted to collapse as soon as they were opened.”

“His name is Basen, and he told me there are natural portals that open that, yes, usually are short-lived, but it is possible in theory for some to stay open for a long time. They would most likely have to be near a source of akorell metal. Maybe that’s what’s below the ground here.”

“I don’t think so,” Aliana said. “I’ve felt akorell metal before, and I don’t sense any here. It feels just like the rift.”

Callie crouched near the well and stuck her arm inside. “I think I feel something.”

They waited in silence as she closed her eyes.

“I think someone’s down there,” she muttered fearfully. “Aliana, can you tell?”

Aliana crouched beside Callie and put her arm into the well.

Another long silence passed.

“I don’t feel anyone’s presence but ours.”

“I’m certain now. I feel someone. You really don’t?”

“Callie, there is no one down there.”

Callie opened her eyes to check Aliana’s expression. The princess showed confusion, then gave her head a shake as she closed her eyes again and leaned practically into the well.

“No, I feel it.”

“What do you feel *exactly*?” Aliana asked.

“Someone is connected to mana in some way.” She opened her eyes and cupped her hands around her mouth. “Hello?” she yelled. “Who is down there?”

Everyone waited, but there was no reply.

Tarak just hoped this wouldn’t mean he would have to start unearthing now. He could be at it well into the night.

“Ah shit,” he grumbled as he noticed everyone staring at him. “Do not say it. Do not make it true.”

Aliana said, “If Callie feels someone connected to mana, we really need eyes down there.”

“So go down and look,” Tarak suggested. “We have rope.”

“We need to unearth it anyway,” Aliana said.

“At least wait until I have eaten and have some ale in my stomach.”

Kataleya suggested, “We can have something brought out to you as you work. I guess dinner might be canceled. I will make sure Justina knows to meet us here.”

Tarak asked Aliana, “How deep is the rift?”

“Not very.”

“Do not lie to me.”

She sighed. “It’s deep.”

“Lord and bane.” He took off his shirt.

“What are you doing?” Aliana complained.

“It is hot, and I am not about to potentially ruin this expensive shirt.” He folded it as he carried it off a safe distance away. He set it on the low roof of a nearby house. Tarak looked down at himself. He was a sculpture of beauty. “You cannot possibly complain about this.” He gestured at himself.

“Ugh, just be quick. We’re going to be standing here as well.”

“I expect good food and ale, Lord Dame,” he told Kataleya.

“Lord Dame?” she asked, sounding offended.

“Or whatever people say for respect. Dame was used in my time.”

“Just call me Kat,” she said.

Jon asked Callie, “How are you feeling someone connected to mana? That sounds a little like psyche from what I know about it.”

“I’ve found a way to connect to the system of mana. It’s how I found Tarak while he was dying and helped him heal

himself.”

“She’s a goddamn brilliant sorcerer,” Tarak said, noticing clear astonishment in Jon’s wide eyes.

Callie gave Tarak a look of appreciation, then explained, “Until recently, I’ve only been able to connect to mana while falling asleep. Eventually I figured out how to reach that state while still awake, but it’s very difficult. Even without it, though, I can sense someone connected to mana in a way we are not.”

“Are they connected to the rift, specifically?” Aliana asked.

“It’s hard to tell.” Callie closed her eyes again. She shook her head. “I think it will be easier once I can see what it is I’m feeling.”

“I really don’t feel anyone down there,” Aliana said. “Maybe they’re in another realm.”

“Stand back,” Tarak warned everyone. He made the most powerful spell of gravity he could muster a short walk away from him. He still felt it pull him toward it, but he could resist its tug from here. The ground could not.

The grass and soil ripped up and threatened to overwhelm the spell, but Tarak guided his black sphere of gravity up and to the side, dragging the contents of the ground through the air. It was certainly more than his body in weight. He let his spell come to an end, dumping the grass and black dirt off and forming a mound. Then he reformed the spell over the small hole in the earth and repeated the process.

Callie asked Jon, “Is there any way you can help him with your spell?”

“No, I can’t wrap dvinia around the ground like I can a person.”

“Then stand back and enjoy the show,” Tarak said as he made another mound and started on his third spell.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

As Tarak began, Callie stood idle and watched with the other sorcerers. Kataleya put her hand on Callie's shoulder. "Can we speak for a moment?"

Callie feared she knew what this was about as she followed Kataleya away from Jon and Ali.

"Trevor came to Livea on business today," Kataleya said.

Callie gave a sigh. "So he told you."

"If it's none of my business, let me know."

"No, it's fine." Callie knew Kataleya and Trevor were friends. She had even heard gossip that they had been in a relationship. It was a fact that their families had been close before both imploded. Their parents had thought about setting them up with each other, and the engagement might have come to pass if it wasn't for Trevor's father turning against Nykal during the war. Trevor had eventually stood against his father. Much later, he and Callie were engaged.

She'd sometimes wondered if Trevor would have proposed to Kataleya if Callie had turned him down. Callie had always been friendly with Kataleya, though their age difference made it difficult for them to be true friends. Kataleya was the oldest of the king's sorcerers who met at the castle shortly after Callie's father came to power. She was six years older than Callie, making her twenty-two now, much closer to Trevor's age.

"Trevor had really taken a shine to you before you broke the engagement," Kataleya continued.

"I'm sure he was just saying that because we were to be married."

"No, I know him. He was really falling for you. He gushed about how beautiful and smart you are."

Callie's pain came through on her face. She didn't know what to say.

“I first thought your age difference was going to be an issue, but after he told me that, I wondered if I could be wrong. I feel like I know you, Callie, and I definitely know him. This really is none of my business now, but I was surprised to hear about the broken engagement. I just wanted to let you know that you can talk to me if you want. I know it might be strange because of my past with Trevor, but I thought I could be the only one you could talk to who might understand.”

What was Kataleya really saying? Had Trevor done something to Kataleya? It was difficult to imagine that the same thing that had happened to Callie had happened to someone as older and wiser as Kataleya.

One benefit to Kataleya sticking her nose in Callie’s business was that Callie felt no remorse for doing the same. She supposed that was the whole point of Kataleya opening up to her.

“What was the extent of your relationship with him?” Callie asked.

“We liked each other but never had a deep connection. We had some memorable nights.” She gave a laugh. “For good reasons and *bad*.”

Maybe there were some similarities. Or just one.

“We never had any arguments or problems really,” Kataleya continued, “but there could never be love between us. Does that answer your question?”

“It does. I could never have loved him, either.”

Kataleya nodded as if expecting this. “I was surprised at first when hearing about the engagement. You have always seemed like a girl who appreciates being around someone fun, and Trevor just isn’t. I don’t mean to presume, but I’m the same way. It was why things would never work between us, but when he told me how happy he was with you I thought I might have it wrong. You don’t have to say anything on that matter. I just wanted to share some of my experience.”

“I’m very glad.” Callie put her hand on Kataleya’s arm. “This has been a topic I’ve been unable to speak about with anyone else. Can you tell me, do you think he might be dangerous now?”

Kataleya lost all humor as she gave a sad nod. “That was the other thing I wanted to warn you about. He can become very jealous and might act on that jealousy. I’m not sure if you can help it, but I think it would be best if you didn’t involve yourself with anyone for a time.”

“My parents told me the same thing. I think it is wise advice.”

“I have really grown to hate Trevor,” Kataleya practically whispered.

Callie managed to hold in a gasp. “From everything you told me, I thought you two were still friends.”

“He thinks we are, but that is only because there is business done between our cities. I lost all respect for him after he took so long to stand against his father, and after the war I felt like he was using you to make a play for the crown. You’re still young, Callie. Sixteen, right?”

She didn’t feel young, but she obviously wasn’t as put-together as Kataleya. Callie nodded.

“I’m glad you broke the engagement with him. Know that if anything happens, Livea stands with your family.” She took Callie’s hand.

Warmth spread through her arm. “Thank you, Kataleya.”

A silence passed as they dropped hands and watched Tarak move the earth with his powerful spell. Sweat glistened from his chest and across his forehead. He had smooth muscles opulently carved out of his body. Callie remembered the feeling of his hands around her as they kissed, and she felt her cheeks go red.

“I’m a little surprised you aren’t married yet,” Callie commented in hopes of taking her mind off Tarak.

“I’m still young enough to have fun.”

Callie glanced over to find Kataleya giving her a wink.

Callie laughed. "I have been craving fun, myself, but I don't seem capable." *Except with Tarak, but I cannot be alone with him.*

"You must have some fun here in Livea, especially with our dinner plans looking like they are canceled. I have a splendid idea. Tonight you could go off on your own. I could send one of my guards with you, but we all know you can defend yourself just fine. He would only be there in case things get rowdy and you don't want to burn anyone. What do you say?"

"I'd say my father would never allow it."

"Oh," Kataleya replied in disappointment.

"So it's a wonderful idea," Callie added.

Kataleya grinned. "You had me there."

Callie wouldn't even know what to do with herself on her own in Livea, but that would be part of the fun.

A beautiful and very tall young lady approached. Given her elegant dress that sported a large display of her chest, Callie took this to be Justina. She wore a confident grin as if there was nowhere else she'd rather be than right here, her smile widening as she caught sight of Tarak.

"My god," she seemed to be talking to Kataleya as she pointed conspicuously in Tarak's direction. "Is that powerful man the son of Caarda?" She looked right over Callie's short head as if Callie wasn't there.

"It is," Kataleya replied. "But he is still a boy in a man's body."

Justina didn't seem to hear this as she gaped at Tarak.

Callie felt her teeth coming together, though she kept her lips closed and put on a false smile as Justina looked down and gasped.

"You must be the princess. I am terribly sorry for not introducing myself. I was so lost in the sight before me." She

curtsied. "I'm Justina."

"It is a pleasure to meet you." Callie could sound polite in her sleep. She gave a slight curtsy in response but found Justina to be focused on Tarak again by the time she rose.

"He has no lady in his life, really?" Justina asked Kataleya.

"So I've been told."

"He's about to." Justina headed toward Tarak.

"You should know," Kataleya said to stop her, "that Tarak's not what we expected. He's a bit brazen and even crude."

Justina shot a look over her shoulder at Kataleya. "And he's really the son of Caarda?"

"The one and only," Kataleya said.

This seemed to disappoint the noblewoman as she gave a hum, but then she shrugged. "No one can be perfect, I suppose."

Justina came up on Tarak's back as Callie watched from a distance too far to hear. Justina waited until he let the gargantuan quantity of soil slap down around the massive hole he had made all by himself. She seemed to say something that turned him around. His eyes widened as he seemed to notice her beauty. She extended her hand to introduce herself. He wiped his sweaty forehead with the back of his arm and said something that made her retract her hand, but she laughed and touched his arm instead as she stepped closer.

Justina spoke again. He seemed to lean back instinctively, turning to catch sight of Callie and making her realize she was staring in anger. His eyes widened even more than when he'd first glimpsed Justina. He took another step back from her and gestured at the hole.

She spoke. He replied. They both smiled when she spoke again, then she laughed as he responded. Tarak was half turned toward the hole near the well, but he straightened up to face Justina as their conversation went on.

“It seems like they’re getting along nicely,” Kataleya commented.

Callie had told him to do this, but it didn’t make it any easier to watch.

She turned to Kataleya. “Why don’t you come with me tonight? You can show me the fun places to visit in your city.”

“That is a wonderful idea, and any other night I would be enthusiastic to join you. But.” She glanced at Jon, who remained chatting with Aliana. “I may have some other plans tonight...with Jon.”

“Oh!” Callie spoke in shock.

“I hope it will not cause a problem between us. I know you had feelings for him at one point.”

“That was years ago, and now I’m...” She stopped herself from mentioning Tarak. “We became friends, and it has been a long time since I thought of him that way.” To lighten the mood Callie leaned toward Kataleya and whispered, “He’s not my type anyway. I’m looking for someone more fun.” She tried not to let her gaze shift to Tarak, though it was impossible.

“Yes, Jon isn’t really one to make us laugh, but when he’s that damn handsome and not to mention downright heroic, fun is easy to be had.” Kataleya laughed.

Callie chuckled. “What about Hadley?” she asked.

“Oh I would never put myself between two people, but I have the feeling that they may have broken up. There was something between us when Jon arrived. If I’m wrong, I will not pursue, and in that case I will find you wherever you are and we can have *almost* as much fun as I might if things go according to plan.” She laughed again.

Callie smiled and realized she missed having Kataleya around the castle, even if they hadn’t been very close before.

Kataleya looked around and seemed to notice a crowd was gathering to see why a sorcerer was unearthing the land near the well.

“I’d better take care of this,” Kataleya said, then approached the crowd. Many smiled at seeing her. They asked questions without fear. Surely she was a good lord who was looked at fondly by her people, and why not? She was beautiful, smart, and funny. She had also fought in the war and provided all the water the people needed. Callie couldn’t imagine a better leader.

She looked over at Justina, who was blond like Kataleya and just as beautiful. Could Tarak prefer girls who were taller? Callie had never been worried about her small stature before, but Tarak was unusually tall. Perhaps he would rather be with someone who could kiss his cheek without pulling his head down. She did know one thing about Tarak based on his romantic escapades with the analyte, Illia, who had teleported here by accident. When an attractive lady threw herself at him, he seemed almost powerless to stop himself from responding.

She needed to stop thinking about this. She closed her eyes and focused on the feeling that had drawn her to the well in the first place. She almost felt that she could communicate through her mana with whoever was there. She could even tell things about him. He was a man. He was powerful. He wanted to know more about who was here, but then why didn’t he respond when she’d yelled down?

It made little sense as to why he would be there. She half expected to find no one, just a rift, when they finally reached the location of this disturbance. What if she was wasting everyone’s time? What if this was just her misreading signals from her mana?

She had spent plenty of time around the rift in the forest, but she had heightened her senses through training since then. Perhaps she would feel the same thing around that rift and it was not a person at all but mana that tricked her into believing it was someone with questionable intentions.

No, she was almost confident. Communicating with mana sometimes felt like sensing something in the room with her while at the same time being certain that no one was there. It would almost be a scary feeling if it were not for the comfort and familiarity of knowing mana. This was different. This was

sensing someone was in the room with her and *knowing* where he was standing. He seemed to be just beyond grasp, just beyond the rift, perhaps.

The only question that remained was what did he want? What was he doing here?

Through Leon and Charlie's help, Callie had discovered that her new use of mana was in the same tree as Leon's healing spell and his more recent discovery, the spell that gave him physical strength. They called it the mortal magic tree, named by Charlie. She didn't even realize that she was using a specific note to do most of her communicating through mana, Middle C. Charlie had recommended she work toward increasing her range from 1C to uC. He believed that by casting with the two octaves, Lower C and Upper C, she may be able to communicate through the plane of mana while still being awake.

His jaw had dropped when she'd told him her range was 1C to uC. Tarak had the same range, though she doubted he'd put in half the work to accomplish it that she had, not that she held it against him. Ever since learning about mana when she was thirteen, she had been working to extend her range during all the boring lessons about the noble families, culture, history, and politics that she'd had to sit through. She hadn't wanted to tell anyone about her large range because her father would know just how much time she'd been spending on it, and there was little to brag about if she couldn't cast anything besides fire with it. Now things had changed.

Casting with the octaves of C was what she had been working on for a while now, and she was already starting to see results even though she could only consistently cast with Middle C and Upper C.

There was something else that had begun happening while casting with Middle C. She had been receiving signals from her mana, but she couldn't decipher what they were. It was only recently that she had begun to wonder if maybe they were messages about people's emotions—psyche. The problem was that the message changed too frequently. Even during her conversation with Tarak, she had received many

signals from her mana, and none of them were familiar. It was like going to a place with five different smells, all new to her. Only slowly could she begin to learn what these signals might be telling her.

One in particular was quite easy to understand because she had felt it very strongly from Tarak when he'd wanted to kiss her in the castle. She decided to do a test and approached Tarak and Justina as she cast Middle C and let her mana pick up on emotions. Sure enough, she felt the same thing. Attraction, she was sure of it now. It was coming from both of them and directed at each other.

Callie knew she shouldn't be angry, but it was difficult not to be.

Tarak noticed her. "Princess, I need to speak with you, my dame, please. Justina would you mind giving us some time to discuss this mana disturbance?"

"Of course." Justina took her leave.

"Do you feel something?" Callie asked.

"No, I just needed an excuse to break away from her. Thank you for coming over."

She used her mana again to see what she could sense. She had a breath of relief as she felt even stronger attraction. In fact, it was so strong that it was like staring at a bright light and trying to discern what was behind it.

"I hope you are not worried about her," Tarak murmured. "She may have the ability to turn a man's head, but you could make me move mountains."

Callie found herself lifting her hand as she wanted to touch his arm, but she stopped herself. "Thank you."

"Now help me get rid of her," Tarak said.

"I cannot do that! I wouldn't know how without revealing our relationship."

"Do you think *I* do? I have never rebuked a woman's advances in my life."

“Never?”

“Never.” He shook his head as if this was something to be proud of.

“You could be less charming?”

“I tried. I make vulgar jokes and she just laughs harder.” Tarak seemed to notice Jon and Aliana approaching. “Help me!” he pleaded in a whisper to Callie.

She gave a laugh, but she didn’t know what she could do, either.

“Why are you stopping?” Aliana asked.

“Is there a problem?” Kataleya asked as she joined them as well.

“Yes. I am starving.”

“I’ll get you some bread,” Kataleya said.

“Bread? No ale or meat?”

Aliana commented, “Just finish this quicker and we can all sit down and enjoy a meal.”

“There had better be at least three helpings for me after all of this, and I want ten ales to my name!”

Justina called out, “Did I hear you request ten ales?” she asked with a laugh.

Tarak appeared slightly uncomfortable as he became unusually shy. “Maybe nine would suffice.”

She laughed again. “He’s funny!” she told the group.

“Hilarious,” Aliana muttered.

Jon pointed at the well. “What is that?”

Green smoke wafted up from the well. The ground began to shake.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tarak fell over as the ground shifted beneath his feet. The well crumbled and disappeared below ground. The earth swallowed itself up, a hole widening. Tarak managed to stand, only to fall over again. He made a spell of gravity between him and Callie and Aliana, picking the three of them up as the ground gave out underneath them. Jon had Kataleya in his arms as he lifted the two of them up and away.

Their audience screamed and fled, but Justina was far behind them. She fell over and was too far for Tarak to reach with his gravity spell, but the hole stopped spreading before reaching her. The same green smoke that had come out of the well now rose up out of the hole. A tentacle as thick as Tarak's body broke through the green cloud. Then there was another. Then a third. They swayed as if searching for something.

Tarak took Aliana and Callie through the air as he guided the three of them toward safety with his spell. He set them down, then ran back toward the tentacles, a fourth showing up. Justina and two others from the audience had fallen during the chaos, and now one of the tentacles was wrapping Justina up. These had to be the arms of some beast below. Yes, Tarak could hear the monster bellowing from under the cloud of green smoke. It was so dense that Tarak felt it on his skin like cool mist. He couldn't see past his arm once inside the cloud.

"Callie, I need sight!" he yelled.

"I'm on it!" A blast of hot air cleared the green smoke.

All three people were wrapped up, each by one tentacle. The beast below seemed interested in crushing them as Justina and the two others screamed in agony and pounded and pulled on the tentacles.

Jon threw his hand, slamming one tentacle with his sorcery. It bent and uncoiled to release one woman. Callie unleashed fire to burn another. It dropped a man and recoiled back into the green mist dwelling in the hole of the earth. Tarak made gravity near Justina while she was coiled up, but it just pulled both her and the tentacle. Kataleya blasted it with

water, but it did no good. Justina couldn't seem to breathe as she went white, her terrified eyes finding Tarak.

He jumped up and grabbed hold of the end of the tentacle, the smaller part wrapped around her body. He pulled it down with all his weight, bending the arm of the beast until his feet reached the ground. He then pried a little more of the tentacle off her and allowed her to breathe. It was covered with suction cups and bristly hair.

She gasped as she fell to her hands and knees. Tarak now found himself battling with it as it tried to coil around him like a massive snake. He managed to keep himself from being crushed by holding his elbows out from his sides, but then a second tentacle shot out and grabbed him by the legs.

Soon he was being picked up and carried into the green smoke that wafted out of the hole. Hot air struck him as Callie screamed in effort. It cleared the smoke enough for him to see the beast below.

Green like a plant, it was more of a mouth with tentacles than anything else. Two bulbous eyes glared at Tarak above a maw that was big enough to fit three Taraks within. It must've had two hundred teeth, sharp and deadly, all dripping with thick saliva.

"I am not being eaten today!" Tarak yelled as he fought with everything he had to free himself. The beast lowered him close enough to its mouth to feel its hot breath.

Something struck one of the tentacles holding Tarak, jerking them to the side. He realized his legs were free, but another arm of the beast was still wrapped around his shoulders. It loosened as if the monster was about to drop Tarak into its mouth. He clung with his legs and hands as he slipped free.

The beast tried to shake Tarak off, but he made gravity above his head and let go. Like falling but the opposite way, Tarak did not move quickly enough. Another arm of the green fucker grabbed him by his ankles.

He fought against its strength, his sorcery winning out but stretching his legs to the point of near breaking. A fireball struck just beneath him and sent him spiraling through the air, smoking and yelping in pain.

He let his spell come to an end and tried to straighten out in the air, only to realize he was about to hit the ground. He pulled himself up hard with another spell, skidding his feet and running as he regained balance. He stopped and turned around, then darted back toward the fray. In just the short time it took to get there, he saw Callie and Jon both snatched by separate tentacles. Kataleya hit one with a stream of water, only for it to do nothing. Aliana was screaming at the people watching for someone to fetch a bow.

Jon constricted the arm of the beast with his sorcery, squeezing it to half the size and pulling out a deep cry of pain that reverberated up from the ground. Green smoke had returned. *This nasty fucker must be producing it!* Tarak ran into the cloud as Callie disappeared within. He heard the sound of fire and felt the heat as he neared. He came upon her as the beast dropped her in front of his feet. He half tripped over her and half bent down to pick her up.

Holding her in his arms, he ran back the way he came, but the ground gave way under his feet. He fell too quickly to do much besides make a quick spell of gravity above them. It held them in the air and started to pull them upward when another tentacle wrapped around his legs.

With Callie in his arms like a bride, she twisted and cleared the smoke once again with hot air. Tarak could maintain his height, but he felt like a leg was about to snap as he yelled out.

Callie shot a fireball down at the monster's head. It exploded inside its mouth. The beast shrieked as all tentacles wavered. One wrapped around Tarak's sides. Carrying Callie, he could do nothing to physically force it off him as it started to squeeze.

He couldn't even scream as it crushed his insides so hard that he was certain something would rupture at any moment.

Callie sent a jet of fire into the tentacle grabbing Tarak. It burned him as well, but he didn't care as he felt the tentacle uncoil and retract away from the heat.

Suddenly he was falling. When did he let his spell come to an end? He wasn't sure he had it in him to form another, but he was going to try anyway. Then he and Callie crashed into... water?

He was disoriented until he realized that Katalaya had caught the two of them with a block of water, but they were quickly sinking through it. Tarak let go of Callie as she swam up. He tried to do the same, but his injuries prevented him from moving much at all.

The hazy image of Katalaya with her arms stretched out was still clear enough for him to see her expression. She couldn't hold the water long.

Tarak wanted to catch himself with gravity, but he'd never made a spell underwater before. He fell out of the water block, but something smacked him in the air. Arms grabbed him and carried him off. Jon, he realized, as the sorcerer set him down on the ground and then zipped around. Jon headed toward Katalaya as she was now plucked off by another tentacle. A second one grabbed Callie. Smoke enveloped both of them as Jon disappeared into it. Aliana had procured a bow and a quiver of arrows, and now she seemed to be unloading one after the other until smoke enclosed her as well.

Tarak held one of his sides as he ran toward the smoke. "This fucker needs to *die!*"

He picked himself up with gravity and carried himself toward where he'd last seen the statue of his uncle. He stuck out his feet and collided with it, probably breaking bones in his foot, but he didn't care right now. He'd snapped off the arms of the statue as he'd intended.

He pretty much fell on the shattered stone and soon found the sword, but his uncle's hands and attached arms were still stuck to the weapon too tightly for Tarak to pull it free. He screamed and heaved with all of his might, but he couldn't break the stone around the handle of the massive sword.

He stepped over and picked up the enlarged arms of Airinold by the wrists. The stone and sword was as heavy as a horse, but he managed to pick up everything from the ground with shaky legs and gritted teeth, but mostly because of Gravity Sphere. He then put more force into the spell, lifting himself into the air and turning the wrists of the statue for the sword to face downward.

He could hear the terrified screams of Callie and Kataleya somewhere below him. "Clear the air, Callie!" he yelled as loud as his strained voice would allow. "I shall destroy this beast right now!"

He could not hold on any longer. He was about to drop and hope for the best when hot air cleared the smoke. All four sorcerers were wrapped up, gasping and yelping as each was crushed. Tarak maneuvered between them and high enough above to break everything in his body if he was to drop and hit the ground, but it was not ground below.

"Die, you nasty fucker!" Tarak yelled as he plummeted with statue and sword.

He had a quick glimpse of the beast's massive eyes gaping and going cross-eyed as they tried to follow Tarak between them. He melted through flesh and felt bone shattering underneath him. He seemed to keep going deeper than he'd anticipated as something wet and dark enveloped him.

He screamed and thrashed as he worried he'd fallen into the mouth somehow, but he could barely move as wet flesh refused to give in to his efforts.

Deeper he fell. He inhaled something foul. Everywhere he turned was more wet flesh. He smelled blood. No, he tasted it. Where was he! He couldn't breathe as he turned this way and that trying to find a way out.

It was like he'd fallen into water, only it was dense and chunky. He risked opening his eyes only for them to sting and show only black. It was everywhere. He picked a direction he thought was up and swam. His shoulders caught. His legs were

almost completely stuck, but he eventually stuck his head out and had a gasping breath.

His head emerged from the shredded head of the beast. Only its mouth could be recognized, all twisted up and uglier than ever. Tarak was glad nothing was in his stomach as he heaved and spat out blood and brains.

“Lord and bane,” he muttered between his body trying to vomit. “I have to get out of here.”

He had broken his foot, he was certain now. But there were other parts of his body that were equally unusable, like his right arm and hand, not to mention a shooting pain that went through his side every time he turned.

“God damn you,” he told the dead beast. “Whatever you are, I hope you burn in h—” He dry heaved again.

Finally, he seemed to be done. Now he might be able to focus enough to pull himself out with a spell.

Jon floated down first. He blew out air. “Damn, Tarak, I can feel from here how much you need healing.”

Thank god Tarak had removed his good shirt before all of this. “I take it everyone is fine?”

“Yeah, I healed them. I would heal you, too, if I could. Can you make it out on your own?”

No, he was still too hurt to think about moving at all.

He looked up past Jon to see Callie, Aliana, and Kataleya on their knees looking down from the edge of the hole. Tarak gave another thanks to the powers for the fact that there was a water mage up there.

The cavern lay around him. The beast had broken its ceiling, but it stretched out in every direction.

He didn't see any damn rift.

Tarak called up to Kataleya, “I broke the statue of your beloved Deviant.”

“I had thought the statue fell over from one of those tentacles. That was you?”

“Yes, I broke it with my now broken foot, and I used the statue and sword to split open this now broken head. It was the only sword around. Goddamn above, why did we not bring weapons!”

Aliana yelled back, “We were just supposed to investigate the rift and have dinner. None of us wanted to carry weapons the whole way, and I’m sure you would’ve complained the loudest if you’d been asked to.”

“Well now I am going to have the offensive stench and *taste* of this thing in my mind for the rest of my goddamn life! What the fuck is this thing! What the *fuck!* *Is* it!” Tarak thrashed like a madman, reinjuring his side all over again. “And why did you not sense it, ranger!”

“It was not there in the beginning! It’s as if it suddenly appeared.” She gasped. “The rift! It was probably from the dark realm, but I don’t sense the rift anymore.”

Tarak didn’t care if there was still a high chance that he might drop himself. He had to get out of here. He made a spell of gravity and lifted himself out as quickly as he could manage. Jon flew out of the way.

As Tarak cleared the hole, he shifted the spell to pull himself forward over the heads of the other sorcerers. He could take the pain no longer and set himself down in between them and now a large audience with Justina at the head. She ran to him as he flopped onto his back.

“My goodness, are you all right?”

“Just wonderful.” He sat up against the agony pulsing through his whole body. From his hands, he flickered off...he didn’t want to look closely enough to figure out what it was. It was all over his bare chest and arms. He rubbed it off and flicked more. Justina quickly stepped back.

Tarak growled over his shoulder at Kataleya. “I need a cleaning, then a barrel of ale. I have to drink enough to forget everything, or I may never enjoy soft food again.”

She nodded and headed over to him. “I think I might share that barrel with you.”

The other sorcerers began following Kataleya, but there was a sound from within the hole that stopped everyone. It was a clap like a tree snapping but made out of air. Both Callie and Aliana turned suddenly to face the hole again. They ran toward it and knelt for a look. Their urgency put Tarak on alert as he limped over to join the others, his broken foot the last thing that still needed to heal.

“It’s him,” Callie whispered. “The man I connected to through mana.”

“I feel him now,” Aliana said. “He wasn’t down there before.”

Tarak had a glimpse, but the dead beast and all its tentacles took up the only open space they could see. “Where is he?” Tarak asked.

Aliana pointed toward the side of the dead monster. “Underneath the ground, and I felt another rift before he appeared, but this one was different. I think he came from a portal.”

A voice called up, “Anyone dead up there?”

Callie yelled back, “Who are you?”

“Oh, no one.”

Tarak glanced at the other sorcerers and found confusion in everyone’s eyes.

“What do you want?” Callie asked.

A long while passed. There wasn’t much time in the day, darkness shrouding details about the beast that Tarak would hope to forget completely after he inebriated himself past coherence. The silhouette of a man seemed to be walking up one coiled tentacle. He stopped when he could put one leg on the side of the beast’s head. He whistled as if surprised by the magnitude of destruction.

“Bastial hell, look at that.” He casually leaned back for a look up. “I’m impressed. Which one of you did this to my desmarl?” The man had an accent of an even tone, speaking as if every word was part of some dry joke.

Callie made light. He opened his arms as if putting on a show.

He wasn't particularly large or different in appearance, and yet Tarak had no doubt in his mind that this was an Ancient because even Tarak could feel a disturbance to the normal serenity of mana. The Ancient had a confident gaze to his bright emerald eyes, a smirk about his mouth. He had short hair on the sides and long with waves of loops and tangles on top, a messiness that looked less chaotic and more planned the longer Tarak looked at it. The hair itself was as if it belonged to two different men, blond on top and brunette around the sides and near the scalp. His reddish brown beard was just long enough to hide the shape of his chin.

Tarak had half a mind to spit on the Ancient. "You brought that thing here then act as if we are friends. Look at what you did to this beautiful city." Tarak stood up and presented himself. "And to this beautiful body! I was inside of that creature's head moments ago, and you are not making it easy to forget. Now you had better say something meaningful, or it is you I will split open next!"

The Ancient shot upward as if a gust of wind had propelled him. He landed between the sorcerers and the now large audience standing back. His smirk turned into a smile as Tarak and the others tensed to ready themselves for a fight.

"You can throw away your lives if you want," he said holding the same grin. "But I really think you should listen instead."

"You still haven't told us what you want," Callie said.

"I'm about to. *Eesh*. So impatient." He turned and addressed the crowd. "Good people of..." He stopped and looked over his shoulder at the sorcerers. "What's this place called?"

"Livea," Katalaya growled.

"Good people of Livea, I apologize for sending a desmarl here. I'm conducting a number of tests across Dorrinthal. I want a better idea of how many sorcerers there are here and

what they are capable of, but I also did all of you a large favor. A desmarl is the best thing to use for collapsing a rift, which you had down there until recently. You're welcome for that!"

Most everyone appeared scared.

The Ancient looked over his shoulder again. "They do speak common tongue, don't they?"

Jon stepped toward the Ancient and reached out his arm. The man was lifted by Jon's sorcery, though he seemed to enjoy it as he looked down at his waist and laughed.

"That's a neat trick."

"We almost died fighting off that thing." Jon went closer and lifted the Ancient higher. "I don't care that you collapsed the rift. Give me a real reason why I shouldn't kill you right now."

"I'm beginning to see what you sorcerers are like here. Business, business, business. Where's the fun? There's no reason for us to be enemies. Leaving that rift under a city would eventually result in far more deaths than a loose desmarl, anyway." He took on a more serious expression. "What's your name?"

Jon didn't answer.

Squinting and aiming his hands at the sorcerers, the Ancient seemed to be casting some sort of spell. Tarak felt his mind being searched, trifled with like a chest of old clothing in search of something specific.

"You." The Ancient pointed at Kataleya. "You seem to be the lord here." He laughed as if his own comment came as a pleasant surprise. Wagging a finger at her he said, "Aren't you a little young for that, madam?"

"He's a psychic," Tarak whispered to Callie as he stood nearby protectively.

The Ancient pointed at Tarak. "Correct, and you are the closest to me." He clicked his tongue. "Did the previous man like me breed with mortals since I've been gone? Frisky bastard, isn't he?"

“Jon, set him down,” Kataleya said.

Jon let him down, but aggression never left his face.

“I say we kill him,” Aliana suggested. “He’s going to be nothing but death for us. He’s even admitted it.”

“Aren’t you a nasty one? Who hurt you when you were younger?”

Aliana did not appear amused.

“I could punish him for you. Yes?” He waited. “Or is it her? No, him.” He paused again and lifted his hand. “Yes, him. He was older than you...handsome...blond.”

“I knew it!” Tarak told her pointedly.

“Get out of my head!” Aliana aimed her bow. “Surrender now. We will put you in chains and bring you to the castle.” She paused. “Kataleya, you do have chains handy, don’t you?”

“Can chains even stop him from killing us?” Callie asked. “We still aren’t sure what he’s capable of besides psyche.”

“I agree,” Jon said. “He needs to die in order to protect ourselves.”

The Ancient’s mouth dropped open. “Oh come on! I’ve barely done a thing. You don’t even know my name. It’s Xiffrik, by the way, but that name makes me sound so old, doesn’t it? I should have a better name, something timeless. Hmm, how about...” He glanced slyly at the healer. “Jon?”

“Nope.” Jon shook his head. “Nope, not that one.”

“What do you want?” Callie asked. “This is your last chance!”

“I want to help all of you, of course, and my ascension won’t harm anyone. I promise.” He put his hand over his chest. “I was once a legend all across the world. That was a long time ago, and it seems that everyone who knew of me is now dead. I would have thought at least a few stories of my good deeds had made it to this era, but no.” He clicked his tongue and looked down as if depressed. “That really makes

me sad. I worked hard, too, way harder than I'm prepared to work now."

"You are lying to us," Callie said. "You cannot possibly be from the past. The way you speak—"

Xiffrik interrupted her with a language unfamiliar to Tarak. He spoke with confidence and aggression, his face morphing into that of a man bent on starting a fight. Then he stopped, had a breath, and seemed just like his old friendly self.

"No one wants to hear that again, do we?" He squinted and lifted his hand. He gasped and grew a wide smile. "Princess. Oh my. Now *this* is interesting. And a sorcerer, are we?" He paused again. "Yes, we are." He made a fist and shook it. "Fire! Excellent choice. I'm fond of fire myself."

Everyone stepped back as he turned his hands and leaned his head toward the sky as if he would cast a great spell.

Xiffrik seemed to realize this as he looked around and dropped his hands. "Oh, there is no need for theatrics when we are having such a good time getting to know each other. I have no need to lie, Princess. I speak this way because this is how many people speak in Ovira, my home. I am excellent at adapting, you see. What do I want?" He scratched his head. "Didn't I tell you already? I am going to ascend, and it will even be beneficial to you all."

"You plan to change mana," Aliana muttered.

"Change? No, mana cannot be changed. Mana is even mightier than I am...for now. I plan to change how all of *you* interact with mana. I will make it easier."

"We have heard all of this before," Tarak grouched. "We are not interested, and attempting to change mana is an act of war."

"War? Hah! I am one man...man?" His head tilted as his eyes lifted. "Is a man still a man once he's lived a thousand years? Even though I was asleep through most of it, I would say no. I am something more, wouldn't you agree?"

"You're an Ancient," Callie said.

“An Ancient? I think I like that. Then what is he, born from one like me?” Xiffrik pointed at Tarak.

“A Deviant,” Callie said.

“Oh, Deeeviant. I like that even more. Maybe I’ll make my own Deviant one day. Anyway, I have places to be... *monsters* to unleash. *Ohhhhh*.” He wiggled his fingers to match his sarcastic voice. “I’m joking. No more desmarls, but isn’t this fun? The mystery of it all! And by the end of it, I will be one with mana. You know how mana connects the worlds? It passes between them freely? It lives eternally and is connected to everything and everyone?” He paused as if waiting for an answer. “No? Yes? Aha, I’m feeling a lot of yesses! Well, that’s going to be me one day, at one with everything and everyone. Isn’t that just the greatest thing you could ever dream of?”

He headed toward the hole as if to jump in. Tarak was not the only one who started walking after him. He shared looks with the other sorcerers. They nodded to each other. Xiffrik needed to be stopped.

He spun around. “You could all throw your lives away trying to stop me, but that would be a waste. You are some beautiful people, really, inside and out. I’ve never killed anyone before, and I’d really hate to start with people who are so beautiful.” He gestured at the broken statue and the massive hole. “I apologize about this, but what a fun way for us to meet, yeah? I promise you the rest of this will be fun also, and not a soul will get hurt. Just look at Ovira and Greenedge if you’d like references of my previous work. The people there are better in touch with sorcery than the people here, and more importantly, they are happy. You couldn’t convince them to give up their ways of mana if you tried. But don’t. Save us all the trouble. Ah!” He pointed at Jon. “I’m sensing some very aggressive thoughts from you, young man. Oh sheesh, now from all of you? Tsk, tsk.” He put his hands on his hips. “I think we need a demonstration, hmm? Otherwise, lives are going to be lost. All right, go ahead and attack me. I promise I won’t kill any of you.” He waited, but no one moved. “Go on, then. It’s the fastest way for you to learn.”

Tarak paused and found the other sorcerers doing the same. The watching people of Livea quickly slunk away.

“Well, go on now. Fight!” Xiffrik said with an exaggerated thrust of his arm. “Show me what you can do!”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Tarak was about to approach Xiffrik and see just how strong the Ancient was with his hands, but Callie murmured something that stopped him.

“Let’s see what he does against fire.”

Tarak stood back and waited. Callie moved her hands around as a fireball formed in front of them.

“No wand?” Xiffrik grinned. “And no bastial energy, either. I am learning already.”

Callie tossed her hand, and her fireball mimicked her movement. Xiffrik held up his palm. A shell formed in front of him the same color as the green smoke of the desmarl. It absorbed the fireball like water as the green energy dispersed the heat in waves of red and orange.

Xiffrik seemed to have complete control over it as he moved the floating shell to the side and gestured at it. “You all seem surprised by this. There are no sartious mages here? No? Let me explain. This is sartious energy. Desmarls make it to hide their limbs, but it’s also all around us. Condensed, it can be as hard as stone.” He squeezed his hand, and the shell collapsed on itself to make a floating sphere. Then he snapped his fingers, and it turned to dust. “Or thin enough, it can be burned with bastial energy. That’s how mages make fire where I come from. Watch.”

He lifted his arms as if controlling a puppet, the dusty green energy turning into a wide cloud of smoke. Then he pushed his hands together, forming another sphere but this time of the fine dust without solidifying it. It exploded into a swirling ball of fire that grew to be as big as Tarak.

He moved close to the other sorcerers as Kataleya formed a wall of water in front of them.

“You can relax!” Xiffrik yelled for his voice to reach past the roaring flame. “I told you I wasn’t going to kill any of you. You needed a demonstration of my power, and this is only the beginning.”

He snapped his fingers, and the fireball dissolved to ash and fell to the floor. There was a smell to the air that was not like anything burning but something sour and earthy. Kataleya's water wall fell.

"Can any of you cast?" Xiffrik asked.

Tarak's mana felt different. He couldn't quite connect to it.

It seemed that everyone was having the same trouble.

Jon told the sorcerers, "Manabreak, like one of Hadley's curses."

"He can do that on *command*?" Callie asked worriedly.

Tarak had never heard of a mana-breaking curse, but it sounded pretty self-explanatory.

"Enough with the whispering." Xiffrik came toward them. "So none of you use bastial energy, and yet you still cannot cast when I alter mana. This is fascinating me more and more."

Slowly the scent dissipated, and Tarak felt that he could connect with his mana again.

"I sense you all are starting to worry, but I don't quite feel that any of you have really come to understand how futile it is the stand against me. I didn't want to have to do this, but it looks like I have no choice." He seemed almost sad as he told them, "This is going to hurt very badly." Then he smiled. "Who wants to go first?"

Kataleya surprised Tarak by reforming her wall of water and stepping out of the line. "I will drown him if I can, and the water should protect me from any spell."

"No, let me," Jon said.

"Just heal me if something happens."

"Heal?" Xiffrik asked. "Hold everything. Jon there can heal wounds?"

Callie explained, "It's one of the reasons we will fight you to keep you from changing mana. We have healers in our

world.”

Xiffrik raised his eyebrows and his palms. “I would never take away a healer, and I would never do anything to mana that would stop a healer’s work.”

“Then what would you do?” Aliana asked.

“Just let me know what spells you want kept, and I will make them more accessible. The others?” He whistled as he shot his thumb over his shoulder. “Gone.”

Callie said, “But you would surely alter mana for it to empower you the more it was used.”

“I have to take *something* for my effort. I’ll be sacrificing a lot of my power to change mana. It seems fair to me.”

“Temporarily sacrificing your power,” Callie stated. “We all know you have become this powerful because of the sacrifice you made a thousand years ago in Ovira.”

“And Greenedge. Oh, most of you will be long dead by the time I have ascended. By then, everyone will be used to the change of mana and there will be no reason to complain.” He seemed to be waiting for them to agree. “Here, I even promise you this. Tell your father, princess. Or is it your mother? Who’s the ruler? There is just so much I need to learn, isn’t there? Whoever it is, tell them that I promise to protect Dorrinthal from any of those other pesky Ancients who are surely going to come any day now.” He squinted his eyes as he delved into Tarak’s mind again, and Tarak was sure he wasn’t the only one. Xiffrik let out an exaggerated gasp. “One has already come, and you defeated...her, is it?” He whistled. “No wonder all of you are so confident. So is she dead or...no. She ran. Oh, I am excited to find out all about her. In time. For now, the demonstration.”

Kataleya made her wall of water again.

“Oh please,” Xiffrik said with a laugh. “Psyche is unaffected by water. Here, watch.”

Kataleya dropped with a scream of agony, but she stopped on her knees and looked up with a scowl.

Xiffrik appeared apologetic as he put his hands up. “Just a quick one. Go on and tell the others how painful that was so I won’t need to do it to them.”

Jon helped up Kataleya, who still seemed weakened by the painful blast of psyche as she bent over. “There was nothing to heal,” Jon said. “And there still isn’t.”

“It hurt, but I’m fine.”

“Of course you are,” Xiffrik said. “We shouldn’t be fighting. You.” He pointed at Tarak. “I can feel how much you want this to be over so you can clean the desmarl guts off you and...drink ale? Is that what I’m feeling?”

“A barrel of it.”

“Now that sounds like fun. Why don’t we all sit around and share a barrel of ale?”

Aliana said, “I thought you had other monsters to unleash.”

“That was a joke. If we all become friends, we can work together.” He leaned forward and seemed enthusiastic about the idea. “You can be part of the process. Isn’t that nice? Especially when you consider the alternative. You might not like what I come up with. Think on it. And the people of...” He turned and spread his arms as if to address what now looked like the whole city. He looked back over his shoulder. “What’s this place called again?”

“Livea,” someone yelled from the audience.

“The great people of Livea! Wouldn’t you like to have a better chance of using sorcery? I’m sure it’s very difficult right now. I can change that.”

A few spoke agreements. Others mentioned that he didn’t seem so bad. Tarak wasn’t sure if Xiffrik used psyche, though it didn’t feel like he had before, and it didn’t seem like he had an interest in doing so now. As strange as the Ancient was, Tarak was beginning to believe that Xiffrik might want to empower himself without causing problems in the process.

Only one thing was certain for Tarak, and that was how Xiffrik seemed intent on empowering himself no matter what. He was friendly now—this was a game to him. That would change as soon as something or someone prevented him from getting what he wanted.

Xiffrik looked back at the sorcerers. “Ale anyone?”

Callie explained, “You have to understand that we don’t want mana changed. We’re still discovering everything that can be done with it. There could be other spells besides healing, water, and fire that will prove to be extremely useful to us and future generations. That possibility is taken away if you change mana. Even worse is that we cannot allow one person to have unstoppable power. If anyone becomes an Ancient over too many sorcerers, there will be no chance of ever stopping them. They can do whatever they want.”

“I’m not going to argue against that, but...*but* you should know mana is going to be changed here whether you want it to or not. I am connected to Ancients like myself all over the world. I have a sense of where they go and where they come from. Sometimes I can even feel what they want, and what they want is Dorrinthal. It’s the only place inhabited by potential sorcerers where sorcery is ready for the molding. If it’s not going to be me, it will be someone else.”

“We already fought off—”

“I know, I know,” he interrupted Callie. “But she is not dead. She will return stronger and with a better plan. It might be as soon as tomorrow. She could find a way to enter Dorrinthal at a location you are unaware of and begin changing sorcery. It might be too far away for anyone to feel until it is too late. She could even be on a boat right now if she has trouble entering through a portal...or is it...?” He squinted. “A rift. So she’s from Aathon, I take it? A summoner?”

He tilted his head a bit and moved his hand around. “I’m feeling a lot of questions from all of you. I am not a summoner. I can make portals, and I can convince any living creature to obey my commands while they are in my presence,

but I have vowed never to do that to humans. It was not very hard to get a desmarl here, by the way. There are limitations to my portals, but I believe you will find out about those soon enough. Basen Hiller is in Dorrinthal, isn't he?" The Ancient waited, squinting his eyes again as he got his answer with psyche. "Yes. You know, he is very famous in Ovira. He doesn't know who I am yet, but everyone will soon enough. Like I said, I was a legend eons ago—for good reasons, not bad, I assure you. Establishing a new legacy is not a priority, but it would be nice. Then I wouldn't have to deal with all of this...fanfare, and we could be having that barrel of ale about now. So what will it be? I'm getting a little tired of watching you drip desmarl guts." He gestured at Tarak.

Aliana gestured for everyone to come close. As Tarak neared them, however, they drifted away a bit. He stayed a step back from their tight circle, leaning in to listen.

"Do we think we can kill him?" Aliana whispered.

"Careful, he seems capable of reading our thoughts," Callie warned.

"He's delusional," Jon said.

"You have not met my grandfather," Tarak interrupted. "Xiffrik makes him look like a disaster in the making. He is hundred times better than Basael or Monrra, but that does not mean I am ready for him to change mana."

Kataleya said, "If we don't get involved with him, he's going to find a place far from here to begin."

"I might be able to sense when someone changes mana," Aliana said.

"No matter what, we need sorcerers everywhere," Callie said. "We need an alliance with the analytes and the elves, not just politically but to stop Ancients of all kind."

Jon disagreed. "That won't matter. He'll just find some remote place."

"I think not," Callie said. "He needs to be around sorcerers so they can start using his changed mana and slowly begin to empower him, otherwise it won't spread and he will

remain weak from his sacrifice. We could eventually hunt him down and kill him then if he doesn't flee. Either way, his creation would revert back. That's why an alliance across Dorrinthal is necessary. We already have the analytes on our side because of Zarin, I believe. The elves might be willing to work with us because of Fatholl."

"I agree with everything Callie has said." Tarak leaned in closer, but everyone shifted away. He held back a grumble as he continued. "Just like Monrra, I cannot imagine Xiffrik or her stopping their quest for power over the mana in Dorrinthal."

Callie nodded. "Monrra can take a rift into the dark realm from anywhere whenever she needs to retreat. Xiffrik seems capable of disappearing in a similar way. Stopping them will be hard, but I think it must be done."

They checked on Xiffrik to find him chatting with the locals. He seemed to be amusing to them as most held smiles, some even sharing laughs at something he said.

Aliana asked, "Has he been using psyche to change our thoughts?"

"No," Tarak said. "I have felt psyche from Orvyn. It is noticeable."

"Yeah," Jon agreed. "I feel that my mind has remained unaltered."

Kataleya gave a sharp breath. "This should be a discussion with the king, but I fear what might happen if we put Xiffrik in front of him."

"Then we let him go for now," Aliana said.

"He could summon...no, bring more of those creatures into towns and other places," Kataleya warned. "He's looking for a populated place where sorcerers are least likely to oppose him."

Jon rubbed his hand down his face as he let out a sound of frustration. "I don't know. I'm tired and hungry, and Tarak's smell is making it very hard to think."

“Oh I am sorry, oh delicate sorcerer!”

“I honestly don’t know what to do,” Kataleya said. “The spell he put on me was the worst pain I’ve ever felt. I don’t know how we’re supposed to fight against that. Have any of you been trained to resist psyche?”

“No,” Tarak said, “and that seems to be the biggest problem.”

Jon said, “I’ve had a few lessons from Basen, but I need a lot more practice. Basen isn’t a psychic, after all. He just knows what to do.”

Callie gave a frustrated shrug. “It’s up to my father and his council. We could all work with Xiffrik. If he changed mana here, he would become weak for a long time. We could turn on him later.”

“He’s coming,” Aliana said.

Xiffrik seemed to always have the same casual demeanor whether he was smirking or strolling toward them. He gestured at the gaping hole. “You know all rifts are extremely dangerous, right? I’m not joking. At some point the rift is going to collapse, and there is a high chance it could take a lot of this city with it, killing many people here. I’ve seen it before. It’s made of artistry and esitry, are all of you aware?”

“So Basael was not making that up,” Tarak muttered.

Callie told Xiffrik, “We are aware.”

“Once I change mana, I can get rid of artistry and esitry. Then all the rifts that have formed, some you know about and others you clearly don’t, will dissipate without destroying anything. Trying to find a solution for these rifts was the reason I was tasked with changing mana in Greenedge and Ovira. I’m not blind about any of this. If you have a psychic here, you could confirm what I say is the truth.” He cocked his head. “Oh you do have a psychic! They must’ve come from Ovira. Who is it? I wonder if I know them.”

Tarak had the same feeling as with pretty much every question Xiffrik asked. Tarak wasn’t sure if he should answer,

how to answer, or even how he might keep the answer from Xiffrik's psyche.

Xiffrik put his hands to his hips. "This is getting absurd, isn't it? We could be having this long conversation over ale and food. Instead we are standing here, as evening passes into night, many of you starving. I'm going to make a decision. Yes, here it is. I'm going to visit the other parts of Dorrinthal anyway. Curiosity is the cure for laziness, at least for me. Perhaps for you it will be the cure for fear. I will return later. This gives you plenty of time to discuss this with your king, which seems to be on everyone's mind right now. In the meantime, I have some advice. I know all of you are interested in rifts and probably want to see what you can discover. Use the one in the forest that I feel isn't far from here, if you must investigate them for anything. That way, if something goes wrong, it's only likely to kill a person or two."

Xiffrik walked into their group, confirming that he was shorter than Tarak, about Jon's height which was only slightly taller than the average man. This of course didn't seem to bother Xiffrik at all as he wore a happy little smile.

"It really was a pleasure meeting all of you." He strolled through their small circle. "Beautiful people. It would be such a shame for all of you to throw your lives away in an attempt to stop something that's going to happen no matter what. Please remember that."

He stepped over the edge of the hole as if about to fall in, but a platform of sartious energy appeared beneath his foot. He moved his other onto it, and the platform descended. With night now upon them, he disappeared into the darkness.

Soon there was another clap of something powerful, a portal opening most likely, and then another as the portal closed. Tarak could feel that Xiffrik was no longer with them.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Tarak had a standing bath from Kataleya's warm water, and Callie was kind enough to dry him off afterward with air unpleasantly hot. Then all retired to Kataleya's mansion, where Tarak had a bite to eat and less than he wanted to drink.

Thanks to Xiffrik, he now had to remember most of the details of this evening. Dutiful Jon left after eating even faster than Tarak had, not partaking in the ale, to return to the castle. The king needed to be notified of the events as soon as possible. Kataleya looked the most disappointed by this, all but confirming Tarak's suspicion that there was something between her and Jon.

Justina had been uninvited to dinner, to Tarak's pleasure. There was too much the sorcerers needed to discuss.

Late into the night, however, it seemed obvious that there was nothing new to discover that they hadn't figured out already. Xiffrik's power still remained somewhat of a mystery, though it seemed quite clear that they would not be able to slay him easily. Meanwhile, he could probably kill a group of them as it was now, with everyone unprepared to face him. Psyche alone seemed to have no counter, and Xiffrik might be able to pain all of them at once. Certainly, they wouldn't be able to keep him out of their territory.

Everything Xiffrik had said seemed to be true, and worse, it also made Basael seem like an honest man. Xiffrik had ruined their night by putting everyone in a sour mood. Before heading to bed, Tarak realized he still stank and needed a real bath with soap.

Kataleya left the room to have one drawn for him, leaving Tarak alone with Aliana and Callie in what he learned was called a sitting room, which seemed like a waste of space when they could sit just about anywhere. The three of them mostly sat in uncomfortable silence, not because of any awkwardness but because they felt trapped by the situation Xiffrik had put them in. There really seemed to be no solution, and none of them seemed ready to come to terms with this.

There was one thing that put Tarak in a better mood, and that was what lay behind Callie's eyes in each glance she gave him throughout the night. Tarak would do everything in his power to at least give them a chance for a private moment.

Eventually, Aliana left to investigate the city one last time for anything strange she might be able to sense. Callie stood up as Tarak went to face her.

"My door will remain unlocked tonight," he said.

"All right," she whispered back.

A smile split his face.

She looked as if she was failing to hide back her own grin. "Stop smiling like that," she said with a stifled laugh. "We have to be discreet."

"You stop smiling."

Her lips pursed, but her eyes held her grin.

Kataleya's servants were all over cleaning up after the dinner. Two of them walked through the sitting room with bed sheets as if to prepare a room. Tarak lost his smile as Callie stepped back from him.

Tarak wanted to assume these people would not gossip about anything they saw here, but why would that be? All of them already had quite a story to tell to anyone who was not here in Livea during the desmarl attack. He could easily envision one of them tacking on the prime gossip that the princess was involved with the son of Caarda, but only if Tarak and Callie made it obvious enough. They really had to be careful.

Kataleya returned to let Tarak know his bath was ready. She had already shown all the sorcerers where they would be sleeping, in adjacent bedrooms with doors accessed by the same hall.

Tarak said his good nights and then went to scrub himself vigorously. It took a while to remove the stench from his body, but eventually he couldn't smell desmarl brains any longer and quickly dried off. Rather than go straight to his room,

however, he decided to take a little trip outside the mansion. He had seen some lovely flowers on the way in. Tarak only needed one. Kataleya's gardeners shouldn't notice because she had dozens.

Although he hurried, it was well into the night by the time he had finished setting up his room. He lay in bed on his side and watched the door.

It did not take long before the handle turned and the door started to open. He sat up and formed the illusion he had worked on as Callie turned around and quietly shut the door behind her.

A candle lit the room and provided a waxy scent that had become synonymous with good times for Tarak. What looked like a hundred flowers filled the entire floor except for an open path to the bed, where Tarak sat in wait. The sheet was draped over his lower half, his upper half naked. He was not so daring and downright crude to be naked underneath the sheet, but his undershorts could be easily pulled off in haste if needed.

"Tarak!" Callie whispered roughly as she froze in the middle of the room and glanced around. "How could you possibly bring all these flowers here? And how could we get rid of them without anyone knowing?"

He let the illusion come to an end as he pulled the one real flower out from underneath the sheets.

Callie sucked in a long breath as if about to give a speech, but then she simply leaned forward and uttered, "Oh."

Tarak snickered. She approached, and he handed her the flower. She sniffed it, then set it on the bedside table next to the candle.

"Do not blow it out," he whispered as she leaned toward the small open flame. "I want to see you better."

Callie turned and faced him. Her nightgown was shaped like one of her dresses, with wide sleeves and all. The only difference was how loose it was around her small frame. It draped around her chest, giving Tarak the slightest glimpse of what lay underneath.

He stood and picked her up. She let out a whisper of a squeal as she wrapped her legs around his waist. He kissed her neck as she moaned and tugged at his hair.

Tarak lost track of the time as they enjoyed each other without speaking. They'd moved to the bed, where passion pulled them close, and a sense of urgency seemed to keep them from ever separating. They might not have another night like this.

The nosy gentleman wanted to be involved, sticking up and making sure to find Callie no matter how hard Tarak tried to keep it under wraps. Callie bumped up against it enough times by now for the extent of his wants to be perfectly clear, and she had done little more than gasp and giggle. He did not press for anything more, perfectly content to hold her and kiss her all night if they had the time. Eventually, however, she nestled her head against his shoulder and said something.

“Can I use psyche on you?”

“Um...*what?*”

She gave a laugh. “I think I have learned how to use it.”

Tarak sat up to look into her eyes. “Lord and bane, you are serious.” He lay back down. “Careful, sorcerer. Illia used psyche on both of us without doing it on purpose and, well...”

“I know what your nights were like with her. Aliana told us during your drinking game, remember?”

“I do, but I do not want to become like that with you.”

“Because I am inexperienced compared to Illia?”

“I would not worry about Illia if I were you. What I had with her started shallow and became deeper once we shared a bed. But with you, it has started deeper than it ever was with Illia and can only grow from here.”

“I think I can tell that was genuine.”

“Of course it was. I would not lie to you.”

“No, but I want you to.”

“You cannot possibly want that,” he said.

“I do. Tell me something completely untrue, and make it hard to guess.”

“I have never heard of this game, and I cannot say I care to play right now. Can we not go back to kissing and you ‘accidentally’ bumping my nether regions, only a little more frequently and vigorously?”

She laughed. “No, I want to test my psyche like I said.”

“Oh! Are you telling me you think you can detect lies?”

“Not every time, but that’s why I want to practice.” She leaned over him and traced his lips with her finger. “Please?” she asked.

“What do you hope to do with this skill when you learn it?”

“Are you scared I will use it on you?”

“No.”

“You are lying.”

“Are you using psyche already?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “Was I right?”

“Yes! But I felt nothing. How can I tell when you are using it?”

“I don’t know. Maybe you’ll learn that as we practice.”

“This is a very valuable skill, but it makes me nervous.”

“That’s true.”

“Yes. Do you know what I would do with this skill?”

“What?”

“Never tell anyone about it. Never call anyone on their lie if it will give away my skill.”

Callie didn’t respond for a breath. “Is that not immoral?”

“Certainly not! The lie is the immoral part.”

“That is a good point, but there is one problem.”

“What problem?” Tarak asked.

“I want to use this skill to assist more than myself. I plan to help the kingdom if I can.”

Tarak grumbled. “Yes, there is that darn responsibility. That is why I did not keep my illusion spells to myself. It always complicates things, does it not?”

She laughed.

“What does using psyche feel like?” Tarak asked.

“That is difficult to describe. My mana sends me a message that is clear but is not something I understand right away. I think it is connecting to your mana and conveying a reading to me. Only through experimentation have I realized what some of these messages are saying. Tonight you have helped me discover sincerity.”

“What else have you learned?”

“Attraction.”

“From me, I have no doubt.”

She gave another laugh. “Yes, it is difficult to pick up most other readings because your attraction is so strong.”

“You are the one to blame for that.”

They went silent for a short time.

“I would say this is not fair,” Tarak realized aloud. “You will one day be able to feel everything I feel.”

“It seems that I might, but only if I investigate your mana. I wouldn’t want to all the time. That would be exhausting. It is going to be nice to detect lies, though.”

“I do not lie.”

“Insincere.”

“I do not lie in a way that would hurt anyone,” he specified.

“Genuine.”

He leaned over her. “There are things we could do that would be much more fun than this game.”

“Sincere.” She smirked.

He smiled as he spoke with a whimsical tone, “I am becoming *very* tired of this.”

“I know, but I want to memorize this feeling so I don’t forget the next day.”

Tarak lay back beside her with a sigh. “How much longer do you need?”

“Just an hour more.”

“An hour?” Tarak started a tantrum. He thrashed all around as he let out a guttural grunt like a little trapped animal, bouncing Callie about the bed. She giggled wildly.

He let his tantrum come to an end. Callie put her hands over her mouth to keep from laughing too loudly. Then Tarak started to laugh, and he, too, had to muffle himself with his pillow.

“It was a jest,” she whispered between laughs. “We can stop.”

She settled back beside him with a sigh. He had his arm around her, her head resting upon his shoulder. She leaned up and kissed him on the cheek.

“I wish I could stay here all night,” she said.

“I would like that.”

Eventually Tarak realized he had fallen asleep, but only as Callie gasped and admitted the same thing.

“I’d better go back to my room,” she said.

He rolled out of the bed and walked her to the door.

“I had wanted to have this type of night with you since soon after I met you,” Tarak said.

“Sincere,” she said as she smiled. “All the recent memories I’ve had of having fun have been with you.”

They stood close with their hands clasped.

“But I’m not sure when we can do it again,” Callie said.

Tarak started to speak but stopped himself.

“This is when I would tell you that we will find an opportunity again soon. A lie, can you see?”

Callie nodded.

They hung their heads. Callie put her hands on his chest. He embraced her, and she slid her arms around him.

Eventually she leaned up to look into his eyes, and he had her lips again.

It was a long while after when she finally left, leaving Tarak hot all over and wanting everything but sleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

No one disturbed Tarak as he caught up on rest into the morning. A servant helped him with some breakfast, and soon he was headed out to find the other sorcerers.

Tarak remembered every detail of the fight against the desmarl, especially falling into its disgusting open head. It was still sitting here, gaping open in the light of day. All the sorcerers from last night were here, but now Fatholl stood among them. Jon must've brought him from the castle.

"What have I missed?" Tarak asked Callie, resisting the urge to step close.

"Jon spoke with my father last night. He slept in the castle and took Fatholl back here in the morning. They arrived recently, and Jon just took Fatholl down into the cavern and then back up so Fatholl could fully investigate it."

The elf peered over the edge. He muttered something in elvish and stepped back.

"It's easier to tell from here that it is in fact a desmarl," he told them. "But not a particularly large one."

Tarak took another glance. The beast was gigantic considering all of its tentacles. Its round head alone was as tall as Tarak. The tentacles stretched out must've been at least three times Tarak's height.

Fatholl continued, "These were the beasts in Greenedge that had taken over much of the continent for many years. I went through a lot of trouble to destroy what I thought was all of them, but I must've missed some. There were thousands. Xiffrik claims to have more ready to send through other portals?"

"He did claim that but later said he was joking," Callie said. "How did he open a portal underground that was large enough for that to fit through?"

"Did you see any akorell metal on him?" Fatholl asked.

“No,” Callie answered. “He didn’t have any gems or bracelets that we could see.”

“That is strange, indeed. There is no akorell metal underground or any sign of it.”

Jon said, “There are limitations to setting both the entrance and the exit of a portal. A large infusion of bastial energy, usually from akorell metal—”

“I am aware of that limitation.”

“Then can you explain how he made one without akorell metal?”

“I wonder if he somehow used the rift to create his portal. They are both doorways, after all, and the hardest part of opening a tunnel is creating the doorway. Once that is open, it has to lead somewhere, so the tunnel is made on its own. Maintaining the open portal is the next hardest part. I have never seen or heard of a portal large enough to fit a desmarl, and I have never heard of a portal opening without akorell metal.”

Fatholl didn’t bother to conclude his ominous message.

“Well shit.” Tarak couldn’t help cursing. “Are you saying that arrogant bastard really might be unstoppable?”

“Everyone and everything can be killed. I’m certain of that, but we may run into the same issue as we did with Monrra in that both she and Xiffrik can escape through a rift or a portal whenever they want.”

Kataleya said, “His psyche was the worst pain I have ever felt. I don’t see how any of us could fight through that.”

“You cannot at this point,” Fatholl said. “Psyche in that form is not just pain. It also causes your muscles to contract. You will be unable to move unless you resist the spell. Even after, you will feel weakened for a time. It is the ultimate weapon against anyone who cannot resist.”

Tarak managed to keep his curses to himself this time. “How do we resist?” he asked.

“To resist all psyche, you have to put yourself in a state where the feeling cannot reach your mind. If the spell is designed to make you sad, you must make yourself immune to sadness. In this case, when the spell is designed to cause you pain, you must become immune to pain.”

“I have never been scared of pain,” Tarak said. “Try the spell on me.”

Fatholl flicked his hand in Tarak’s direction, and a scream ripped out of Tarak’s throat as he fell to his knees. He then fell flat to his chest, unable to even get his hands up to keep his face from bouncing against the grass.

The spell suddenly came to an end.

He gingerly pushed himself up, his muscles feeling like they were about to give out. “Lord and bane,” he grumbled. “I imagine that is how it would feel to be chewed to pieces by a desmarl.”

Fatholl’s face showed no apology. “Some have found success with focusing on a feeling stronger than the pain. I haven’t had much success. My best defense is usually to attack the psychic with my own spell. You may want to train yourselves to cast through the pain if you cannot resist it.”

Callie said, “I saw you pain multiple people at the same time during the fight against Monrra. Does that mean Xiffrik can do the same?”

“Yes, it’s not very difficult for any skilled psychic to affect multiple targets at once. It usually just tires them out faster. The hardest part is differentiating their energy from the energy of allies nearby. I imagine Xiffrik is at least as powerful as I am, probably stronger. He should have no trouble disabling all of you at the same time with a single spell. He is therefore very dangerous. I do not recommend inciting him into action of any kind. There may be no hope of saving yourselves if I am not there to assist.”

“How certain are you that you could disable him with your own spell?” Callie asked.

“I am unsure. He may be able to resist or he may not. I would not want to try and fail. It may be the end of me and anyone fighting beside me.”

Tarak mentioned, “He also did something to disable mana from being used. There was a smell in the air.”

The other sorcerers agreed.

Aliana commented, “It was like old ale in a dirty tavern, but sweet, too, in a kind of sickening way.”

“Did he continue to cast during this?” Fatholl asked.

“He did not seem to try,” Tarak answered.

“I have only heard of a few others who could disable bastial energy, but for it to prevent all spells from being cast makes me wonder.” He had his hand on his chin as he stared at the ground.

Callie said, “Xiffrik seemed curious about that as well. He specifically mentioned bastial energy and seemed surprised that all mana had been disabled.”

“He probably has the same knowledge of mana that I do, coming from Greenedge and Ovira,” Fatholl said. “It is mostly limited to bastial and sartious energies.”

Callie asked Jon, “Did you tell him everything Xiffrik said?”

“I did last night, and to your father as well.”

Fatholl said, “I now believe the Ancient was honest about everything. He probably did alter mana initially to stop rifts from opening and dangerously collapsing. He clearly understands mana well enough to complete such a complicated feat, but there is certainly more to mana that he does not yet understand. We might be able to use that against him if we do plan to kill him.”

Tarak was a little surprised at how casually Fatholl mentioned killing anyone, let alone someone who might be the most powerful sorcerer in the world.

“I would like to meet with him,” Fatholl continued, “but I fear he may become threatened by my power and kill me.”

Tarak commented, “He did mention that he would kill anyone who stood in his way from changing mana, and as reluctant as he sounded, I believed him.”

“So did I,” Callie agreed.

“I should be able to discern if he’s lying about anything,” Fatholl said. “The king wishes to meet with him as well, but we all have the same fears. I can’t imagine a scenario where the two of them can speak without endangering Nykal’s life, unless Xiffrik willingly steps into a prison cell before we put the king in front of him.”

Jon asked, “A prison could really contain someone like Xiffrik?”

“Surprisingly, a cage of thick metal bars is impossible to break out of for even the most powerful sorcerers. Only a metal mage, like Charlie Spayker, would have an easy escape. I don’t think Xiffrik has the knowledge that metal can be altered with the right note and training. I knew nothing about that until I came here. There is no discussion of notes, even, in any of the other continents.”

Jon sighed. “Well, no matter what happens here, the portal-maker from Ovira should be done in Rohaer. He’s probably waiting for me.”

“Let me say one thing about Basen Hiller.” Fatholl attracted tense looks as he paused. “We know each other from my time in Ovira. He is going to say that I have done unforgivable things.” Fatholl gave another pause, this one short. “Terrible acts. He’ll have a long list of them.”

“Are you saying he’s going to lie?” Jon asked.

“No. He has no reason to lie.”

“Wait.” Callie showed her concern with a glance between sorcerers as if not understanding. “Are you saying you *have* done these terrible things?”

“I have, yes.”

Everyone seemed to share the same horrified expression as Callie.

“What things?” Tarak asked.

“I would not call them terrible, though they will sound that way coming from Basen’s mouth. I have killed to save lives.”

“Haven’t we all?” Jon asked.

“I have killed kings. I had them slain in their throne rooms.” He paused. “Not during wartime.”

“Oh gosh!” Callie said with a gasp. “Does my father know?”

“He and your mother have been informed. The advisors know as well. There are other things Basen might mention, such as that I tried to kill him but failed. It is a long story, but we had an agreement that he disrespected. I am glad he survived, however. Even though we were once at war with each other—”

“War?” Callie interrupted.

“Yes, at war. Even though we were once at war, I respect him and his skill over bastial energy. He is the headmaster of a prestigious school of sorcery and a leader. He needs to be involved in these conversations about Ancients, but it would be unwise to tell him that I am here before he arrives.” The elf showed a serious look to Jon. “Or he will not come with you no matter what you tell him.”

Jon would head to Rohaer straight from here, meaning it was up to Tarak to take Fatholl back while Aliana and Callie would go on horseback. They all said quick goodbyes as Tarak and Fatholl fastened the two-person harness, and soon Tarak was up in the air.

“Say, Fatholl,” he asked over his shoulder. “How hard is it to detect lies with psyche?”

“Not too difficult for any skilled psychic, but that’s because most people are easy to catch. Some liars are so

talented that only a master psychic can find the insincerity behind the confidence.”

So people could still lie to Callie at this point, but that might not always be the case.

“You claim you could tell when Xiffrik is lying. It does not matter that he is a stronger psychic?”

“It may matter. It depends on how much time he has spent manipulating his own energy to give the impression that he is sincere. It is a skill most psychics do not practice because of how difficult it is to accomplish.”

“But you can make others feel whatever you want them to feel?”

“Mostly, yes, but there are limitations even for me. If a man loves his king, for example, I could not make the man want to kill his king.”

“What if a man does not like his teacher because the teacher is an arse, but this man would never try to kill his teacher?”

“I could never convince anyone to kill anyone else unless the want was already there.”

“So in a moment of anger, then?” Tarak asked.

“Perhaps,” Fatholl said. “It depends on just how angry they are, but yes they would be more susceptible to aggression through psyche.”

Tarak straightened out and muttered to himself, “I do not like psyche.”

Fatholl seemed to understand him even though there was no way he could have heard. “In your kingdom, where there are few psychics, I understand your trepidation. However, I come from a place where psyche is common enough that prominent figures cannot hide their intentions. This has eliminated the benefit of any big lie. Rulers of all kinds must care for their people. There are places in Dorrinthal that would benefit from this change.”

“Lycast?” Tarak asked.

“Yes, but not because your king or queen requires it. You are lucky to have goodhearted rulers. This is especially uncommon among dorrin. Psychics would be more beneficial in keeping the lords and ladies across Lycast in check. Many have lost themselves to their political power.”

“Like Lord Reuben.”

“He is one, yes.”

Tarak looked back again. He could barely just see Fatholl’s gray hair whipping behind him as they flew.

“I like you, elf. You hide nothing.”

“It is the way of the world with psychics, and it may be one everyone has to become accustomed to whether they want to or not.”

“What about Zarin?” Tarak asked. Another nice thing about speaking with Fatholl was that Tarak didn’t feel that he ever had to elaborate.

“Zarin is not motivated by power. He is a good advisor, but that may change now.”

“Why is that?”

“Jon smashed his leg with a mallet last night and healed him to perfection. He can now walk without pain, and I have sensed a great change from him.”

“Lord and bane!” Tarak laughed with glee as he thought about Zarin’s years of suffering coming to a sudden end with a great smash and a powerful spell.

“Did Zarin willingly decide that?” Tarak asked.

“Jon pressed the topic as Zarin refused. Eventually Jon threatened Zarin that he was going to smash Zarin’s knee no matter what, and it would be better with Zarin’s cooperation to ensure Jon smashed the right spot the first time.”

“I wish I could have seen that.” Tarak gave another laugh, then muttered to himself, “It turns out Jon is not so delicate after all. Good man.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

A good mood set a smile on Tarak's lips and even produced a whistle as he walked through the empty apartment hallway in the castle grounds. He would grab a change of clothing and relax in a nice bath. Callie liked him. There was nothing that could bring him down.

He passed by a room and stopped. His whistle turned into a curious one as he leaned back for a glimpse at a posy of vibrant and clearly expensive flowers sitting in a vase on someone's desk. Tarak looked both ways down the hall to find no one, then he snuck into the room for a peak.

He soon realized this must be Jon's new room. There wasn't much here besides the furniture that came with the room. The only evidence of the healer was an open drawer with the sleeve of one of his shirts hanging over it.

Tarak walked over to the desk on the other side of the room and took a look at the note in front of the flowers.

"These flowers are only a humble gesture of how much you mean to me.

—Zarin."

Tarak snickered.

He started out of the room when Eden crossed by and stopped at the sight of Tarak leaving.

"What are you doing in Jon's room?" she asked.

"Snooping." Tarak joined her in the hall but pointed back at the flowers. "Is Zarin attracted to Jon?"

"No, he's just foreign."

"I see. It has been a pleasure, but there is relaxing to be done."

"Tarak, wait."

"Hmm?"

"I have a favor to ask of you."

“I would not like to become involved between you and Michael.”

She shook her head. “No, it’s not about him. Jon is going to be busy for a while, but I heard you can fly with people now. Can you take me to the rift in the forest and then retrieve me in a few hours?”

“To summon your pet?”

“Yes, and spend time with him in our realm.”

“Is this the only time you will ask me to do this?”

She hesitated before answering. “Probably not.”

“So it seems that you are really asking if I will take you there and back every day. This is not a small request!”

“I am only asking if you will take me there today.”

“Tomorrow you may ask the same thing.”

“And you may say no, but will you take me today?”

“Let me think.”

Tarak did not know Eden very well, but he did not like her for the simple fact that she had cheated on Michael by kissing Arthur.

“It is not a favor for me,” Eden said. “I am raising Saffy for all of us.”

“Do you know that the rifts are volatile?”

“I do, and I still think it’s worth the risk. The king does as well. I have been riding there and back every day. That’s almost two hours wasted. You could get me there in a few minutes, if you’re even close to as fast as Jon.”

“Do not think you can trick me by appealing to my competitive nature.”

“It’s not much of a competition when one sorcerer’s so much faster than the other.”

“You...” He stopped himself. “I hate that this is working for you. Fine, I will prove to you how fast I am! But only today.”

She smiled gratefully. “Thank you.”

Tarak spent the day accidentally getting to know Eden better. He hadn't wanted to, but after taking her down into the forest cavern, he had been too intrigued to leave right away, and the getting to know her part was unavoidable.

Saffy was much bigger than the last time Tarak saw the winged lizard, now coming up to the middle of Tarak's shin. The little creature was also much braver than before, staring at Tarak for all of one moment before ignoring him for the rest of the time.

The cavern was just as Tarak remembered, warm and wet, and full of small tunnels. However, the rift seemed slightly smaller, unless it was his imagination. Eden said she had not noticed a change.

The gateway to the dark realm was still as menacing as the first time Tarak saw it, maybe even more so now that he had almost died after falling into one of Monrra's rifts. It hummed and wobbled as if unstable. Tarak couldn't take his eyes off of it for a while, fearful something was about to happen, but Eden told him it was like that every day. She had gotten used to it.

Eden was much smaller than Tarak and had explored all of the tunnels she could, sending Saffy to explore the others that were too small for her. Most were short and ended soon after they began, but there were two that led to other caverns. Neither of the other two caverns was very large, and neither had a rift, but it fascinated Tarak nonetheless. How many caverns dwelled under this forest? Since rifts seemed to form in caverns, estimating the number of caverns across the land might help determine just how many rifts there could be. Hopefully there weren't any others under cities like there had been under Livea.

Soon after they arrived, Eden had Tarak take her out of the cavern with sorcery. Saffy followed all the way up with little beats of his small wings. In the forest, the creature split his time between ripping up grass and exploring. He liked to

stick his head inside bushes and wiggle his little tail with excitement. One time he came back with a fat grub in his mouth and strutted back to Eden as proud as a little dragon could appear.

Eden clapped and told him words of encouragement throughout. She would point at places and tell him to fly or investigate, or even attack, in the case of a smooth stick here and there. Saffy seemed to understand her even better than a trained dog, and Eden told Tarak this was because of esitry. She had learned that it was like psyche, a form of communication through mana, but she couldn't seem to sway emotions like a psychic might. She could only relay messages.

She surprised Tarak by telling him that Saffy had begun communicating with her as well. It was only simple things so far, like hunger, fear, or excitement, but everything she told Tarak about her little pet was spoken through a proud smile.

After a while, she told him he could come back in an hour. "I'm sure Saffy will be tired by then and need to return to his realm," she added.

Tarak, not wanting to admit that he had little idea how much time an hour actually was, figured he'd rather stay and have some questions answered.

"What does esitry feel like?"

"Like with other spells, I can tell I'm communicating with mana, but I feel more than that with esitry. I've wanted to learn how to open my own rift, but I'm having trouble."

"Are you sure you are capable?"

"Fatholl thinks so. He's the only one who knows anything about esitry, so I have to trust him."

"He seems trustworthy to me."

She looked at him as if he may be joking. "Have you not heard that he's murdered kings?"

"Yes, he mentioned that."

She tilted her head from one side to the other. "And that doesn't concern you at all?"

Saffy flew over and landed on Eden's shoulder. He showed his teeth at Tarak as if Tarak was the one causing Eden's distress.

"Hey, I thought we were friends." Tarak wagged his finger at the little lizard, but the creature bit at it. "Whoa. Eden?"

She stroked Saffy down his back and shushed him. "He senses my worry. Fatholl may have used psyche on you."

"He did not. Eden, he fought beside us against Monrra."

"Because we share a common goal. He does not want Ancients to have control of mana, but what if it's because he wants control for himself?"

Tarak gave a laugh. "You have not met Xiffrik."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I mean we do not have the privilege or the means to worry about Fatholl right now. I would focus only on Xiffrik. Fatholl will help us with him, and if the elf becomes a problem later, we will worry about him then." Tarak shrugged. "It is the king's job to find a solution to these types of things, can you see?"

"I can see that just fine, and I can also see that Fatholl may have influenced not only the king but his advisors as well. I could tell how powerful psyche must be because esitry is similar. I could have Saffy attack you right now. He would fight you until his last breath for no other reason than because of our connection through esitry."

"He is a beast, and the king is a man."

"Men are easily persuaded. I can only imagine how easy it would be with psyche."

"Do you really believe that about Nykal?"

"I do worry, which is why I want creatures from the dark realm on my side. I think my bond through esitry might be strong enough to keep psyche from altering their minds. Fatholl tried to hurt Monrra's beast but couldn't do it. That has to be because of esitry."

Saffy flew off to chase a butterfly. Tarak grimaced as the lizard quickly caught up and snapped his mouth around the insect. He landed and crunched the bug around with his sharp little teeth.

“Are we starting to miss Basael?” Tarak asked. “Is that what I hear?”

“I think we are, to my surprise. Do you?”

“I think I might, which I assure you is an even greater surprise.”

Eden sat with a dejected breath. Saffy hurried over to nestle against her.

“I miss Michael so much, Tarak. I know you don’t want to hear it, but I have kept it in for this long as a favor to you. I miss him all the time.” She looked up with sad eyes. She was a little too adorable.

“Lord and bane,” Tarak grumbled as he realized that he wasn’t going to be able to stop himself from helping her even though he knew he shouldn’t. Michael had chosen a pretty one, and Tarak was not immune to beauty. In fact, he was probably more weakened by it than most.

“Will you please talk to him for me?” Eden asked with a few bats of her long lashes. “I would never kiss anyone else or do anything to hurt him.”

“Why did you?” Tarak asked.

“It took a long time for me to figure that out.” She petted Saffy and looked at the ground. “I took him for granted, and that led to me disrespecting him and our relationship. He’d always chased me, and made it so easy, that I never stopped to realize how much I treasured him.”

God, I hope the same would not happen with Callie. Tarak was ready to chase her wherever she went. Perhaps he should ease up a bit.

Saffy whimpered, but Eden ignored him as she looked up at Tarak. It almost felt like she was begging, another weakness for Tarak.

“I will mention what you mentioned,” Tarak said. “But nothing more.”

“Thank you.” She stood up and hugged him. Saffy landed on Tarak’s head and chewed on his hair.

“Hey.” Tarak brushed him off.

“He’s tired and ready to return,” Eden said as she parted.

Saffy groaned as if agreeing, at least about the tired part.

“Does he not have a mother in the dark realm?”

“She died in front of him. It happened while we were investigating the rift. That is why he sought help and connected to me.”

“You understand all that from esitry?”

“I do. I also have gleaned that his mother was a gigantic dragon, and still she was killed. I have trouble imagining what could have ended her life.”

“Some image, that is.” Tarak turned around for Eden. She hopped on his back. “I would hate to be stuck in the dark realm for any longer than I was the last time.” He bent his knees and was about to cast but straightened out.

“What is it?” Eden asked.

“Every time something goes in and out of the rift, there is a chance of it becoming unstable, can you see?”

“Yes, but Saffy is very small, and he is an esitren.”

“A what?”

“A creature that is one with esitry. They are the only ones that can travel through a summoner’s rift. That means they must not put the same kind of strain on the gateway. There should be very little risk from him passing through a strong and natural rift like the one in the cavern.”

“First of all, I went through Monrra’s rift without it collapsing, and I am not small. Second of all, there is no reason we should be down there when he is perfectly capable of going through the rift on his own.”

“Monrra is different. She’s the only summoner Fatholl has heard of who can create rifts strong enough to support a non-esitren creature passing through. But I suppose you’re right about Saffy.”

She slid off Tarak’s back, then crouched in front of her creature.

“Go back on your own this time,” she told the little dragon.

He scampered over to the edge of the hole, then looked back with his blue lizard-shaped eyes.

“Go on,” Eden encouraged. “You are strong enough now.”

He straightened his neck, waddled a bit as if finding comfort at the edge of the hole, then jumped down. Eden gasped and ran over for a look with Tarak quickly behind her.

Saffy spread his wings and glided down in a circle. He looked up and squeaked as if proud. Eden laughed as she and Tarak watched her pet disappear into the darkness below.

Tarak waited for any kind of sound or change to mana to tell him Saffy had gone through the rift, but none came.

“He went back,” Eden said.

“I heard nothing.”

“There isn’t much disturbance when he goes through, like I was saying. I don’t think there’s much risk to it.”

Tarak turned and crouched for her to climb on his back again. “I cannot say anyone is certain about any of this, Eden. Should it not be someone’s job to confirm everything we can about mana, portals, creatures, and all of that?”

“Yeah, that’s Leon’s task.”

A silence passed.

Eden spoke again. “Yeah, I know. I’m worried, too.”

“At least Charlie is involved, is he not?”

“He is.”

That was something, at least.

Tarak took them into the air and headed toward the castle.

Eden asked, "Can you take me back tomorrow? You don't have to stay the whole time. It's such a short trip for you, and then I don't have to worry about keeping track of my horse while I'm with Saffy. Please, Tarak?"

"I was going to say yes after your first question."

"And you'll still speak with Michael today?"

"Yes, yes, but I am starting to want something in return."

"What?"

"Flowers."

"I am not buying flowers for you."

"For Michael."

"Girls don't do that for boys."

"Zarin did for Jon."

"I told you that's because he's foreign," Eden said. "It must be something analytes do no matter the gender."

"Fine, do not bring Michael flowers."

Eden did not reply. It was a short trip back to the castle at the speed Tarak could now fly. They touched down in the courtyard. She straightened her legs to swing off Tarak's back as Michael appeared confused, possibly displeased by the sight of them together.

Eden stayed back as Tarak approached. "I took her to the rift in the forest," he told Michael. "Nothing would ever happen between me and Eden. I did not think it would even need to be said."

"It doesn't."

"Your face said otherwise," Tarak commented.

"Did it? I should work on that."

Eden walked up to them. "Michael..." She spoke with the same sad eyes that had worked on Tarak.

“Keep on walking.”

She sighed and went past him.

After she went into the great hall, Tarak told Michael, “You are a lot more strong-willed than I took you for.”

“You have no idea how badly I want to forgive her, but I can’t, and then I get angry, because I want to do something that I can’t do. I don’t like to be angry, Tarak. It makes me feel all confused inside.”

“I am going to say one thing that is not much of my business, and it is only because I was weak and told her I would.”

Michael rolled his eyes. “What is it?”

“She has come to realize that she took you for granted and that she would never do it again. She did not treasure you before. She has disrespected you. She says that would change from now on.”

“Do you think she’s telling the truth?”

“Is that question everything or nothing?”

“What do you mean?” Michael asked.

“I mean does it matter to you?”

“Hell yes, it matters. If I knew for certain that she would never do anything like that again, I would...” He stopped himself, then gave what sounded like a frustrated laugh. “Yeah, I would forgive her, and we would spend all night in bed.”

“Do you not usually spend all night in bed?”

“You know what I mean.”

“No, actually. I am having trouble envisioning your nights, especially considering the news that both Reuben and Aliana have kicked you out of *their* beds at night.”

Michael chuckled. “Well, you’ve given me something to think about.”

“Have you heard what happened in Livea?”

“No. Catch me up over lunch?”

“Certainly.”

“Wonderful.”

“I would not say so,” Tarak warned. “You will soon find out.”

“Oh what *now*?” Michael complained.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tarak spent the next day mostly around the castle. He took Eden to and from the rift location in Curdith Forest, informing her that he'd told Michael the things she had said. After that, Tarak would not be involved. He tried to resist the urge to seek out Callie, but it was difficult considering how little he wanted to do anything else. The fact that they sneaked into a closet in the keep during the one time he did seek her out made it even harder to resist chasing after her again.

Jon had not returned from Rohaer with the portal-maker. People began to worry. The trip to Rohaer and back was only supposed to take one day, and apparently it was unlike Jon to encounter delays. Tarak had learned to trust that Jon could keep himself alive. Therefore, he was more concerned that there seemed to be talk about sending someone after Jon to see what might've happened, and everyone knew now that Tarak could fly.

Of the people Tarak asked, no one could describe the distance to Rohaer in terms Tarak understood. It was well over a hundred miles. How far over a hundred miles? A lot more. How many miles was it to Livea? Twenty, thirty, or even up to fifty, depending on who was asked. Eventually Tarak came across Charlie and asked him the distance, but the smart lad just told Tarak that there was dispute about the actual distance to Rohaer City, the capital of Rohaer. Rohaer itself, on the other hand, was even harder to gauge. It was a vast country reaching from the southern edge of Curdith Forest all the way to the water on the southeastern side of the continent.

Tarak knew one thing. His chances of going there, finding Jon, and making it back without problems were impossible. He told Leon his thoughts on the matter and earned nothing but a laugh.

“Why would you think we would send you?” Leon asked.

“There has been talk,” Tarak said.

“From idiots who don't know what a disaster you are. Stop gossiping and get back to training. If someone needs to

go look for Jon, I'll do it myself.”

Tarak didn't mind feeling small in front of Leon. That's what led to Tarak being overlooked for troublesome tasks like this one. Tarak's goal was to still be useful to the king but to never surpass someone like Jon's usefulness. Tarak figured he should be able to manage that just fine, or at least he thought so until the king summoned him into his council chambers. No one else was there except Nykal, the queen, and a whole lot of parchments in front of them. Tarak stood a short distance away, just past the doorway. Why was the queen here as well? Would this be about Callie?

The king said, “Tarak, I want you to go to Rohaer's capital to see what you can find out about Jon and Basen Hiller.”

Tarak scratched his head. “Me, sire?”

“Why not you?”

“Have you spoken to Leon about this?”

The king sucked in a breath, clearly insulted. “It is not Leon's decision!”

“No, I mean...Leon said...” Tarak couldn't seem to stop scratching his head. *The bastard put me in such an awkward situation. No matter. This is his fault.* Tarak went ahead and told the king, “Leon said that only idiots would send me.”

“Are you calling me an idiot?”

“No, um...Leon is.”

“It sounds like you are.”

“Incorrect, I—”

“*Incorrect?*” The king stood. “Would you rather spend the day in the dungeon, Tarak?”

“I mean no disrespect. A habit from my time.” He lowered his head. “When should I leave?”

Nykal stared for a moment as if contemplating the dungeon after all, but eventually he eased back into his chair. “The sooner the better. Follow the road south out of

Newhaven. It leads right into the capital. It has a castle and sits near a large lake. You cannot miss it. Speak to Barrett Edgar when you arrive. Present your identification papers. You still have not chosen a last name?”

“No, sire.”

“I told you to do that a while ago.”

“I have not thought of the best one.”

“Shut the door and come here.”

He glanced at the queen as if he might have some help, but all she did was gesture. “The door, Tarak.”

Tarak turned around, sighed, and shut the door. He wanted to frown, but it didn't seem appropriate. He supposed he should look at the king and queen with deference.

How does one go about doing that? He tried to look pained that he had caused a grievance.

“What are you doing?” Nykal asked.

“Showing you respect.”

“By holding in a sneeze? Relax your face.”

Tarak did, stopping at the other end of the king's oval table.

“You have an unmatched talent with sorcery. You're strong, you learn quickly, and you heal. You have proven useful, but you have always caused problems. Now, those problems are starting to bother us, especially your relationship with our daughter.”

Tarak took that as good news. Callie had probably told her parents something that implied how serious she was becoming with Tarak. He wouldn't have it any other way, but he was starting to wonder if perhaps he was wrong as he looked into the king's furious eyes.

“And you smile at this news.” Nykal shook his head. “I am beginning to wonder if you are hopeless.” He glanced at his wife. She seemed to share his sentiment as she told him

something with her eyes that didn't seem good for Tarak. Anger forced words out of Tarak's mouth.

"I smile because I am mad about Callie, but now I am not smiling because I have just realized something. You say our relationship is a problem, but what about her relationship with Trevor? I cannot imagine the two of you had any such talks with him. And why not? Because he is a nobleman and I am not? Because he dresses well and uses polite-covered non-words while I speak my mind? Trevor hurt Callie, and you let it happen. Meanwhile, I was there for her, cheering her up when she was depressed after her long outing with Trevor, and I will continue to be there for her. She will for me, also. When I was sick and *dying*, she saved my life! I returned the favor by saving not only her but three other sorcerers from the desmarl, nearly killing myself in the process, and I would do it again, as disgusting as it was. I still can taste desmarl brains when I recall falling into that beast's head! Now, I may not know what to do about Xiffrik, but I trust that you two do. I am ready to risk my life to stand up to him, if that is what you command. I trust, and you both should trust me. I will protect not only the two of you but your daughter more fiercely than anyone in this kingdom could. I swear it, and not only because of how I feel about her, but also because she is quite possibly your most valuable sorcerer. She can communicate with sorcerers across tremendous distances! The fact that she is a princess is probably the least interesting thing about her and has even become a hindrance to her and everyone who cares about her."

Tarak forced himself to stop even though he wanted to go on. He realized he was leaning on the table. He slowly took his palms off. He was a little surprised the king and queen had let him go on so long. What had just come out of his mouth? So many things. God, why could he not control himself?

Nykal turned and looked behind him. He called out, "Fatholl."

The elf came out through a door separating this room from the back chambers and stopped beside Nykal.

"He believes everything he said." As he spoke, the elf inclined his head toward Tarak.

“You had me questioned with psyche?” Tarak asked in disbelief.

“Psyche had no influence over you,” Nykal replied calmly. “It was used only to tell if you were lying.”

“This is why people are worried you are letting this psychic manipulate you. I have given you no reason to distrust me!”

Nykal said, “My ideas are my own. Fatholl was against it until I told him we wanted to question your intentions with my daughter, and he still took some convincing.”

The elf nodded. “I usually do not want to use psyche on any allies, but I agree this is a special case.”

“Did you really plan all this?” Tarak asked the king, still somewhat in disbelief. How could Nykal plan to use psyche against him when Tarak had been nothing but loyal?

Well, he supposed he had been a little spontaneous at times, and maybe he had been reckless during other times. He’d also shown that he cared for fun above all else, and then there was his strong desires for Callie.

Tarak supposed he should let this go.

“I still want to confirm one thing,” Nykal said. “You mentioned that Callie being a princess is a hindrance. Are you saying definitively that you are not interested in any political power that a marriage would grant you?”

“Do I look like someone who wants political power? I want *less* responsibility in my life, not more. Yes, I am saying that I would be happier if Callie was *not* a princess. Then I would have a normal mother and father to deal with, not the queen and king. Also, jealous ex-betrotheds would have access to weapons at most, not *armies*. I do not need this kind of stress, but for Callie I would put up with much worse.”

“All true,” Fatholl said.

The queen smiled a bit, but Nykal did not.

“You should be cautious how you use a psychic,” Tarak advised. “People are beginning to worry.”

“You have mentioned that already, and it is not your place to advise me.”

“I would like to leave now.” At seeing no disagreement, Tarak looked at Fatholl. “I trust you, but others are more worried.”

“I sense they are.”

Tarak, scowling, gave a stiff bow to the royal parents of Callie. *Royal pain in my arse.* “I will head to Rohaer, but not before I say goodbye to Callie.”

“You will leave immediately,” the king told him. “Callie will be made aware of your departure.”

“Nykal,” Esma whispered.

He softened. “Fine.”

The queen told Tarak, “She’s in her study, but do not spend long.”

He bowed again. Then he left.

After a quick tryst with Callie, Tarak headed to his room to pack a few things in a small bag he could wear on his back. Leon showed up looking even more displeased than usual.

“Hurry up.” Leon had a bag of his own over his shoulder.

Tarak finished packing and pulled the drawstring to his bag. “Are we not going to address what you told me earlier?”

“I may have misspoken. The king is not an idiot. Now pay attention.” Leon took off one of several rings he wore. He handed it to Tarak. “Tell me you remember what a calling is.”

“It signals to the other calling when flicked.”

“Good, and I have the other with me. If you encounter trouble, signal, especially if you find Jon.”

“Are we not traveling together?” Tarak asked.

“It’s unlikely we’ll stay close the whole time. I am flying to Rohaer as fast as I can. I have the tracker ring that is linked

with Jon's. If I find myself to be within ten miles of his, I will know which direction to go."

"Then why am I going at all?" Tarak asked. "I cannot expect to find him without a tracker ring."

Leon shook his head and looked down as if annoyed he had to explain this. "If Jon is really in trouble, it's unlikely he still has the tracker ring with him. Whatever, or *whoever*, happened to him has probably removed it or disenchanting it. You are going to help me look for him the old-fashioned way: With our damn two eyes. The king already explained how easy it is to get to the castle in Rohaer City?"

"He did."

"Then you will meet me there, unless you make it their first. Speak to the king regent, Barrett Edgar. He's a good man, a *very smart* man. Listen to whatever he tells you about where to look for Jon."

"And if he has no idea?"

"Then Jon is in even more trouble than we thought."

Aliana seemed to startle Leon from the doorway: "I really should be going, too."

"Shit, Aliana!"

"I can sense Jon from far away."

"How far?" Leon asked. "Miles?"

She didn't seem to want to answer.

"Even one mile?" Leon asked, hinting.

"Not quite."

"Can you even differentiate between him and any other man similar in weight?"

"Yes." She then muttered, "but only at close range."

"Then what would you do except to slow one of us down?"

"I know I can be useful."

“We don’t have time to argue. Come on, Tarak. I’m watching you go first so you don’t get distracted. Go on, now.”

“Sorry, Aliana,” Tarak said as he headed toward his window.

“Please just find him and keep him safe,” she called after them.

Tarak opened his window with Leon breathing down his neck. “Farewell,” Tarak said. “And tell the others that I—”

“Just go already!” Leon nearly pushed him from the window.

“Back up!” Tarak snapped. “You are on my arse like a dung beetle with a fresh whiff.”

“Go!” He shoved Tarak again.

Tarak climbed onto the window and jumped out as he prepared his gravity spell to catch him. He soared over Michael and Arthur having a chat, then Eden and Tienna having what looked like a more serious talk. They all stopped to look up at him.

“I shall return with Jon!” he informed them.

“Good,” Michael yelled back. “Don’t fool around!”

Yes, this was serious. Even Tarak had begun to like Jon. He hoped everyone was wrong and that Jon had not encountered trouble at all but had only delayed his return to fool around, as Tarak might.

That seemed unlikely.

As Tarak flew out of the city to the south, soaring over the wide and well-kept southern road between the mountains and the trees, he wondered how many days he would have to be missing before anyone would come looking for him. Weeks, most likely. And then when they came looking, would they come expecting to help him out of trouble or come to drag him back by his ear expecting *him* to be the cause of trouble.

Perhaps it was about time he started changing his reputation. For now, he would focus on Jon. *Where the hell you be, my friend?*

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The trip to Rohaer took hours. Tarak could not exactly search for Jon while traveling. It took too much of his focus to keep up his speed. He figured Leon would use the calling during the trip if he came within range of Jon's ring, but Leon passed Tarak after Tarak's second break. Leon landed for only a brief moment to tell Tarak that it was a lot farther to Rohaer and to pace himself. Considering he used no inappropriate words, Tarak figured Leon had really begun to worry.

Tarak passed over many trade wagons overstuffed and heavily guarded. Most of the time, he was too high up for any of them to notice him. There was nothing else quite like flying. There was a thrill to soaring at a speed faster than any animal could ever hope to reach. The wind hurt his face, especially his eyes, at first, but he seemed to become accustomed after dropping off and picking up Eden from the forest so many times. It was the same with the abundance of air causing difficulty to catch his breath. Most of these issues were resolved by relaxing, a difficulty when a slip of his mind could result in a fall that was likely to kill him if he did not catch himself.

Eventually, flying became second nature and he was able to turn his head and look over the trees of the massive Curdith Forest. He could almost laugh at the idea of catching Jon flying about, unhurt, perfectly fine and capable of returning. Tarak imagined yelling at him like a mother, "Do you know how worried we were?"

But that would be a relief to the other scenarios Tarak was beginning to imagine.

He was quite hungry when he arrived at Rohaer. The old Tarak might've stopped for a bite to eat without telling anyone, but the new Tarak was trying to change. He didn't quite like the bother of being a gentleman, but putting everything aside until Jon was rescued was the right thing to do.

The forest dwelled close to the road the entire way here, though it finally gave a wide berth to farmland as the road twisted away to follow the descending mountains. The capital of Rohaer was as easy to spot as the king had described. The southern road had led straight to it. A massive lake surrounded the southern side of the city, with rocky mountains to the northeast.

With no time to waste, Tarak flew over the city that seemed even bigger than the capital of Lycast, though the buildings left much to be desired. It seemed as if fires had swept through the city long ago, but much had been rebuilt. There were still enough blackened walls and dilapidated roofs to indicate the disaster that had struck, but people bustled about the streets and went on with their lives. In fact, there seemed to be fewer beggars than in Koluk. Tarak only saw one of them, though his trip through was quick.

There were major differences between Rohaer's castle within the surrounding city compared to Nykal's castle within Newhaven. This one was more fortified against an uprising from its own people. The base of the castle was made of brick and propped up the rest of the structure too high for anyone to reach except through the drawbridge and up some staircase deeper within.

Above that, however, the castle looked more akin to a palace. White walls and sloped roofs decorated the structure. Many windows with thick glass covered the walls. Tarak would have a tough time breaking through any of them if he was trying to force his way in. Instead, he landed on one of the corner towers, where a man seemed to be directing him.

After a short introduction, Tarak found himself quickly escorted down the spiral steps and through halls that didn't look very different from the interior of Nykal's keep. There were no decorations on any of the walls. They had most likely all been taken down at the end of the war. There were hardly any people walking around. Tarak assumed it was because the place was gigantic and Barrett Edgar didn't have a need to fill the entire castle.

Eventually Tarak's escort turned into a room with the door open. A wide window on the other side gave view to the city, and beyond it, the forest. Leon and someone Tarak assumed to be Barrett Edgar were pointing out the window and talking about Jon. They stopped as they noticed Tarak.

He gave a bow to the king regent.

"It's my pleasure to meet you, Tarak, but let's be hasty about this. Leon tells me you have skill with light?"

"I do, um, sire?"

"Barrett is fine." He had white hair, short and brushed slightly to the side. Although he looked much older than Leon, he didn't seem to have many wrinkles across his forehead or around his dark eyes. His eyebrows and beard were dark, but the lower half of his beard had turned white. He was not a large man but not thin, either, though he had an imposing look as if he had dealt with many crises just like this one. Two little lines of concentration were etched into the middle of his forehead, just above the top of his nose.

Leon had the same wrinkle as he told Tarak, "Come here."

Tarak approached the window as Leon pointed toward the forest. "Do you know which way this is?"

"West."

"Yes. I will be searching through the trees, west and north. Barrett never heard from Jon, and the portal-maker hasn't, either. He's still busy establishing a connection to the portals in Ovira, so at least we don't have to worry about him leaving here yet, but it seems Jon never made it to Rohaer. He was likely abducted somewhere between here and to the north. I know where the cities are within the forest. Maybe he's being held in one of them. If not, maybe someone has seen something that would give me some sort of clue as to where he is. You are to go to the tallest mountains nearby and look out over the forest for anything. Stay until dark. Come back to the castle then. We have something else to worry about, but hopefully we can find Jon before then."

“What else?” Tarak asked.

“Reports informed Barrett that an army seems to be gathering and hiding in the forest. This could all be a ploy to make an attempt on his life. They are far enough that they wouldn’t be here until nightfall, which is why we need to return by then.”

“Who plans to attack?” Tarak asked.

Barrett said, “I have a pretty good idea, but it’s not important right now. Just find Jon. As soon as you have food, you’re leaving.”

A woman brought in two medium sacks. Barrett thanked her and handed one to Tarak, then the other to Leon.

“Sustenance,” Barrett said. “And water. You can leave your belongings with me.”

Tarak and Leon set their bags down. Leon pushed open the window. “I’m off.” He jumped out, and wind blew Tarak’s hair back as it swept Leon up and shot him out over the city.

“Tarak, one last thing that might help you find Jon.” Barrett looked Tarak in the eyes with a raised eyebrow. “Leon tells me you have worked on illusions, but have you tried to bend light to give you extraordinary sight?”

“I have not. What do you mean?”

“Do you know how a spyglass works?”

“I have no idea.”

Barrett took one from the table nearby and handed it to Tarak. As Tarak peered through and saw a closer look at the forest beyond the city, Barrett explained, “It bends light. If you are capable of creating an illusion, you should also be able to magnify objects in the distance like a spyglass does. You should even be able to reflect light like a mirror. This skill may give you vantage points into the forest while you are up in the mountains. I suggest you work on it while you keep an eye out for Jon, but don’t let it distract you. Jon is the priority here.”

A little overwhelmed, Tarak realized that Barrett was now expecting Tarak to jump out of the window next as he waited

with an impatient look. Tarak tried handing back the spyglass, but Barrett took it and put it in Tarak's bag.

"Oh, right," Tarak muttered.

"Good luck," Barrett said. "I don't know what kind of signal you might find of Jon's whereabouts, but whatever it is might be short-lived."

"I will keep focused for any signs."

"I believe you will."

Tarak climbed up onto the windowsill and prepared his spell, then jumped. He caught himself with gravity and veered off toward the northeastern mountains.

So no one seemed to even consider the idea anymore that Jon was perfectly fine and just taking a bit of time for himself. Tarak had just about lost hope on that idea.

He flew toward the mountains. Could someone like Jon, who could fly, fight, and heal himself, really have been abducted? It was difficult to imagine, but what was the alternative?

As Tarak realized the answer to that, he almost lost concentration of his spell. He quickly landed on an even mountain ledge to compose himself, his heart slamming against his chest.

Death. They had probably killed Jon.

No, he refused to believe it. He would keep an eye out.

Still feeling that he might drop himself, he glanced out over the treetops as he took some time to consider what Barrett had said about bending light.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Jon didn't feel as though he was ready to make the trip to Rohaer. He had just finished dealing with Xiffrik, the desmarl, and his mind was filled with dejection. Last night was supposed to be the first in a long while that he had allotted time for fun, and this interruption made him feel unlike himself.

He was almost certain that Kataleya had expected him to stay the night and share a room with her. He could all but confirm this after the sad look she had shown him when he'd announced that he'd better leave to inform the king of everything that had happened with Xiffrik.

Now he was on the way to Rohaer, though his mind was still distracted. He hoped to find time soon to travel back to Livea and see Kataleya again, but that might not happen for a while.

He flew as fast as he could. It would take hours to reach the other kingdom, but the capital was fortunately close to its northern point. He hoped Basen had not grown impatient waiting for Jon to return. Normally Jon could deal with impatience, but a portal-maker could just teleport away if he wanted.

Barrett should be able to convince Basen that Jon would return soon because Jon always stuck to his word. The delay meant something must've happened. Basen should understand. He had dealt with plenty of unexpected problems throughout his life. Or perhaps Basen needed more time than he'd first assumed, and Jon was worrying for nothing.

Jon had flown so many times for such long distances that it was almost like taking a long jog. His mind went to other places rather than dwell on the spell needed to keep himself up. Hadley had remained in Kyrro after Jon left with Basen. He wondered if she had started a relationship with anyone since Jon's departure. They had realized during their long time together that they cared about each other, but it was physical

attraction that had pulled them together more than anything deeper. They were better as friends.

Hadley had beautiful dark hair, ostentatious curves, a kind face, sharp eyes, and she was far too smart to be stuck with Jon for all her life. With her looks, and her strange and interesting skill of witchcraft that had now translated to making potions, she certainly garnered a lot of attention in Ovira. She almost definitely had spent at least one night with someone else by now. Jon thought he would not be jealous, but he found that to be increasingly more difficult the more he thought about it.

Kataleya had captured Jon's heart before Hadley, but there was only one first love for Jon, and that was Lycast. He had garnered even more attention than Hadley when he'd first arrived in Ovira. The people there had heard of dvinia, only they called it pyforial energy. Apparently it was more common across the mountains to the south of the continent, in a place called Sumar. But even their most skilled pyforial mage wielded the sorcery differently. He was a man named Neeko who had good control over small amounts of it. He could even use the energy to grasp the handles of multiple swords, controlling them during combat as if held by long and incredibly fast arms and hands. Jon did not have as much precision, but while Neeko could fly, he did not have the same capability as Jon. He could not travel long distances, especially without a break, and he had trouble carrying someone during flight.

It was not called dvinia anymore, Jon had to remind himself. *Argil*.

What the people of Ovira had not heard of, however, was healing. They had many potions, and one in particular was known to cure almost any injury or sickness, but it took hours and had very severe side effects. Jon healed hundreds of people while he was there, and the people marveled at him. He would never get tired of helping people, but he no longer cared for the attention that came with it. He wished he had a little more time for himself.

At some point in the near future, Jon would need to take a portal back to Ovira with Basen. Hadley did not plan to live there, though she could have changed her mind since Jon left. More importantly, however, was that Jon saw a connection needed to be made between Lycast and Ovira. There was much to learn from each other. No one in Lycast had heard of bastial energy, and yet this was the primary source of all spell casting in Ovira.

Tarak had warned of his father and grandfather's visions of terrible war and death, but Jon had met the people of Ovira and spent a lot of time in Kyrro, a territory at the southwestern side of the continent. He refused to believe that it was these people who would be responsible for these visions coming true. They wanted to avoid war at nearly any cost, having gone through so much of it in the last thirty years. Xiffrik, on the other hand, made a whole lot more sense.

Jon's focus returned to his flight as he heard a woman's piercing scream from somewhere below him. He stopped himself by halting the Argil around his waist. He looked down but couldn't see anyone on the road or through the trees.

The scream came again, this time from behind him. He turned around in the air and noticed a woman being dragged off her horse with the animal darting off. A group of men pulled her into the woods nearby.

He touched the hilt of his sword in his sheath for reassurance as he pushed his Argil to position himself above the treetops over them. The woman continued to scream as one man yelled for her to shut up or she would be killed.

Jon had seen three of them. He still seemed to have some time, so he hovered this way and that as he tried to get a better angle, but the treetops were too dense and clustered for him to see through.

"Just kill her," one said. "She's making too much noise."

The woman seemed to scream as loud as her lungs could manage.

Jon swooped down. He opted for surprise. There were only three, after all. The woman lay supple between them. One had his blade drawn, but strangely, none seemed to be fighting her as Jon had imagined. They stood around as she seemed relatively calm.

Her hood had come off, revealing purple hair. An analyte. She said something in another language while she lifted her hand as Jon came down. He knew it to be psyche immediately. He had felt this pain before from psychics in Kyrro to show him what could be done with the sorcery.

He flopped the rest of the way down as the men made way for him to strike the grass with a thud. His pain from the woman's spell was too severe for him to feel anything from the landing besides a bit of force to his chest and head.

One of the men said something in analyse that sounded like a question. The woman, the psychic, replied as she made a concentrated effort to keep Jon immobilized in agony. He couldn't focus on anything but the feeling that every muscle was contracting in the worst pain imaginable.

He didn't realize until then that there were hands around his neck, choking him. Why weren't they killing him if that's what they wanted? He had no ability to defend himself.

They want me alive.

He tried to remember what he had learned about resisting psyche. He needed to feel something stronger than the pain, but it had caught him before he was ready. Now it was impossible to think of anything else.

His vision started to fade. He felt strangely at peace as the pain stopped. He was no longer choking, but he couldn't stop himself from falling asleep.

Jon awoke to find himself somewhere else. As he sat up and the blurriness faded from his vision, he first noticed that he was in a cage just large enough for him to stand up and move around a bit. Thick metal bars encircled him as dizziness took

a firm hold. He held his head and crouched to his knees as a groan escaped him.

He seemed to be in a cave. A sconce on the wall provided light for a few yards, but then blackness overtook it. He looked the other way to see the end of the cave just behind him. The roof was low. A dripping sound echoed around. He felt that a lot of time had passed, like he had been asleep for an entire day. He knew psychics could put others to sleep. He had even seen Hadley do this with curses before mana had reverted. Hell, she had even put Jon to sleep one time at his request, during the war when he was having difficulty relaxing. But this sleep he awoke from didn't feel natural. He was too groggy, almost sickly.

The analyte psychic emerged from the darkness. "Jon Oklar?" She had a bit of an accent.

If she could pain him, she could most likely detect lies. "Yes, what do you want?"

She looked back into the dark and said something in her language. About a dozen men emerged, a few with bows, most with swords, others with spears.

"You are a healer. You are good," she said. "We do not wish to kill you."

"Then don't?"

She chuckled along with a few others.

Jon realized his bag was taken. He didn't see it among them, but he had no doubt they had already gone through and taken his thirty silver. He was glad he had left the rest of it for the king's master of coin to hold at the castle.

"You will stay here for a while as we take care of business," the woman said.

"And then what?" Jon groused.

"Then we bring you out. We disappear, and you are eventually rescued."

"I have my own business that needs to be taken care of. Lives depend on me. *Many* of them." He did not bother

holding back his anger. “You can confirm everything I say is the truth. I have to be somewhere. It is important.”

“The only business you will be taking care of is the business you must make in that pan.” She pointed to one he had failed to notice just outside the cage, just thin enough to fit through the bars. “You are lucky we want you to remain alive, or you would already be dead. You will be fed. You will have water. You will be fine.”

She turned around and said something to her group, and they all walked off.

“Hey,” Jon tried. “Hey! I have to be somewhere!” He shook the bars of his cage.

The psychic reappeared. “If you use sorcery to move your cage or attempt to break free, we will not hesitate to kill you. Sit and relax.”

“What are you planning?”

She scoffed. “You must think me to be a fool. This is the last we will speak until it is time for you to be freed.” She turned and walked off again.

It didn't take long for Jon to realize why they had imprisoned him. If he was out there, free, he would stop them from doing whatever it was they wanted to do. That alone made it obvious enough that they were planning something heinous. The incident likely would be a massive quake that would ripple not just through Rohaer but most likely through Lycast as well. He could only think of one thing, and that was to kill the king regent. This had probably been organized by the unhappy nobles of Rohaer. Barrett had told Jon there were many of them because of how they'd been taxed severely in order to help the people who'd lost everything during the war.

Jon had to find a way out of here as soon as he had an opportunity. He thought about going now, but two men, both with bows, had returned to stand watch. He needed time, anyway, to test out how much he could move his cage. He had not been imprisoned in a very long time, and back then it was a cell under the castle and not a cage like this one. With all the

metal that made up this large cage, it was certainly a lot heavier than two people, which Jon could move easily. He figured he could still move it with himself inside, but just how much he wouldn't know until he tried.

There was no lock to be found on the cage. A chain held the door shut. Someone with mtalia must've rigged this. Could he break the chain? Probably not without a heavy rock and a lot of effort and noise. He found no rocks nearby and couldn't afford noise. He was stuck in here.

He looked at the analytes gazing back at him. They seemed to be in their forties or fifties, not a kind feature to their faces. Skill was not required to shoot Jon from this short range of five yards, where they stood.

The longer this went on, the greater the chances Jon would be rescued. He didn't know how long he had slept, quite a while it seemed. They had probably tried to keep him unconscious for as long as possible.

Jon had told King Nykal that he should return in one day, maybe two, if Basen needed even more time. That meant a search party would not begin until day three. Could these analytes know that? Could they make an attempt on Barrett's life before then?

Jon sat and thought through all of this for a long while. He eventually came to the conclusion that Barrett was safe within the castle so long as the attack did not come from the air. Even then, the windows were thick and difficult to break through without serious injury. Barrett had plenty of guards and even some sorcerers of fire within the castle. It would not be easy to slay him except with an army, and an army took time to reach any destination.

That meant time would be on Jon's side, but his abductors had probably taken him into the forest, and Curdith Forest was huge. There was no way anyone would find him. Both his tracker ring and calling had been taken and probably disenchanting.

He was not going to escape until he learned how to resist psyche. He had to put himself in a state of mind where he was

immune to pain. He almost laughed at the idea. It was no wonder just about no one could resist a strong psychic.

As he tried to figure out how anyway, these analytes did feed him and provide him with water as mentioned. The psychic woman eventually reappeared.

“I will now question you to see if you must be put to sleep or not. Do you have plans of escaping?”

Shit. Jon needed first to convince himself of the answer before speaking it.

“Do not delay!” the woman said.

“I know I cannot escape. I have no hope of standing against your psyche.”

She lowered her head as she squinted her eyes. “Say that again.”

He repeated himself, but she made him say it one more time. He repeated again, and that’s when she shook her head.

“You will sleep, for your own good. Do not attempt to escape when you awake. You will die.”

He would not get another chance to practice resisting. He thought of his father, who had perished before seeing what kind of man Jon had become. He thought of when his father had tried to get out of bed, only to collapse from sickness. It was the last time he had stood, and both he and Jon knew it would be. Jon’s heart tore to pieces all over again as he recalled the feeling of knowing he was about to lose his best friend, his only friend.

“Stop!” the psychic demanded. “Do not fight this or we will kill you now.”

Jon pushed away the memory.

The psychic stomped toward Jon. “You are going to fight, aren’t you?”

“I cannot fight you!” he yelled, tapping into his anger so that he could feel nothing else. “I have told you three times already. I just don’t want to go back to sleep.”

It seemed that he may have done a fine enough job convincing even himself of this as she looked at him sideways. A man came through between the two archers and said something to the woman.

She replied with a question.

He gave a short answer.

She started to walk past him as Jon overheard voices in the darkness. One man seemed to be yelling in common tongue.

“This is madness! All of you will lose your lives if you do not release me this instant!”

The psychic stopped and gestured back at Jon. “Have more guards come here. Kill him if he does anything. I believe he wants to fight.” She glared at Jon. “You cannot escape. Do not throw away your life.”

She walked back into the darkness. It wasn’t long after that Jon began to hear the same person screaming in agony.

A man then yelled, “Tell me who else knows!”

“No one!” the other man yelled back.

“He lies,” the psychic said.

“Let’s see how deep we can put this needle,” said another.

There was another scream.

Jon couldn’t wrap Argil all the way around his cage, and the bars were too thin for a good grip on any one of them. That meant his best chance at moving was to wrap Argil around his body, then push his hands and feet against the roof and floor to hold the cage steady. He tested it now. It was almost too heavy for him to lift, but he could manage it barely.

Both archers startled. They hurried to load arrows. Jon put all of his strength into throwing himself toward them, but the cage didn’t quite lift evenly off the ground. Its front corner caught, and the whole thing started to topple forward. He tilted his body within the cage, and the pressure with his limbs that he put on the roof and floor allowed him to steady it. As the

archers fired, he pulled his Argil off his body, hardened it with more mana, and extended it to shield him.

The bars of the cage deflected one arrow, while Jon's translucent shield absorbed the other, stopping it right in front of his eyes. Both men started yelling in analyse. Jon was vaguely aware of an even louder commotion now not far ahead, where they seemed to be torturing the other prisoner for information.

Jon hurled his cage closer to the archers. He was about to reach out and grab one of them with Argil when two more analytes came charging in, one making light. *A fire mage*, Jon realized and made another shield as the mage swirled his hand and formed a fireball. The others moved away from him as he cast.

There was an explosion against Jon's cage as light and heat disoriented him. He felt the strain against his mana as the fire threatened to disintegrate it, but it was short-lived.

Inhaling smoke, Jon waved his hand to clear it and found the four of them to be within his range. He picked the fire mage out of the lot of them, hoisting up the man with Argil around his sides. The mage tried to fight by physically prying the energy off his hips, but Jon kept a good hold. Jon thrashed him around, knocking the others down to buy himself time.

He let go to grab himself again, hurtling himself and his cage forward another few yards. Jon could see down the tunnel better from here. There was just a short distance before it turned. The analytes continued to yell for help, most likely, as they rose up. It was the one with a sword who Jon was now the most concerned about, for the man was the first one to ready his weapon and charge.

The easiest way to pick someone up with Argil was when they ran straight at Jon. He needed only to open his Argil and let them sprint into it before enclosing them in it. He picked up the swordsman at a close enough range to see the shock in his eyes behind fallen strands of purple hair.

Jon slammed him into the low roof of the cave, stunning him. He then tossed the analyte at the next one who seemed

ready to fight, one of the archers, crushing him against the floor with his own ally.

Jon assumed the old position, arms above, and dragged himself and his cage another few yards. Once more now and he'd be at the turn.

The archer and mage left standing backed and turned as if to run. Jon grabbed the archer and knocked over the mage with the archer's body. Then he slammed the archer's head into the roof to take him out of the fight as well, at least for a while.

The swordsman groaned but couldn't seem to stand up. The archer beneath him slipped out, but he tripped over the other two fallen men. Jon snatched him up and slammed his head into the roof. He would do whatever it took to escape. Maiming just happened to be easier than killing.

He scooted himself out, cage and all, crushing the leg of one archer who couldn't get out of the way fast enough. The turn was tight, and Jon soon found himself stuck.

He panicked a bit, shaking his Argil back and forth as if to free himself, but it only rattled him within the cage. He needed another method.

He looked behind him to see the fire mage, blood oozing from his head, stumbling as he yelled out. Jon launched him back with a punch of Argil, but the fire mage's scream seemed to reach the ears of the others elsewhere in the cave.

They came charging into the tight turn. With them clustered together, Jon blew them back with a wide and powerful wall of energy. He used that same energy to wrap around three bars, then pushed his cage out of the narrowest part of the turn.

"Fuck," he uttered as he witnessed the scene before him. At least a dozen men stood in front of him with various weapons. Nearby, a man with his hands and feet tied and blood streaming down from his face looked over to Jon as if for help. When he saw Jon in a cage, his hopeful expression faded fast.

Jon crouched and covered himself with Argil as arrows and fireballs exploded against his cage and his energy. He held

for a long time, unable to see anything.

He readied himself for the psychic who he knew was coming. There was too much adrenaline in his body to relive that heartbreaking moment of his father collapsing. Instead, he fixed his mind on his anger. They would kill him, then Barrett. He must not fall here.

It did nothing to stop the pain, but being ready made all the difference. Jon maintained his barrier as he screamed out his agony.

This was not going to work. They could outlast him. He widened his shield of energy so that it covered nearly the entire front panel of his cage. It continued to absorb arrows and fireballs as he wrapped the energy around the bars and in on itself.

The strain was almost too much as he dragged himself another few yards. He needed a reprieve, but he wasn't going to get it.

The men yelled something, and the psychic yelled back with equal frustration.

Suddenly, the onslaught came to an end, and so did the pain. Jon let his spell drop as he sucked in air. He noticed a couple of fire mages and the psychic seemed as exhausted as he felt, but the archers were fresh, and so were the three swordsmen trudging toward him.

He looked back to ensure no one was coming behind him, then picked up one of the swordsmen and knocked him into the other two. An archer must've come around the turn from behind and shot. The arrow went into Jon's lower side. He quickly pulled it out and put his hand over himself to heal, but another arrow went into his shoulder. He could do the same with that one, but he needed instead to block the third and fourth with Argil.

He could not cast Argil and his healing spell at the same time, so he left the arrow in his shoulder. Two of the swordsmen were already back on their feet, creeping along the

walls to give their archers room. Both of them suddenly ran at Jon as they appeared to notice him catching sight of them.

He could only stop one of them, pelting the man with his clear energy. The other drove his sword into Jon's arm as Jon tried to protect himself.

He took an arrow to his stomach, too, as he knocked that swordsman back into the wall. He needed time to heal himself, but he could see the fire mages about to start up again. The dorrin tied to a chair slammed into one of them, knocking both mages off balance as one stumbled into the other. The archers turned to check the disturbance.

Jon could not drag himself past the swordsmen at his sides because they would then be behind him. He snatched up one, slamming the man's head as hard as he could. He would not take a risk of this one getting up. Then he did the same with the other.

Both swords were too far for him to reach. He watched in horror as the dorrin was impaled by many daggers, but it gave Jon more time. He scooted himself a little more, but then he saw the psychic lift her arm. He readied himself for pain, as he still had no idea how he could possibly resist.

He screamed in equal agony and anger as he pulled himself forward again, closer now to all of them. He could see light at the end of the tunnel. It was only twenty yards or so. He could make it there in no time if there weren't a dozen analytes in front of him.

Jon grabbed the psychic with Argil. She put her hands over her head and shrieked in fear, knowing what was coming. So he threw her sideways instead, relieved to see her head crack against the wall. She fell, knocked out or hopefully dead.

Jon needed to get to the dorrin, who was quickly bleeding out, but the archers had put away their daggers and taken up their bows again. Jon made a long sheet of energy and forced it toward all of them. It absorbed many arrows, then knocked several weapons out of hands. He clawed through the air, dragging his energy back along the ground and pulling the screaming dorrin toward him.

There was one archer who still had his weapon, and a fire mage seemed ready to cast as well. *Damn it.* Jon could only protect his head with his already injured arm as he reached out his other to put his hand on the leg of the dying man.

He healed as the cage was struck with a fireball. The jolt made it impossible for Jon to realize until after the smoke cleared that he had taken another arrow, this one near his hip. He could barely move with it inside him, so he yanked it out and healed himself quickly as the bars of his cage blocked another arrow.

Flames had gotten through from the last fireball, his shirt quickly catching fire. He smothered it with Argil, then used the same cluster of energy to protect his body. The dorrin ran around Jon's cage, only to yell out.

Jon looked back to see one of the swordsmen he had maimed earlier now driving his blade through the dorrin's chest. The swordsman yanked it out and stabbed Jon in the back. Jon blasted him away, but he took yet another arrow.

The dorrin quickly died, his heart pierced. Jon wouldn't have had it in him to heal the man, anyway. Jon would bleed out if he didn't heal himself. He pulled out two arrows at once, healing right away, but he took another in the leg.

He didn't need to move that leg much. He healed his pierced back as his cage took the brunt of another fireball. His eyes stung as he turned and looked away, forming another shield.

Jon could maintain a spell of Argil indefinitely, but this one needed constant repairs to keep from being torn apart by all the arrows. One fire mage approached a little too confidently and tried to burn Jon with a stream of fire, but he pushed his shield into the mage to interrupt him, then wrapped it around the mage and tossed him at the others.

Jon took another arrow into the same leg as before, but he had bought himself time. He dragged his cage toward them all. There were much more than a dozen here now, especially including all the bodies on the floor of the cave. The men still standing backed up as the others scrambled to their feet. They

stopped at the end of the cave, about ten yards away. Many had left their quivers, taking arrows from other quivers still attached to hips. There didn't look to be a whole lot of arrows left, maybe fifty. His enemies were harder to keep track of because some were dead while others were just injured, and they were on either side of his cage now.

Jon made his shield again as he checked behind him. He muttered a curse as he noticed another swordsman getting up. Even the psychic was rising to her feet with her hand on her bloody head. He needed time to kill these bastards, but he didn't have it.

He could not control two spells of Argil at once, but he could buy himself a longer moment with a little trick so long as he had time to focus, as he did right then. Jon let his spell disperse as he made a rev behind his cage. The Argil would remain where he'd put it, floating as a shield and strong enough to block anyone trying to reach him, but not for long. The only benefit was that Jon didn't have to focus on it and could reform the shield in front of him, catching a few more arrows before sending the sheet of energy toward his attackers, disarming most of them again.

One archer kept his weapon and fired at Jon's unprotected body. It went into his upper chest, but not his heart. He quickly pulled it out and healed himself, for that was not an injury he could endure.

The swordsman behind Jon fumbled about and pushed against Jon's rev. It wouldn't last much longer. The cave was tall enough here for Jon to grab the swordsman with Argil, drag him over the top of the cage, and hold him in front of Jon as a shield. The man took two arrows in his back before his comrades stopped shooting.

Jon was covered in sweat and blood, his breathing ragged. He didn't see how he was going to survive this. The psychic stumbled toward him with her hand out.

He gritted his teeth through the pain as it coiled him onto the floor of the cage. At least an arrow flew overhead, but another went into his stomach. He couldn't feel it over the

psychic's spell, but he could tell it was there. He wanted to pull it free, but he didn't have the physical strength.

He used the last of his stamina to grab the psychic with Argil. She yelped as he picked her up. Her screaming intensified as he slammed her once against the cavern roof and then again. Her screams stopped as he let her body flop.

He took another arrow to his arm as he pulled the one from his stomach. He healed his abdomen and took a third arrow. This one would have struck him in the neck if he hadn't lifted his arm up to protect himself.

He made another shield and investigated his injuries. There had to be at least six arrows in his body, but most were in his arms. The amount of blood on his clothes was the most alarming thing. He couldn't tell if he was mostly drained from the long fight or from blood loss, but he almost didn't have the strength to go on.

He had to. He had to survive this.

He lay down and hoped the difficult angle would keep him safe as he dragged his cage forward another few yards. He couldn't quite bend his arms enough to protect his head and neck as he lay flat and controlled the energy without sight. An arrow embedded itself deep into his back. That one hurt the most.

He tried to reach up and pull it out, but he couldn't seem to bend his arm in that way. He dragged his cage a little farther, hearing the shouts from the analytes just nearby. He had to be near the exit now.

It was an effort even to look up, his body numb. He found one archer coming for him with a dagger, but Jon aimed his hand, his Argil with it, and scooped up the man. Jon was about to slam him into the roof until he realized they were now outside. All Jon could do was toss him into another archer. The rest had backed away too far.

They fired from the cover of trees. Jon could do nothing now except protect himself, but he was bleeding out. There

was actually one thing he could do, but he was certain he didn't have the strength for it.

No, he had to find the strength. He would not die here.

He groaned in effort as he pulled the cage up with Argil by two bars in front of him. The cage tilted, and Jon fell against the back bars. He pushed with all of his strength. It was as heavy as a bison, but he somehow managed to get himself into the air.

He kept going, slowly with every last bit of stamina he had. Looking straight up past the bars, past his translucent and thick ring of Argil, he could see the treetops as he felt arrows pelting the cage.

Sweat and blood streamed into his eyes. He wiped it, but his blurred vision did little other than tell him green was still above him, not blue sky. He couldn't breathe as he put everything he had into the last push, forcing back branches and breaking through the treetop.

He couldn't go on. He guided himself only with feel, throwing his cage forward toward where he hoped the bushiest part of the tree lay beneath him.

He landed hard. His cage swayed as the treetop threatened to dump him backward. He rolled toward the other side of the cage as he pushed with what little Argil he could still cast. The treetop swayed the other way. He evened himself out with a slight push behind, and soon he came to a stop.

He gasped for breath as he pulled arrows out of his arms first.

His vision narrowed. He had lost too much blood. He managed to heal his arms in one powerful spell, but it was too much for him to cast such a strenuous spell with this much blood loss. There were still more injuries to heal, more arrows sticking out of him. Dizziness overtook him, then darkness.

He awoke as he felt himself falling. Tree branches cracked around him, some slowing him for but a mere

moment. He didn't have the strength to do anything except get his head over his bloody arms and brace for impact.

He slammed down and strangely felt only a little pain, probably because everything had gone numb long before.

He tried to lift his head and nearly passed out as streaks of white shot across his blackened vision. There was no fight left in him. He could hear footsteps coming toward him, analyse muttered between the men. He wanted to give them his last words. They were scum. They had taken away not just Jon's life but the lives of all the people Jon could've saved with his healing spells throughout his many years, and for what? What could be worth this? Nothing. He would spit on them if he could. He would spit on them like a krepp spat on lowlife, dishonorable shits. He lifted his head and barely found the strength to open his eyes, but he had no saliva.

He did, however, have a defender.

Tarak came down on top of one analyte. Another shot him in the chest, but Tarak ripped the arrow out and charged the shocked archer. Another two shot Tarak in the back, but he kept on charging like an enraged bear.

He kicked the archer in the groin, then grabbed the doubled-over analyte and picked him up over his head. Tarak threw the man with the same ease as tossing a rock. The analyte struck another head to head. Both men seemed to be out as they landed.

Jon found the strength to sit up, but dizziness overcame him. He tried to focus his mind on the healing spell, but with his body completely numb and his vision pinched to a dot, he could barely keep from collapsing.

"Tarak," he tried to mumble, his voice as weak as a whisper. "Where am I injured? Where do I need to heal?"

Jon wanted to search his body, but he could barely move his arms. He wasn't sure why he was wasting his effort. He didn't even have the strength to heal himself.

Tarak didn't seem to hear him as he took another arrow to the shoulder while charging another archer. Jon could barely

tell what was happening anymore. He didn't know how many archers were left standing, but this one seemed to turn and flee toward the cave.

Jon could only hope this would end fast. His arms shook. He fell against the floor of the cage and went out.

He came to with Tarak speaking to him.

“Jon! Jon! You have to heal yourself or you will die! You barely have a pulse. Here, you are still bleeding here.”

Jon felt Tarak bend his arm to put his hand somewhere on his back.

“Heal! Heal!” Tarak ordered.

Jon's healing spell required his mana to sense the injury and repair it, but with Jon barely conscious his mana felt out of reach. He tried to tell Tarak he couldn't, but he didn't have the strength to speak.

He knew he would not wake again this time. He wanted to ask if Tarak had killed them all.

He had so many years left, so many people to help, so much to do. Damn them.

Jon slipped away.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Tarak cursed a dozen times as he failed to wake Jon. He slipped his two fingers through the bars and held them against Jon's neck. He still had a heartbeat. Tarak had lost track of the amount of times he had flicked his calling to signal help from Leon. They were probably too far from each other, especially considering where Tarak had seen Jon compared to the location Leon had begun to search.

It was almost immediately after landing on the mountains that Tarak had seen something strange. What seemed to be a cage had flown up from the forest and landed on one of the treetops. Tarak had not even begun to try to figure out how to use his mana to increase his sight, taking out his spyglass instead. A bloody man seemed to be passed out within. Tarak could not be certain that it was Jon, but he didn't know who else it might be.

He had flown as fast as he could to find that it was indeed Jon, nearly dead and with a number of analytes about to finish him off. Tarak figured he just needed to kill them or chase them away, and Jon would be able to heal himself. The fight had taken Tarak into a nearby cave, where the ground was littered with a whole lot of bodies and some incapacitated analytes barely breathing. Tarak almost couldn't believe that Jon had fought his way out of here, while in a cage, and made it this far. He had killed dozens of people.

Jon had not healed himself but passed out with one wound still bleeding. There might be more. There was too much fresh blood to tell. Jon was not like Tarak. He did not naturally heal. Leon might be able to save him, but there was so much blood. It might be too late already.

"Jon! Jon! You have to heal yourself or you will die! You barely have a pulse. Here, you are still bleeding here." Tarak bent Jon's arm to put his hand over the open wound on his back.

"Heal! Heal!" Tarak said, but Jon was out again and would surely die soon.

Tarak took off his shirt and wrapped it around Jon's body, specifically over his sliced open back. It was a meager attempt to keep at least a little more blood in his body, but Tarak didn't know what else he could do.

How the hell was Tarak supposed to get him out of this cage! Tarak tried to lift it, but it was too large and heavy to heave off the ground for more than a moment. Jon continued to lose blood.

Tarak cursed as he darted around until he found a rock as big as his large hand. He slammed it against the chain, drawing blood and possibly breaking a bone or two in his hand. He kept going until the chain snapped.

He scooped up Jon like a bride and flew up through the nearest clearing to get above the treetops. Jon was thick with heavy muscle, but Tarak managed to hold him in such a way that he could flick the calling as they traveled, though Tarak wasn't sure Leon would be in range to receive the signal.

Tarak made it back to Rohaer City and over to the castle in no time. He landed roughly on the same tower as before, the same guard hastily opening the trap door. Tarak left the guard behind as he flew down the stairs, a sphere of gravity keeping him from tumbling. He dragged himself down the halls, uprooting the rug and knocking over tables and everything else in his path.

"Barrett!" Tarak yelled as Jon grew almost too heavy to hold any longer. "I have Jon! He is in dire need of help!"

Tarak had given up flicking the calling for now. It was difficult enough to maneuver the hallways. He wasn't sure if Jon was even breathing at this point, but there was no time to stop and check.

Tarak yelled the same thing until he heard Barrett call back to him.

"Here! Here!"

Tarak saw Barrett step out into the hall and signal Tarak into a room. Tarak flew in, nearly taking the king with him. Tarak stopped but was thrown forward by an onslaught of

furniture that had been dragged behind him by his gravity spell without him realizing it. Barrett fell and was soon buried underneath small tables.

A number of terrified people Tarak had not met stood in a room with walls and a floor painted white.

“He has lost too much blood!” Tarak stepped over the mess of furniture with Jon in his arms. He put Jon on what looked like a mobile bed, then he pulled Barrett to his feet. “Is there some way to put my blood inside of him?”

A group of men and women seemed to check Jon for injuries as they wiped old blood off.

“He’s barely alive!” a woman shouted.

“Brennon, there must be a way!” Barrett yelled. “He cannot die! He cannot!”

One bald man with wrinkles under his eyes spun around. “No one has survived a transfusion. More testing needs to be done to find out why. You know this!”

A woman added, “He is going to die anyway. His pulse is too faint.”

“My blood will not kill him!” Tarak said. “Put it inside him. I do not care how!”

“You cannot know that,” Brennon said.

“I am the son of Caarda. My blood will save him!”

Brennon took the news without emotion. “Go.” He gestured at a woman standing behind. “Get the tube.”

The woman ran to a cabinet of medical tools.

Tarak was tall enough to see Jon over the crowd. He looked pale and dead already.

“Hurry!” Tarak screamed.

Brennon just about pushed Tarak into a chair nearby. “Sit. Extend your arm. Relax.”

“Do not tell me to relax!”

“You have to, for Jon’s sake!”

Tarak cursed and tried to take a few deep breaths, but it felt like a brick lay in his chest.

A woman brought over a thin and floppy tube of what might've been rubber. It seemed to have needles at the end and a few other parts to it that Tarak didn't have the time or the wherewithal to understand. She passed it off to Brennon.

"Hold still," he told Tarak, then slid the needle into the middle of Tarak's arm.

The others made way for the healer as he pushed the needle on the other end of the tube into Jon's arm in the same place. Tarak could feel his blood moving, but it seemed slow, a trickle. Could it really travel all the way through this tube and into Jon's body?

One woman put her face right up to the tube as she lifted it. "We need more flow."

"Stand up," Brennon told Tarak.

He did. Both the woman and Brennon looked closely at the tube.

"We still need more flow," the woman said.

Tarak closed his eyes and connected to his mana. It was in his blood, part of it. His mana was part of what made Tarak alive. *You can make gravity. You can create illusions. You will see my blood through this tube and into Jon's body. Guide it.*

He could feel his mana understanding and pushing his blood harder, but he lost connection to his mana, or perhaps it was his blood, as it left his body. Was it working?

"Whoa!" someone yelled near Jon.

"There's too much pressure!" said someone else as Tarak peered over and saw blood pooling around Jon's arm.

Tarak started to feel faint as he told his mana to ease up. They also seemed to make some adjustments to the tube, and soon Tarak felt a steady flow of his blood leaving his body.

Dizziness hit him hard. He closed his eyes and stabilized himself. That was better.

Brennon asked, “Are you going to pass out?”

“Me? No, never—”

Tarak awoke with a gasp. He started to sit up but lay back in what seemed to be a bed. “*Ng*, my fucking head.”

“Quiet.” Leon scowled at him from a chair nearby. “Jon’s still sleeping.”

Tarak noticed Jon in an identical bed an arm’s length away. Leon sat between them near the foot of each bed, though he seemed to have eyes only on Jon.

“He lives?” Tarak whispered.

“Yes, thanks to you.” Leon finally glanced over. “I closed his last wounds. I’m sure he’ll be fine. You look terrible. Save us all some trouble and go back to sleep.” He stood up and seemed to be putting on a cloak.

“Where are you going?” Tarak whispered.

“I have to scare an army into disbandment.”

“I can help.”

“Don’t trouble yourself. We have plenty. Rest. Seriously, Tarak. You look terrible. But good work.”

“How about a few ales when I wake up?”

“We’ll have a barrel between us.”

“And some meat?”

“You can devour the entire royal farm if you want.”

“Mmm.” Tarak rested his head and closed his eyes.

He awoke later to the sounds of Jon waking up.

“Oh god, my head. Where am I? Tarak?”

Tarak sat up and felt tired but much better. “Can you heal yourself?”

“There’s nothing that needs healing.”

There was movement from the corner of Tarak's vision. A man he recognized from the white room stood up from a chair against the far wall. "I'll fetch the king, if he is free."

Tarak gave a nod of thanks, then asked Jon, "How do you feel?"

"Not too bad besides the headache that I can't seem to get rid of."

"It will pass. I had one as well."

Jon looked around the small room that was basically just two beds, a now empty chair, and a couple of cabinets along one wall. Jon eased out of bed wearing a thin robe that stopped at his knees. Tarak joined him and realized he was wearing the same outfit, though his barely made it to his thighs.

"What happened?" Jon asked.

"I saved your life! You are lucky. I almost did not make it in time. Another few moments and—" Tarak gestured across his neck as he made a sound to go with it. "And those moments really almost happened." He stood and lowered his voice. "I was alone with Callie right before I left. We both had hands in places they do not normally go. You really are lucky, my friend. Neither of us wanted to halt but we both agreed you might be in trouble. It needed to be a short goodbye."

"You have to stop! My head...and all I can picture is what you're describing." Jon blinked as he looked around the room again. "Where am I?" He squinted at Tarak. "And why do you look so terrible."

Tarak did feel rather tired after just a short dialogue with Jon. He probably had circles under his eyes and a look of fatigue. "I gave you a whole lot of my blood, and I did not fare so well afterward."

Jon looked down at his torso and hands. "I have your blood in me?"

"You would be dead without it."

Jon groaned as if in disgust. "My mana can feel it like there's something else living in my body." He squirmed.

“Oh I am sorry! Should I have let you die, then?”

Jon put his hand on Tarak’s shoulder. He still looked quite tired, possibly sore in the head, as he squinted up at Tarak. “I’m remembering things now.” The healer let out a laugh. “You magnificent bastard. You really did save my life. Thank you, Tarak! Thank you!” He gave Tarak a tight hug.

They both tensed as certain parts touched that Tarak was certain neither of them wanted touching. Jon slowly stepped away.

“We’re not wearing anything under these robes, are we?” Jon asked cautiously.

“It seems not. You ruined all of your clothes with your tremendous amount of blood loss. Your clothes were all torn to shreds anyway, probably even your underclothes. You were diced up like meat for stew. I hope everything is whole down there.”

Jon quickly turned around to face a corner of the room. He opened his robe to check.

“Phew,” he said as he closed it up.

“Do you have big plans with that?” Tarak asked.

“Don’t we all?”

“Remember whose blood will be making it work.”

Jon went toward the cabinets. “God, get me out of this room with you.” He started opening drawers frantically. “Where are the spare clothes for us?”

Barrett entered with the same man who’d gone to fetch him. Four others followed close behind holding papers, clothes, and even trays of food.

“How are the two of you feeling?” Barrett asked.

“Fine,” they answered at the same time.

“You should probably continue to rest after you eat. We’ll have spare clothes ready in the drawers. Tarak, the pants and shirt might not fit you very well. I have a tailor with your

measurements, but it might take some time. Sit, both of you.” He gestured for their trays to be handed off.

Tarak was happy to see plenty of red meat on his plate, but with only water to drink. “Leon said there would be a barrel of ale ready when I awoke.”

“As appreciative as we all are for your efforts to save Jon, I have a responsibility to maintain the castle, and I believe a barrel of ale would put you into a state that takes that responsibility to a difficult level. You can have some ale with Leon when you are fully recovered.”

“What of the army coming through the forest?” Tarak asked.

“They have fled.”

“Army?” Jon asked with a full mouth.

“All is safe and will be explained,” Barrett assured. “First, Jon, I have a good idea as to what happened to you, but you may as well save us the time and tell me.”

Jon chewed and swallowed quickly. “My attackers were all analytes. The only woman among them was a psychic. They lured me down as I was flying because she pretended to be in distress.” He shook his head as his gaze fell. “I have to be more cautious now that psyche is showing up in Dorrinthal. I would have been fine had it been any other kind of sorcery, but I was not ready for psyche.” There was anger in his tone. “They said they wanted to keep me alive until whatever they had planned was finished. Then they would release me. I assume that was true, because the psychic put me to sleep and they could have killed me then. Goddamn psyche.”

“As difficult as it is to deal with, it is psyche that is going to lead to us capturing everyone involved. Fatholl will ensure there are no secrets left uncovered.”

“Do you have any idea who was behind the attack?” Tarak asked.

“I have a very good idea, yes. The richest families in Rohaer were taxed the heaviest after the war. Some even lost land that we deemed was improperly obtained. Many of them

were very angry. They organized this attack on my life, I have no doubt. They want one of their own to rule Rohaer. I'm certain it would be someone who would let them regain their lost power and more. One of them, certainly. It does not matter who. All men and women involved in this plot will be found out and hung for treason. I don't care how small their role."

"I am glad it does not seem to be the analytes we are aligned with," Tarak commented.

"No, they would have no reason to organize this, and the army in the forest came from our own towns."

Tarak asked, "What are you going to do with the members of the army?"

"All will be questioned with psyche. We will find out exactly what they were told, what they believe, their intentions, everything. As I hinted at earlier, psyche is the best weapon in uncovering conspiracies like this. Everyone guilty will be found, and it will be a lesson to everyone else."

"I still don't like psyche," Jon said. "There has to be a way to resist that kind of pain, or we might never have a fair fight again. Has there been any word from Basen or Xiffrik?"

"Basen has been informed of what happened to you. He should be done establishing his connection to his system of portals by tonight." Barrett paused. "I have not heard of Xiffrik."

"Oh that's right," Jon said. "I was on my way to tell you."

"There are no other messengers between the kingdoms?" Tarak asked.

"I'm almost certain that it is the same noblemen who want me dead who have been assassinating messengers between the kingdoms," Barratt replied. "Nykal and I stopped sending messengers because of them. They probably planned this attack for some time, but Jon's return gave them pause. They enlisted the help of analyte criminals who already had little to lose and gave them the task of capturing Jon. We are lucky they had at least some decency to plan for Jon's release. Are there any left alive?"

Tarak answered, “At least one fled into the forest. I chased another into a cave where I assume you had been held, Jon?”

Jon nodded.

“I gave up on him to return to Jon, meaning at least two were alive when I left, but I came across dozens of them dead in the cavern.” He looked at Jon again. “I cannot say how you killed so many while stuck in a cage, and with a psychic to deal with. I am impressed.”

“It wasn’t enough. Figuring out how to resist psyche has to be a priority, especially with Xiffrik.” Jon glanced at Barrett. “He’s an Ancient who sent a desmarl into Livea to attack us as a test. He did add that it also caused the potentially dangerous rift to collapse, but that doesn’t matter. He’s determined to find a place to change mana that will empower him as in Ovira. He’s probably traveling across Dorrinthal right now looking for the right spot where he can enlist the help of allies, like Monrra did.”

“Yeah, but he is very different from Monrra,” Tarak said. “He treats all of this like a game that he is going to win no matter what we do.”

Barrett had a long breath. “All right, let me think.” He rubbed his forehead as Tarak enjoyed his supper. “I will have to speak with Nykal. We will combine resources to stop this Ancient at all costs, but I need to first dismantle these noblemen who committed treason. That will take some time. Now that their plan is foiled, I believe messengers should be free to travel between the kingdoms. I will have you two return to Lycast with Leon and Basen tomorrow. Then I will be in contact with Nykal. I will think of what message I want you to deliver. Finish up and rest. Blood loss is not to be trifled with, even by the two of you.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tarak spent the night in the castle. All went well except for the disappointment that there was no barrel of ale for him. It helped a little that Leon was equally disappointed about that after returning from breaking up the army, but it was quite an uneventful night in the end.

Psyche would be needed to confirm everything, but it seemed that most people in this quickly formed army were under the impression that everything wrong in Rohaer was Barrett's fault, and that once he was gone, all their problems would disappear. They were not the smartest bunch of people, many of them wielding makeshift weapons that were certain to fall apart during any real skirmish, like hammers attached to sticks or a rock in a sock. A powerful display of sorcery was all it really took to shatter their confidence, especially seeing as how they were promised a dethroning without much resistance. They were supposed to take the king by surprise, after all, and this might have actually been the case had everything not fallen apart.

It was the sorcerers among them, the fire, wind, and even an ice mage who would've been the most trouble. They were employed by patrons. In other words, someone told them what to do and they obeyed. They had been taken into the castle. Psyche would start with them after Jon brought Fatholl later.

Tarak went with Jon as the healer took Barrett toward the mountains east of the city. Leon went along, but not before muttering that everything might go to shit with this portal-maker, and they all had to be wary. They did agree on one thing, though. No one was going to mention Fatholl to Basen Hiller.

The portal-maker's current location and chosen spot for a portal was a little town near the northern side of the lake, just below the mountains. Although small, it was beautiful and filled Tarak with a feeling of peace. It was hard to imagine anything atrocious had ever happened here. But he was wrong.

A plague had swept through Rohaer and even some of Lycast during the war. Half of the people here had been killed by it, hence the peaceful feeling from afar and the dispirited feeling from within.

Jon had been unable to heal most of the people who'd suffered in Rohaer because he was wanted dead by just about everyone important to the war in this territory. It was no wonder there was so much anger toward leadership among the people, as misguided as it was.

Tarak followed Jon down through the air. They landed in a clearing between trees with amber leaves that made up much of the perimeter. Here was a man who seemed to be the portal-mage, standing from his sitting position with a hint of a smile.

Basen Hiller had dark hair, witty eyes, and was surprisingly handsome. He was not particularly tall or strong, though he commanded attention in a way that seemed as though he had an idea to divulge, and he was certain people would want to hear it.

Basen approached Jon with his hand out. Jon gave it a shake.

"The king told me what happened," Basen said. "Almost dying is easy. It's the staying alive part that's hard."

"It was no picnic."

"Death is not so scary after you face it, but the anger changes you." He shook his head. "I have a very special type of rage reserved for situations like yours."

"You've had the same experience?" Jon asked.

"Oh yes." Basen gave a dry chuckle. "It's a one-of-a-kind experience." He had a clear accent, speaking with less inflection than the people of Dorrinthal in this time period, more of an even tone, like Xiffrik. "Barrett has told me he plans to use psyche to find everyone involved, and it's a very good choice. It might be surprising to hear that although a few rogue psychics are dangerous, a society where they are prevalent actually makes everyone safer. It's psyche that has

kept our leaders honest in recent years. Hey, didn't I give you some advice on how to resist?"

"I tried. All I could do was anticipate the pain and fight through it, but it caught me by surprise the first time. I'm not sure how to learn to be ready."

"You can never teach yourself to be ready for a surprise spell of pain," Basen said. "It's like trying to always be ready for a ball you didn't see coming for your gold nuggets. You won't be able to fight through the spell if the psychic who surprised you is very powerful. Your best strategy is probably to employ your own psychics you can trust."

"And do what with them?" Tarak asked.

"Are you Tarak the Deviant I've heard something about?"

"That is me." He shook Basen's hand. Usually he was thought of as the son of Caarda. Deviant didn't feel much better, but it was a step away from his family, at least, a tiny one.

"What you do with psychics and psyche in general will be up to your leaders," Basen said. "In Ovira, psyche was around long before I came to be. I have little idea what's going to happen here, but I came with Jon because I believe a connection could benefit all of us. I have discussed this with Barrett; if we could train just one healer who would reside in Ovira, thousands of lives would benefit. Already many have by Jon passing through. We could have a psychic come here to train someone you believe in. It all depends on trust and what happens next."

Basen glanced at Leon.

Barrett spoke. "I told you about Leon Purage."

"Yes, I see." Basen offered his hand, though he seemed less enthusiastic about greeting Leon than he had Tarak.

"Well, go on," Leon urged. "Let's see a portal. Then we can start talking about trust."

Basen shrugged and stepped away from everyone.

Jon said, "I thought you were against this, Leon."

“I still might be.” Leon didn’t bother to lower his voice. He probably wanted Basen to hear. “An alliance with another kingdom is one thing, but what we’ve done is allowed someone from a foreign place to have access to our home without us having the same access to theirs. We’re putting a lot of trust in you already, portal-maker, and I don’t like it.”

“You can call me headmaster, or Basen, or Mr. Hiller if you prefer.” He retrieved a bag next to some bushes. “And you have nothing to worry about. We are pacifists.” He started to reach into the bag.

“How lucky you are to have the choice not to fight,” Leon muttered.

Basen stopped. “No no. We have fought.” He spoke with finality. Basen pulled out a glowing stone attached to a bracelet. Tarak had seen enough akorell metal by now to recognize not only the extremely bright light but the feeling of energy in the air.

Basen approached their small group. “You might want to step back. The portal location is right—”

A portal suddenly opened between Tarak and Jon. It nearly sucked Tarak in, but Leon grabbed him and pulled him away before he even realized what was happening. He noticed Barrett pulling Jon away as well.

The air whipped around, bringing up dirt and clouding Tarak’s vision. Although the portal tugged at him, it was gentle enough from a few steps away to be more like that of a strong wind, but it had just about taken his arm in, the thing had been so close.

Leon yelled, “What are you doing opening one on top of us, Hiller!”

“It wasn’t me!”

The headmaster had fallen away from the portal, though his akorell metal still shined.

There was a crack, then a loud gust as Xiffrik stepped through the portal. He had a tunic of bright red, sleeveless, but underneath was a white shirt with long and loose sleeves. A

belt with a bright gold buckle caught the light as he puffed out his chest and put his hands over his hips.

He looked absolutely ridiculous.

“Thank you, headmaster,” he said with a slight bow in Basen’s direction. “Rohaer is the last place on my list to investigate, and oh look, Jon and Tarak! What a happy coincidence to see you here.” He leaned toward them a bit. “Actually, not really. I could see who was here before I made the portal.” His voice returned to that of a man playing the part of a nobleman in a poorly written play. “I could show you how to do that one day, headmaster, if you offer some assistance.”

“This is that Ancient fucker, I presume?” Leon rolled up his sleeves.

“I fuck no Ancients, I assure you. Vile beings, they are! Except for me, of course.” Xiffrik gave Leon a wink, then ran a hand through his hair. “Wait, one moment.” He used both hands to push his wavy hair this way and that. “Those damn portals. So windy, yeah?”

Basen scowled at him. “Who are you?”

“Xiffrik. I am the one responsible for mana being the way it is throughout Greenedge and Ovira. I am over a thousand years old, and I have recently awoken from a very long... hibernation?” He hummed in thought. “No, that’s not the right word. It wasn’t quite sleep. It definitely wasn’t a nap. Meditation? No...” He rubbed the groomed reddish beard on his chin as he looked down. Then he clicked his tongue. “Oh well. Who might you be?” he asked Barrett.

“Barrett Edgar. I am charged with ruling Rohaer.”

“A job you didn’t want at first, but now you have taken a liking to it. No. Wait.” Xiffrik held up a finger as he stopped himself. “It has become your responsibility. You wouldn’t trust someone else to it. Ah yes, that’s it. ‘Like’ is too strong a word. You are proud. But are you a good king? Do you mean well?” Xiffrik squinted his eyes. “Yes.” He clapped his hands once. “That’s marvelous! Good kings are rare these days, are they not, headmaster?”

Barrett appeared nervous as he took a step away from the mind-reader.

Basen ignored Xiffrik, asking the rest, “You all know this lunatic?”

Tarak decided to cut this short considering how long the last interaction went on with Xiffrik. “Yes, and he is an Ancient like he describes. He probably is responsible for your specialized mana system in Greenedge in Ovira. He is also responsible for summoning a desmarl—”

“*Hup!* Not summoning,” Xiffrik interrupted. “I lured one into a portal using psyche, but go on. This is fun.”

“He *lured* a desmarl into a populated city, which nearly killed us as we fought it dead. Then he proceeded to ramble on —”

“Ramble?” Xiffrik clicked his tongue and shook his head.

“Ramble on,” Tarak continued, “about how he was going to change mana here so that he can ascend to the heavens.”

“The heavens.” Xiffrik laughed.

“Ascend in some bullshit way at the expense of the rest of us.”

“All right.” Xiffrik put up his hands. “That was entertaining at first, but eventually it just became wrong. I am not going to ascend *to* anywhere. It is not a literal ascension like the way steam ascends into the air. I am going to become something that is greater than what I am now. I’m going to become like mana. It is not only eternal, but it is the thing that connects us to our world and our world to every realm. It is part of the fabric of our universe. Oh come on! You all look at me like I’m insane for wanting this when I can promise that each of you would want the same thing for yourselves if you could obtain it.”

Leon grumbled, “What do you expect to accomplish when you have become mana, or whatever it is you are describing.”

“I will become connected to mana in a way no one ever has before. I will become *like* mana.” Xiffrik’s emerald eyes seemed to twinkle as his voice lowered to a near whisper. “I don’t know what I’m going to become. That’s part of the fun.”

“You sound like you’re going to be the biggest pain in my ass I’ve *ever* dealt with.” Leon put himself directly in front of Xiffrik. “How about we finish this right now and save ourselves the trouble?”

“Finish what? You *dying*? There is no need for that.” Xiffrik put his hands on his hips. “Are we not having fun?”

“No, you fucking jester,” Leon said. “You look like a drunken teen who broke into a tailor’s shop and grabbed the most expensive things.”

Xiffrik looked down at himself. “Hah, that’s exactly what I did! What, you don’t like it?”

Basen stepped between everyone with his hands up. “Wait.” He was shaking his head. “Wait. Let me understand something. You are actually a thousand years old. You would attest to that in front of a psychic?”

“I sure would. Reela, Vithos, any of your psychics could question me.”

“How can you possibly know them?”

“I know everything about everyone in Ovira now, Basen Hiller. Especially in Kyrro. It has become my favorite place since I awoke.”

“If everything you say is true, then where the hell were you during the war my uncle started?”

“Hibernating.”

“The Takary War?”

“Hibernating.”

“The last war? Don’t say hibernating. Why did you not do anything? Are you not powerful?”

“I am, but I was hiber—I was in a state where I had little idea what was happening as I was waiting.”

“Waiting for what?” Basen asked.

Tarak answered, “We have been here long enough. I am tired of this man. He was waiting for mana to make him even more powerful. When he altered your mana system eons ago, he made it so the use of sorcery empowered him. Every Ancient has done it. There are others like him.”

“*Psh*, I would like to think not,” Xiffrik interrupted. “But I like when you talk. You have a certain...” He clenched his fist and made an exaggerated face of effort. “Gusto in your annoyance, as if you are on the verge of exploding in anger when really you have control over your emotions. But it’s like you don’t want to have control. Like you *want* to explode, but you know better. It’s much better than Leon over here, who’s actually about to explode at any moment, and it’s only by some miracle that he’s keeping it in. Why are you so grumpy? Hmm? Wait, let me see...” He squinted his eyes and leaned toward Leon. And then he leaned back and visibly shuddered. “*Esh*, no, I’d rather not delve into that any further than I need to.”

“You are wasting everyone’s time!” Tarak all but yelled.

“See, you want to explode.”

Tarak couldn’t hold it back any longer. “Goddammit, what do you want?”

“I have good tidings. I have decided to change mana in the kingdom of Lycast. I am ready to meet the king and discuss how all of you would like mana to remain the same and how you would like it to be changed. I will get rid of artistry and esitry, of course. Nobody needs it, and those rifts are dangerous. I look forward to learning more about how the spells of healing work. I will be sure to make them more accessible. Water and fire will remain in reach, and of course bastial energy must be available, and psyche. It will be a marvelous world of mana.” He spread his palms and swayed in something resembling a dance. “How about that?”

There was no reaction from anyone.

“No one’s changing mana,” Leon stated.

“This again?” Xiffrik let out an exaggerated sigh as he bent over and dangled his arms. He straightened out. “I am going to change mana no matter what. Wouldn’t you rather be involved than try to fight me?”

Barrett asked, “What did the elves say when you proposed this to them?”

Xiffrik shook a finger. “You are smart!”

“And the analytes as well,” Barrett assumed. “They told you they would kill you if you tried to change mana, and the elves might’ve even attacked you.”

“Very smart. How did you know that?”

“Because I know the analytes and I know the elves. You look like a dorrin, so the elves want little to do with you because of that. The analytes are protective of their land. They are more welcoming of foreigners than the elves are, but there are strict rules and customs that all must follow. The changes you propose would do more than alter their lifestyle. It would draw armies from the surrounding kingdoms, us and the elves. The analytes would much rather deal with you than us.”

“So who would you rather deal with?” Xiffrik asked.

Leon answered, “If you change mana anywhere, all of us will come for you. Go back to Ovira before you get yourself killed.”

Xiffrik seemed to lose his humor as he shook his head. “I don’t want to fight, but...” A thought seemed to stop him as he put his hand over his chin. “Actually...yes, there may be a way.” He began nodding enthusiastically. “Yes, there is, and there will be *very* little death. We will be working together after all, in time. I must be patient.” He put up a finger, his arm vibrating as he spoke. “Much to do, indeed! You all are very lucky. I have chosen Lycast. The next time you hear from me, you will accept my proposal.”

Jon said, “We won’t be doing anything but killing you if you’re going to be murdering people.”

“I never have killed, and I won’t need to. I won’t use psyche, either. Nothing good comes from the manipulation of

emotions through psyche. I want a loving relationship like I have with the people of Ovira and Greenedge. Well, *had*. It seems that everyone who knew of me is long dead by now. A real shame. I was loved by all, and now all I sense is irritation and fear *everywhere* I go. Fear? It's exhausting. I am friendly! That's one of the many things I like about all of you. The fear you have is different. The elves and analytes are both scared I will take power away from them. They want complete control over their kingdoms with no interference, even if it might be beneficial. No one knows an elf like an elf, and no one knows an analyte like an analyte. But all of you are not scared about interference. You all fear for the people, for the other sorcerers, and for the future of not just Lycast but the world. You want what's best, and you worry what I'll do later on. That's what I like about all of you. When you finally do accept me, there will be no struggle for power, no games, no politics. Trust will be earned by me, and trust will be shared by all."

He opened his palms and lifted his eyebrows.

Tarak found himself curious about what Xiffrik had planned. He still had no idea what to think about this Ancient besides that no one, including Xiffrik, should have control over mana. He seemed better than Basael in so many ways, but there was one thing about him that made him worse in the end. He was unpredictable.

Two things, Tarak realized. He is also a psychic.

Three things. He is annoying as shit.

The silence of everyone in the group told Tarak that they shared his confusion. He probably wasn't the only one wondering what might happen if they tried to kill Xiffrik right here and now.

Tarak didn't have it in him. Xiffrik had summoned, no, convinced a desmarl to infiltrate Livea. Tarak could still smell and taste the innards of the beast, but Xiffrik himself had not fought them. Was it psyche, or did Xiffrik really want to avoid death throughout this? Tarak could not bring himself to murder Xiffrik at this point.

"Where does Kyrro fit into all of this?" Basen asked.

“Kyrro is perfect as it is,” Xiffrik said. “So long as no one comes and tries to change what I have done there, peace will remain. I have no command over you or anyone there. A little appreciation would be nice, maybe some perquisites to go with it, like food and ale. I don’t *need* to eat anything, but I’m fond of pork, cheese, and sakal. A gift or two would go a long way. Entreat with the dorrin here as you wish. Exchange knowledge. Trade goods. I’d even suggest exchanging a few sorcerers. A healer would go a long way in Ovira and Greenedge, and I know a few trustworthy psychics and a portal-maker could be of great use here.” He put up his hands. “But I’m no god or even a leader. There is still so much for me to learn about mana. I would love to join all of you in your discussions, but there are things to do. So many things, and there’s time for me to learn after the dust settles and we are finally working together. I look forward to that! If there’s nothing else from any of you, I’m off to initiate my master plan.”

He waited.

“No one?”

“What are you going to do?” Jon asked.

“Ah!” Xiffrik pointed with a laugh. “That’s cheating. I can’t tell you, but I will give you a couple of hints. Did you know that the analytes have a portal location *inside* their castle? Those silly people gathered a bunch of akorell metal and performed months of experiments in the same spot.”

Tarak thought of Illia, the analyte who accidentally took a portal into Curdith Forest from the analyte castle. She had stolen his heart and taken command of his gentleman for a short but intense period of time.

It was starting to become a little easier to imagine Xiffrik killing people after teleporting into the analyte castle. There would be a battle, no matter how much he tried to pacify the situation.

Xiffrik surprised Tarak by putting his hand on Tarak’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. I’m not going there uninvited. They

already know that I know about it. That's all that's needed." He dropped his hand.

Jon asked, "And the elves?"

"Let's just say that they are predictable to a fault." Xiffrik clicked his tongue. "Why am I telling you all of this? Sometimes I just get too caught up in everything when I'm having fun. Any other questions before I go? Anything not about my master plan?"

Basen asked, "Do the elves in Dorrinthal know anything about the elves in Greenedge and Ovira?"

"Before the manastorms, there was lots of traveling and trading between the continents. I made portals and facilitated countless meetings between people. It's called common tongue for a reason, you know. Since the manastorms, however, there has been little contact between anyone across the continents, but with some of the manastorms dissipating, there *has* been a lot of contact again. I'm sure the elves and analytes have a lot of catching up to do, as you all are doing, and soon each race will find they are not that different from each other. I predict fighting, though. There's always fighting, unless I get involved. Have none of you realized yet that without me there will be war of a magnitude that has never been seen before? Actually, I cannot take all the credit. The other Ancients, as you call them, will play a big part in preventing a catastrophic intercontinental war. The problem with the other Ancients is that they are all just...completely terrible people with no redeeming qualities, *ugh*." He made a face as if tasting something disgusting. "I just fear Basael might not live to fulfill his role." Xiffrik wagged his finger like a mother scolding a child. "He's meddling in Kyrro, right now. I'm going to have to teach him a lesson. Let's hope he surprises all of us and actually learns something."

"What is my grandfather doing?" Tarak asked.

"He is with your father causing quite a ruckus. It might be wise of you to warn him to stop. Then I won't have to. You have plenty of time, though. He has his head much too far up his own ass to convince anyone to attack me, and it would take

hundreds, probably thousands to stop me in my own home, where my power is unhindered by foreign mana, like it is here.” Xiffrik suddenly sounded bored. “All right, that’s plenty. See you all in a while. Ah!” He pointed at Basen’s bracelets with akorell metal. “You still need those to make a portal? Such a bother, isn’t it? Maybe when all is done, I can help you learn how to make them without all that trouble.”

Xiffrik waved his hand. A portal opened to a place where it seemed to be dark. He looked back with a smug grin. “The time difference. Fascinating, isn’t it? While it’s early morning here, it’s still night in Kyrro, and it’s noon in Aathon. Dorrinthal really is the perfect place for what’s about to happen. It’s in between the other continents, albeit far north, but it’s the only place that has dorrin, analytes, elves, and even krepps! Now those are fun creatures, are they not? It’s a good thing they haven’t figured out how to use mana anywhere, or the rest of us would surely be in a lot of trouble. Well, goodbye for a while!”

He hopped into his portal, which collapsed in on itself as soon as Xiffrik went through.

Basen gestured at the spot where the portal had been. “He opens and stabilizes a portal without akorell, and it’s easy for him! Do you know how strong he must be?”

Leon said, “Why do you think we haven’t killed him yet?”

“So everything he’s said about altering mana is true?”

“It seems so,” Leon muttered.

“Then why doesn’t he pick some remote corner of Dorrinthal and alter mana from there?”

“He needs people to use the mana system he takes control of,” Leon answered. “Otherwise he will never become stronger. If he alters mana in some corner of the continent, we are going to find him and kill him while he’s weak. He needs support from a lot of people.”

Jon said, “Barrett, do you have any idea what he has planned?”

“I don’t. This reinforces even more that I need to speak with Nykal, but not just through messages. We have to be able to remain in communication quickly. I would like to return with all of you, but I need to be here to weed out the people who committed treason and nearly killed you, Jon.” Barrett blew out air through gritted teeth. “There are so many things we need more of: psychics, portal-makers, healers, flying messengers. It doesn’t seem like we are going to have enough time. We have to start prioritizing. Basen, we can at least have your help with psychics and portal-makers. I’m sure we could trade for their assistance.”

Basen held up his hand. “Hold on, I’m not sure I want anyone from Kyrro to be involved in what’s going to happen here. We are pacifists, like I said. I promised Jon I would set up portals in your land and try to help you all understand how they are made so you could train your own portal-maker. You have to know, however, that they are rare. I’m the only dorrin we know of who can make them, and I require an akorell stone every time, which is also rare. It’s unlikely there will be another mage who can make a portal here for a long time.”

“My grandfather made one,” Tarak remembered. “And someone in the analyte castle made one by accident. We met an analyte woman named Illia because she fell into the portal. It will be sooner than you think,” Tarak told Basen.

“Even if I’m wrong, there’s still the issue of psychics. A strong one is also very rare. The few who I know and trust are as busy as they are useful in Kyrro. Whatever is about to happen here seems like a long endeavor. I might be able to spare a psychic or two to teach someone promising here, but I would not want any of them to remain for long. It sounds like Xiffrik is about to make things dangerous, and I don’t trust all of you to protect them. I don’t want to offend, but let’s be realistic. I owe Jon gratitude for all the healing he has provided, but that gratitude does not extend to endangering the lives of my people.”

A silence passed.

Barrett turned to Jon. “Take Basen to King Nykal. Try to keep me informed as much as you can.”

Leon patted the bag he carried over one shoulder. "I have your letter about all of this, Barrett. We'll get it sorted."

"Send the psychic as soon as you can," Barrett said.

Basen asked, "You already have a strong psychic here?"

"Someone who can detect lies, yes."

Leon glared at Barrett, and the king regent responded with a look of his own that he knew not to say more.

"Then why did you all let me go on for so long about training a psychic?" Basen asked.

"Because he still leaves a lot to be desired," Leon answered.

Tarak felt somewhat badly for Basen. If he knew Fatholl was the one all of them had to trust with this very important duty of being the only psychic for both Lycast and Rohaer, Basen probably would be even less inclined to help them. They had to keep it hidden from him at least until he established a connecting portal in Lycast. At least then, if Basen returned to Kyrro and refused to do anything more, someone might be able to eventually learn how to make a portal and use the system he had put into place.

Basen gave a sigh. "We've talked long enough as it is. I'm eager to finish everything in Lycast and return to Kyrro. Certain people need to know what I just learned about Xiffrik."

"Do you plan to do something?" Barrett asked.

"I have absolutely no idea. I just met the man, but I sure as hell want to be prepared."

"It's time to go," Leon said. "Keep your head on your shoulders, Barrett."

"I plan to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Tarak flew all the way back to Newhaven with Jon and Leon. Jon took Basen on his back the whole way there. Tarak had offered to help, but Basen preferred Jon because he knew he wouldn't drop Basen, and Tarak felt just fine about that.

They did not return to the city yet but to the forest, where Illia had taken a portal into Lycast and Aliana later discovered the rift underground with Tarak's help. It was here that Basen should have little trouble connecting to the portal he'd established in Rohaer. He predicted he would only need a day. He would be fine to meet the king either afterward or if he decided he needed a break at the castle. Most people might be enthusiastic about the notion of meeting King Nykal Lennox, but Basen sounded more like he wanted to finish everything and return to his home, and meeting the king was more of a formality.

Basen's attitude was generally friendly, even after Xiffrik's surprise visit, so Tarak felt that they were taking advantage of Basen by deciding not to tell him about Fatholl's presence in the castle. Tarak felt even worse for Jon, who was now required to take Fatholl all the way back to Rohaer so the psychic could find everyone involved with Jon's capture and the attempted assassination of the king, and then Jon would fly all the way back to Lycast.

Tarak was exhausted from all the traveling. He couldn't understand how Jon could go all the way back to Rohaer with someone on his back and not voice a single complaint. Flying was exciting, invigorating, a unique and once-in-a-lifetime experience, or perhaps that was how it should be. Already it was beginning to feel like a chore.

Tarak had a late lunch in the dining hall. Michael eventually sat with him, and soon Reuben and Arthur came to sit as well. They asked about Jon. Tarak told them everything as he ate. He figured they would tell the other sorcerers.

After he finished lunch, Tarak flopped onto his bed, glad to be home.

He had been asleep for a brief time before he was awoken by someone knocking. He sat up to see he had not shut his door and it was Eden who was already inside his room as she knocked on the open door.

“Will you please take me to the rift in the forest?” She approached hesitantly.

“For Saffy?”

“Yes. You’ll be back here sleeping before you know it.”

He groaned as he slid out of bed. He extended his palm. She smiled as she passed off a calling.

He followed her out to the courtyard, where she climbed on his back. There were no other sorcerers around.

“Where is everyone?” he asked.

“I only know that Aliana is out patrolling the city and Callie is spending the day with a friend.”

“What friend?”

“Another girl from another noble family. I don’t know her. She had more friends before the war. I don’t think she’s close with any of them anymore.”

It was not hard to forget that Callie had a whole life before meeting Tarak, but his life before meeting Callie had ceased to exist. He still missed his friends in moments like these, but these moments were becoming rarer—one benefit to being exhaustingly busy, he supposed.

Tarak reached the rift location in very little time. Basen looked to be casting a spell with both hands, a vertical line down the center of his forehead. He stopped as Tarak touched down with Eden on his back.

“Eden, Basen. Basen, Eden. Bye Eden. Bye Basen.”

“Hold on. Even toddlers have more manners than you,” Eden chided Tarak as she approached Basen and offered her hand. “I’ve been coming here each day to work on my summoning skill.”

Basen shook her hand. “A summoner?”

“A burgeoning one. I can’t make my own rift, so I have to use this one to call my creature into our realm. His name is Saffy. He’s friendly.”

“What kind of creature is he?” Basen asked nervously.

“We think he’s a dragon.”

Basen tilted his head down to look through the tops of his eyes, then his eyebrows lifted. “Oh, you’re serious?”

“He is small,” Tarak assured Basen. “Devours butterflies.”

“Better than me,” Basen said. “I guess I would like to know more about this summoning skill.”

“Sure, but let me bring Saffy first. The more time he spends in our realm the better for his endurance, and time flows much slower in the other realm. Therefore he grows faster when he’s with me.”

“What do you mean time flows slower?” Basen asked.

“I mean what is one hour to the creatures in the dark realm is over twenty hours to us, according to—”

Tarak cleared his throat to interrupt her. “Someone who has been to Aathon.”

“Yes,” Eden agreed. “And I can confirm it with almost complete certainty. Saffy doesn’t change much in the dark realm, but he grows quickly here. Time must flow much slower there.”

“What a strange concept. How can that be possible?”

“There is a lot we’re learning about time,” Eden said, then glanced at Tarak. “Have you told him about your father and grandfather?”

“We have not had much opportunity. I have things to eat, beds to sleep in, so I will be brief. First, what have you heard about me? You called me Tarak the Deviant when we met.

“I heard you were the son of some immortal being named Caarda, who did something good during the recent war.” Basen replied. “That’s it. I didn’t really know what to think

about immortals until meeting Xiffrik. Is your father like him?”

“A little but also very different. My father has no interest in changing or controlling mana, but he can control time somewhat—slow it or peer into the future.”

“God’s mercy! Time control?”

Tarak nodded. “My grandfather is an Ancient like Xiffrik, only worse. My father and his siblings are therefore called Deviants, offspring of an Ancient.”

“You would attest to these things in front of psychics?”

Tarak showed his offense with lowered eyebrows. “I have no reason to lie to you. Yes, I would.”

Eden added, “These are some of the reasons we want to keep mana free and unchanged.”

Saffy flew up from the massive hole nearby. Basen startled as he jumped back.

“Saffy!” Eden cheered with a smile. “Don’t worry. He’s friendly, like I said. Meet Basen,” she told her creature.

Saffy was bigger than Tarak had last seen, now standing past the length of Eden’s knees as it landed beside her. He cautiously made his way toward Basen, sticking his blue scaly face this way and that as if sensing something strange.

“He’s curious about you,” Eden said. “You feel different than the rest of us.”

Basen leaned back, his elbows up as if expecting a nibble at his fingers.

“It’s your mana,” Eden realized. “He can sense you are from a different place.”

“You assume a lot about what he’s feeling. I’d say he’s less curious about my mana and more interested in how I taste.”

“No, he’s speaking with me through esitry. I know with certainty what he’s feeling.”

Basen muttered something as he shook his head. “This is stranger than a dream.”

“Well,” Tarak said. “I have things to eat, beds to sleep in, as I mentioned. You two can become acquainted without me.”

“Keep the calling near you,” Eden reminded him.

“I know. I will come back for you.”

“And if you are asleep?”

“Then flick harder.”

“I’m sorry,” Basen said. “A calling?”

Eden showed her finger and flicked her ring in front of Basen. Tarak presented his hand with a twitching finger.

“God’s mercy.” Basen laughed and shook his head. “That is very useful. How far does it work?”

“About ten miles,” Eden said. “I thought you’ve spent an inordinate amount of time with Jon?” she asked. Her creature flew toward some shrubbery and stuck his head within, his little tail shaking. “Shouldn’t you know about many of these things?”

“Jon and I have always been busy discussing traveling, healing, as well as the past wars of our lands. I’m sure Hadley has caught up my people with these affairs.”

“Except she knows nothing about the manipulation of time,” Eden said. “Or Tarak.”

“That is right, we have never met,” Tarak agreed. “Now I must be leaving. Goodbye!”

Basen and Eden seemed to continue chatting as Tarak flew off. He made it back to the castle in no time. A strange sight took his focus as he landed in the courtyard. Zarin was running out of the keep, *running*. Tarak almost didn’t recognize him without the limp, the cane, and even his glasses were gone.

“Tarak! It’s good to see you.” The smile splitting the analyte’s face made him seem even less like the stern advisor and more like one of Tarak’s old friends before a tavern binge.

“Greetings, Zarin. It is good to see you walking!”

Zarin shook his head as if in disbelief. “I can’t seem to get used to it. I have been trying out new ways of walking. What do you think of this one?” He sauntered toward Tarak with his chest out.

“You look like a prince,” Tarak teased.

“Is that an insult? I am a prince.”

“Oh right.” Tarak had forgotten. “Then I suppose that walk suits you...if you want everyone to believe that you think yourself better than them.”

“No, it is a celebratory walk. I want them to see I love life.”

“I understand now. What you want is something more like this.” Tarak presented a lively walk for Zarin. His gait included a bounce to his step and a slight swing to his arms as if they were not content to do nothing. “But the most important part is the smile.” Tarak grinned as if he had a secret. He got a little too into it and snapped toward Zarin with a pointed finger, then gave a wink.

Zarin laughed. “Come out with me, Tarak.”

“Out where?” Tarak stopped his walk.

“To the taverns, to drink and celebrate life. I hear you are somewhat of an expert.”

“I may be, but it is still early in the day and I am already exhausted. Have you heard what I went through in Rohaer?”

“I did. You saved Jon’s life! What better way to celebrate your accomplishments than to drink?”

“I could sleep.”

“You can sleep later. Come on, Tarak.”

Tarak wondered if he could find himself in trouble later. The king, or maybe Leon, would want Tarak to be either recovering from his trip or training. But what if they heard Zarin had really pushed him? Keeping the analyte prince happy surely was of some importance.

“Are you *demanding*, Prince?” Tarak asked with a hinting tone.

“Yes. I demand you come with me.”

“Very well.”

“Let’s fly. I want to know what it feels like.”

Tarak shrugged. “Better now than after a few ales.” He turned and crouched for Zarin to climb on his back.

“Only a few?” Zarin asked as he got on.

“I think I must be responsible these days. A lot is happening, and I may be needed.”

“You don’t sound pleased about that.”

“I am not. It is terrible. Off we go.” Tarak was about to start when he felt Zarin wasn’t quite gasping him as tightly as he should. He looked back and told him with a straight face, “Better hold on.”

Zarin gripped Tarak tighter.

He flew high over the castle wall. The prince hooted in celebration as they soared. Tarak began to descend toward an empty street.

He landed with Zarin laughing and jumping off. The analyte fell, still laughing. Tarak helped him up.

“Was that the fastest you could go?”

“Not even close, my friend.”

“Then let’s have another ride.” Zarin stepped toward Tarak’s back.

“Not without a harness.” Tarak turned around to face Zarin again. “I cannot be responsible for your death.”

“Yes, that would be a shame. All right. Let’s celebrate. Where are we off to?”

“I have not been to many places yet. You should decide.”

“Somewhere with women around nineteen years of age.”

“That is very specific. Perhaps we should start with some place that welcomes analytes.”

“That is any place, with my new gait.” He mimicked the walk Tarak had just taught him, snapping at Tarak and giving a wink.

“Marvelous, but for some that may not be enough.”

“What about this?” Zarin produced a heavy coin purse.

“Now *that* should be just fine.”

They walked around the city for a while before eventually finding a place that was surprisingly crowded given it was only just becoming evening. A bard played a happy tune and many were dancing. Others drank and ate, smiles softening the boisterous noise. Tarak didn't know where they were in the city, but it didn't matter because with a spell of gravity he could fly up and locate the castle with no trouble.

On their way here, Zarin had asked Tarak about him and Illia. There was no jealousy, more of a worry to his tone that Tarak might have fallen for her. No, Tarak had assured Zarin. It was a memorable experience, for sure, but they had parted on good terms and might never see each other again. Tarak was just fine with that because Callie had completely captured his heart, but of course he could not mention this.

Zarin admitted something that Illia had already shared with Tarak a while back. The analyte prince had never been with a girl. Considering his status, his looks, and his intelligence—the young man spoke two languages fluently—Tarak almost couldn't believe this was true when Illia had mentioned it, and Tarak still could hardly believe it was true when Zarin mentioned it.

Illia had spoken highly of Zarin except for his anger. She said the problem with his leg had prevented him from developing relations with ladies. Tarak didn't quite understand this. Tarak figured that even if he'd had a painful gait resulting in a limp, like Zarin, he'd still have at least some luck. It seemed more like it was an attitude that kept the girls away.

Well that was clearly gone now, as Zarin leaned back and finished his first ale without stopping, then wiped his mouth and grinned.

“I have never danced before,” he told Tarak. “Is it hard?”

“Hard for some, easy for others. Are you skilled with your body, like with games of tag or wrestling? Wait. Of course you have not tried them, either.”

Zarin shook his head but stopped as he caught a serving girl walking by. He put his hand out to draw her attention. “Beautiful, may I have another ale?”

She seemed bothered by his comment until she caught sight of his face. Then what seemed like a genuine smile played upon her lips. “Your common tongue is very good!”

Zarin and Tarak had been standing somewhat near the open space where dancers jumped and swung. The serving girl might have been a few years older than Zarin, but her braided blond hair and rounded chin gave her more of a youthful appearance.

“Thank you. I was trained well at the castle.”

“Which castle?”

“In Korrithin. My mother’s castle. She’s the queen.”

She laughed as she brushed her hand down between them. “You’re funny!”

“No, it’s true.” Zarin gestured at Tarak. “He’s a sorcerer of the king. I’m an advisor here. We’re out for a night of fun.”

Tarak noticed a few heads turning. It wasn’t as many as when they had first entered, when maybe ten people stared at Zarin’s hair, but this time they seemed to be looking longer.

Tarak supposed no one would harass Zarin with Tarak standing nearby, but he would still be on guard.

Perhaps it was better that Zarin seemed to be almost announcing his status. Even the most foolish men would restrain themselves from attacking the prince of Korrithin in a very public place.

“If that’s true, then cast a spell for me,” the serving girl told Tarak.

He made a tiny sphere of gravity above her head. It was just strong enough to pull her hair up.

She looked up at it, then her mouth dropped open. “Is that some of the new sorcery I’ve heard about?”

“It is.” Tarak let his spell end.

She put up a finger. “Hold on.” Then she hurried off down the only open aisle in the crowded place, to the bar, where she spoke to another young woman who was just taking up a tray of mugs. The woman set down the tray and stared at Tarak, then Zarin.

“I cannot say if this is a good idea,” Tarak muttered.

“It’s too late now.” Zarin gestured discreetly at people getting up from their tables to gather around them. At least there was no aggression on any of their faces.

Questions poured out of the patrons’ mouths. They asked whether Zarin was really the prince of the analytes, whether Tarak was a sorcerer of the king, and one man went so far as to ask whether Tarak was related to the demigods because of his height.

Now Tarak was really beginning to regret this. He should have been more adamant about staying at the castle or at least bringing others to keep Zarin safe. Tarak was about to tell Zarin that they must go when Zarin lifted his arms and announced something that answered every question.

“Yes, I am the prince of Korrithin, and yes this is a sorcerer of the king, Tarak, son of Caarda. We do not mean to interrupt anyone’s evening. Please, enjoy yourselves, and have a free drink on me. Beautiful!” he called over heads toward the same blonde serving girl. “A drink for everyone here. I’m paying.”

A cheer rose up.

Tarak spent the next hour trying to field questions from too many people to enjoy his drinks. He wanted to leave, but

Zarin had taken a shine to the serving girl, and she to him, it seemed. She was too busy to stay in his company the whole time, but she made sure to stop by for some laughs, some touching, and even a short dance here and there whenever she could.

Tarak tried to convince Zarin to leave with him multiple times. He explained that they should go somewhere less crowded where Zarin would be easy to protect, but Zarin outright refused. Tarak contemplated lifting the now drunken analyte and carrying him out against his will, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. Zarin seemed to be enjoying himself very much, and everyone appeared happy for his company, perhaps for the free drinks he offered.

Tarak supposed it was good for any analyte to break the tension between the races, whenever possible. He just wished it didn't have to be an analyte he was now responsible for.

Eventually, however, Tarak's incessant bothering seemed to break through. Zarin finished his fifth ale and went to tell the serving girl he was leaving. Tarak wasn't too surprised when, not long after Zarin started speaking to her, she took off her apron and hooked her arm around his. They made their way back to Tarak.

"You can go back to the castle," Zarin told him as they crossed by.

Tarak followed close behind as they exited the tavern. "And where might I tell the king you have gone?"

"Tell him I am out and will be back later."

"He will have my plums!" Tarak's finger began to spasm. It was little more than a bother as he barely had a thought to spare. "At least tell me your destination."

"We're going to dance," Zarin said. "Somewhere that's not her place of work."

"I don't want the others here to see how wild I can be," she told Tarak as she hung on Zarin's arm. "Hmm, where should we go for that?" the young woman seemed to be asking herself.

The analyte smiled at Tarak as if he'd won a contest.

Tarak noticed his twitching finger was not stopping. It was starting to become really annoying when he looked down and saw the callring on the same finger.

He stopped and grabbed Zarin's arm. "Arsefuck!" He showed Zarin his finger. "Eden is in trouble!"

"Go, go!"

"Return to the castle now, Zarin!"

"Yes, go!"

Tarak couldn't spare a moment longer. He pulled himself up with gravity so intense that he could hear the others falling over behind him. He looked back to ensure they were fine. Yes, they were on their knees and all right, the young woman looking up at him with wide eyes.

The city shrank around him. Wind stole his breath. Tarak went higher than he meant to before he gained his composure and changed the location of his sphere of gravity to pull him more forward than up. He crossed over the forest, the tiny treetops resembling mere bushes. The location of the rift was easy to spot because of the hole in the canopy.

Tarak's finger had stopped twitching. He could not be too late. He could not. But what else could it mean?

He weakened his spell to plummet at nearly the speed of a freefall, then he increased the power of his sphere to slow down as he passed through the hole in the canopy.

"Shit!" he yelled as he witnessed a gaping abyss where the entrance to the cavern used to be. "Eden? Basen?" He yelled as he touched down and ran to the edge.

"I'm here," said Basen as he sat up, dirt covering his clothes. "She needs help, and I'm useless."

"Where?"

"She's down there somewhere. Something's happened to the rift."

"Stay far back!"

Tarak jumped with Gravity Sphere above him. He slowed himself and observed that much of the scaffolding and nearly the entire ladder had been ripped down with the collapsed walls.

Dust filled the air, preventing him from seeing anything beneath him. Wind blew everything up past him, then sucked it all back down. This repeated as if the world were exhaling and inhaling again, its massive mouth right beneath Tarak.

He lowered himself into the thick of it, but hot air whipped him around as if he was approaching a tornado. “Eden!” he yelled, his voice barely making it over the howling wind.

“Help!” she yelled from beneath him. She sounded so far away.

His connection to mana felt loose, like a grip with greasy fingers. He tried to let himself drop faster, but the hot air pushed him back up. He braced himself as he prepared for what was coming, the inhale.

With Tarak now closer, the rift pulled him suddenly and with strength impossible to match. Tarak could see nothing but dust as he was yanked too far from his gravity spell to maintain it.

He could make out the rift then, a bright red sphere that had become gigantic. There was no roof to the cavern anymore, all sucked in, and the rift now reached where the old ceiling used to be, taller than the castle keep.

The inhale stopped. Tarak rolled to the very edge. The rift was the most fearsome beast Tarak had ever been so close to, growling like the mouth of hell. The dust began to settle. Tarak’s vision cleared. The rift rippled as it shifted from red to blue. He got up and started to run the other way.

The rift belched out hot air that threw Tarak back across the destroyed cavern. He made a small sphere of gravity above him, keeping himself up as he rode the momentum as far from the rift as he could manage. He turned his shoulder and

protected his head as best he could, inevitably striking something softer than he thought it would be.

He tried to turn around but soon came to realize he was stuck deep in a wall of dirt. He could feel the inhale of the rift trying to pull him out, freeing up enough of the dirt for him to tumble out. He practically fell on top of Eden, who looked to be cowering in a ball.

“Tarak, thank you!” she wept. “When I sent Saffy back, the rift suddenly sucked up the ground I stood upon and destroyed the ladder. Is Basen safe?”

“He is. I have to get you out of here.”

“It’s getting stronger. You’ll need to fly up at the right time. Have you seen that it blows out air before sucking it up again?”

“Yes.”

Tarak made light and aimed it all around. They seemed to be in a small tunnel of the cavern, one with a descending roof that traveled down and became a wall deeper in, too low for Tarak to sit under. It was where Eden cowered, Tarak now in front of her. He aimed light the other way, toward where he knew the rift to be. He could not see much past his outstretched arm because of all the dust, except when the rift inhaled again and sucked nearly all of it away.

He cursed as he realized two things: The rift was growing with each breath it took, and they were not far enough from it for either of them to be safe here.

The rift exhaled, spewing out dust and sliding Tarak against Eden. Then it inhaled, tugging him away from her. It grew before his eyes, then exhaled again, this time blasting him with solid clumps of dirt. It inhaled and pulled both him and Eden out of their little alcove.

“I cannot say if I can overpower it!” Tarak yelled as he and Eden scampered back into the farthest place they could reach. “But I have to try because there is no other option! Get ready!”

The rift exhaled and rolled them on top of each other. Then it stopped.

“Now, Eden!” Tarak crouched. “Onto my back.”

Eden was already jumping on.

“Hold on!”

The rift yanked them toward it with incredible power. Tarak made a spell of gravity with as much strength as he could, putting the sphere directly above his head and hoping for the best. It was all he could do with limited sight.

Something with teeth clamped down on his leg. He screamed more out of shock than anything as he lost concentration. His spell broke.

The rift exhaled, tossing away Tarak with Eden on his back—and some sort of creature stuck to his leg! The three of them slammed against a muddy wall high up. Tarak would not let go of Eden’s legs, the two of them sticking to the wall. He looked down to see the creature resembling a pink alligator with three eyes and an oily mane of blue fur down its back. It refused to release its clamp on Tarak’s leg as it dangled.

“Get off!” Tarak kicked the abomination in the face with his free foot. The creature let go and dropped. Eden seemed to be trying to wiggle deeper into the muddy wall, and Tarak soon realized what a good idea it was. They were already high above the ground. If they could just stay here, all might work out.

Moments later, the rift sucked them right out like plucking a rock from the sole of a shoe. Their speed was faster than Tarak could ever hope to reach. He couldn’t breathe. He kept hold of Eden as he made Gravity Sphere behind them to counteract the pull. They struck the ground and tumbled over each other, Tarak losing control of both Eden and his spell.

They stopped before the rift. It had become so massive that Tarak couldn’t see the top of it anymore. It seemed that all the ground had been taken away, sunlight penetrating the dust.

“Tarak,” Eden grunted as she crawled to him for protection. He picked her up and wrapped his arms around her

just before the belch of hot air came out the other way.

He tried to pull them up with Gravity Sphere, but they were tossed away too quickly for his spell to do anything. The rift threw them far. They struck the ground and tumbled over each other, scraping against a wall and eventually slamming into another. Fortunately, this one was soft and muddy.

Tarak moved the mud out of his eyes, but there was still too much dust to see anything. He felt something falling and quickly covered Eden as he made a Gravity Repel Sphere. With his head down, he could see nothing, but he could feel his mana pushing away the weight of ten horses as the earth fell around them.

He heard the murmuring of an animal nearby. Then he felt something furry pushing up against his body. Another creature of the dark realm seemed to be cowering beneath Tarak's spell just beside him. He lifted his head to see what it was and found himself facing a small creature like a rabbit, only orange, and with ears that flattened out and looked like long wings, wrapping around its body as if to protect it.

The rift yanked them right out and back toward it at a blurring speed, and Tarak lost track of where the creature had gone.

"We're going in!" Eden yelled as she clung tight around his back.

Tarak tried to stop them with another repeller of gravity, slowing them somewhat, but he couldn't seem to beat the strength of the rift. It pulled them for longer than it had before, the rift growing before their eyes. It was as if it was reaching out to swallow them.

"Tarak!" Eden yelled in terror.

The rift stole Tarak's spell of gravity, then slurped him and Eden up.

White light blinded him as something pulled too strongly for him to manage a breath. The white light seemed to stretch and bend, shifting to red, then blue as it swirled around. There was too much force behind the pull, stretching Tarak's body in

ways that even his most powerful spell of gravity could never reach. He felt himself just about to lose consciousness before the blue light filled in an entire world around him.

He was thrown into it as if tumbling off a cliff, only sideways. He slammed into the ground and rolled, and rolled, and kept rolling, somersaulting and reaching out in hopes of stopping himself with his hands and feet. He slid the rest of the way on his back, bringing up a mound of dirt and grass with him, and scooting up against it to stop in a sitting position.

Eden flipped and rolled right past him. He held his head and fought against the dizziness to reach her. She looked dead, her black hair covering her face as she lay face down.

“Eden!” he yelled as he turned her over.

She gasped and grabbed his hands as if threatened by them. She sat up, but then clutched her head and started to fall over. Tarak steadied her as his own dizziness abated.

He looked back toward the rift. The enormous sphere seemed to have dug itself a hole as it had expanded in all directions. Tarak could not see the bottom of it because of the crater around, but the top reached as high as the towering treetops of Curdith Forest. It was as red as blood but quickly shifted to blue as it pulled chunks of azure earth into it with a massive inhale, growing even bigger.

Tarak and Eden seemed to be far enough to feel only a slight tug, and there was nothing stopping them from escaping even farther, open land all around, except one thing.

“We’re in the dark realm,” Eden muttered with a shaky voice. “Tarak, esitry poisoning. I can already feel it affecting my mana.”

“I can, too,” Tarak realized as his mana told him to *get out of here now, get out, get out!* It was the same feeling of putting poison into his mouth, his body screaming to spit it out as soon as possible.

The rift rippled like a bubble about to pop.

“It’s going to collapse!” Eden darted toward it. “We have to go back!”

Tarak was already running with her, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her to a stop. “Wait.”

The rift turned red. It spewed out dust, mud, and even a couple of strange and unconscious or dead creatures as the force slid Tarak and Eden back on their feet. They leaned into it and waited, Eden falling to her knees and threatening to roll backward, but Tarak kept her down.

“Get on my back as soon as you can!”

The exhale ended. Tarak crouched down as Eden climbed on his back. He made a spell of gravity as strong as he could, but it now felt weak in comparison to what they’d been through. Still, he and Eden soared toward the rift just as it started to suck them up.

He went through the same feeling as before; white light blinded him as he lost the ability to breathe. He seemed to lose track of Eden as well, not remembering when they had disconnected. The light changed to blue, then red, swirling around and dizzying him before stretching and turning black.

Tarak rolled out into the dark and dusty hole the rift had created in their realm. He stopped himself rather quickly this time using the same method as before, and Eden stayed conscious as she rolled past him with a grunt.

Tarak wanted to get them out of there, but everything was tilting around him. He could barely feel which way was up.

He and Eden tried to help each other to their feet, but both fell a few times. Strangely, the rift did not suck them back the other way. Even more strange was that there seemed to be no walls, no ceiling around them any longer.

The dust began to settle. Tarak and Eden turned toward the rift to see it shifting from red to blue, then blue to red, back and forth, growing in size faster than Tarak had ever seen something grow.

It was about to do something, and Tarak didn’t want to stay to find out what.

Eden seemed to have the same thought as she climbed on his back. He made gravity that started to pull them out, but

there was a deafening crack from the location of the rift. He looked back to see it collapsing in on itself, red and blue mixing to become purple, then silver, then black as it condensed to the size of a closed fist.

Then it exploded in a flurry of colors. A wave of air came with it, destroying everything in its path and slamming into Tarak like a brick. Having already been above the rift, Tarak was thrown upward and out of the hole. Huge chunks of ground came with him. He tried to make a spell of gravity to keep control, but there was too much debris all around, and his spell dissipated before it could form fully.

Eden had her nails in his flesh as she held on for her life. They came down and slammed into the ground. He wasn't sure if he was even conscious anymore as he appeared to enter a nightmare in which he could not move.

The weight of the world fell on his body. He seemed to come back to reality buried in dirt with more piling on top of them. Somehow he still had Eden's hand. He made a repeller spell of gravity, the force nearly breaking his mind as it pushed them away until they became stuck in more dirt.

Eden curled up close to him as she shrieked and covered her head. He couldn't keep up the spell any longer, the weight too strong on top of it as more dirt and mud seemed to rain down on top of them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Callie returned from her visit with her friend in time for supper at the castle. She had been invited to stay longer and have dinner, but she had made an excuse to leave. Callie figured this might be the last time she would see her friend. They'd spent entire days together when Callie was younger, but now there seemed to be nothing they shared anymore.

Her friend spent most of the time inquiring about castle gossip while sharing her own news of noble affairs. She wanted to know everything about the sorcerers, especially the new one, the son of Caarda, and even more about the annulled engagement to Trevor Chespar. Her friend knew nothing about Jon's disappearance. It was the primary reason Callie had left the castle to see her friend. She had hoped for a distraction from her incessant worries about Jon, and now Tarak looking for him.

Callie had remained tight-lipped, and her friend eventually became frustrated. Callie didn't realize until now just how much time she used to spend gossiping and fantasizing with her friends. Status, marriages, and rumors took up most of her focus before the war. Now these things were nothing but petty annoyances.

Callie was happy to be back home. She hoped to hear good news. She just about rushed into the dining hall and grabbed her tray. The boys and girls sat together most of the time these days, and today was no exception. She took a spot at the end, beside Tienna, with Aliana facing Callie across the table.

"Any news?" Callie asked.

"Jon is safe," Aliana answered.

"Thank god. What happened?"

"He was lured into a trap by someone calling for help," Aliana said. "She turned out to be a psychic leading a group of mercenaries hired to capture Jon as an attempt on Barrett's life was played out."

“Oh gosh! I had imagined it might be something serious, but not that.” Callie shook her head.

Tienna was nodding. “Jon almost died, but Tarak reached him in time.”

“Oh gosh,” she repeated. “Are they both all right?”

“Yeah, they’re fine now.”

“Thank god.” Callie had a breath of relief. She was about to attempt a bite of her dinner when she realized that, no, she couldn’t move until she heard everything. She set down her fork.

“I cannot believe anyone would try to kill Jon,” she said. “Did they not know he was a healer?”

Tienna answered, “From the way Leon explained it to us, the mercenaries didn’t want to kill him, but they threatened they would if he tried to escape, which he did.”

Aliana added, “They had him in a cage, and apparently he still killed many of them during his escape from some cave in the middle of the forest. He fought off a psychic, fire mages, archers, and swordsmen, all from within a cage he could barely move with Argil. Even Leon sounded impressed.”

“Leon was here?”

“Yeah, having a quick bite before your father called him away,” Aliana said. “Jon made it out of the cave, but he was bleeding to death. He managed to get himself above the forest, still stuck in his cage. Tarak was out looking for him and saw him. He flew over and took care of the last mercenaries as Jon passed out from blood loss. Tarak broke him out of the cage and carried him to the castle, where they somehow put some of Tarak’s blood into Jon’s body. It was the only thing that saved him.”

“Oh gosh!” Callie repeated a third time. “Why couldn’t Jon heal his wounds before he lost that much blood?”

Aliana said, “We were just talking about that before you came in. Leon ran off before any of us could ask. We believe Jon was too busy fighting his way out of the cave to heal every

wound, and that's when he lost the most blood. There were still some alive when Tarak arrived, so Jon probably didn't have the time he needed to heal himself."

That sounded possible. Jon needed at least a few seconds of complete concentration to heal something like a stab wound. If he was suffering multiple wounds every moment, taking the time to heal them would only result in him suffering more wounds when he wasn't defending himself.

"Who hired these people?" Callie asked.

"Barrett is confident it was nobles in Rohaer who have been the most bothered by the coin and land they had to give up when Barrett took power," Aliana answered. "Jon took Fatholl back to Rohaer. With psyche, they should find just about everyone involved."

Callie didn't need to ask what would happen to them. They would all be killed. Treason was the most serious offense. Even acting as a minor part in a plot to kill the king would result in hanging.

She had even more questions about the event, but one question was more important than the rest. "Where is Tarak right now?"

Tienna said, "I saw him being silly in the courtyard with Zarin. Then he flew out of the castle with Zarin on his back."

"With Zarin?" Callie asked. Now that was strange. "Where have they gone?"

"No one seems to know," Tienna said. "I wish I had asked, but they took off so quickly." At seeing Callie's worry, Tienna spoke again. "It seemed to be related to leisure, though. They were having fun right before."

"I bet they just went for a drink," Aliana said. "I hear Zarin has been looking to have fun outside the castle since Jon healed his leg and vision. He probably convinced Tarak to go with him."

Callie regretted spending the day with her old friend. All she had accomplished there was to make her friend jealous that she wasn't involved in all the affairs of the king's

sorcerers, like Callie was. But now that Callie was in the thick of it, she longed for days without drama. She hoped Tarak would return soon.

Aliana gasped suddenly. “The rift!” She spoke with fear Callie had not seen before.

“What about the rift?” Callie asked.

“I don’t know.” Aliana stood up. “I just now felt something stronger than when Illia took a portal, and I think Eden’s still there!”

All the other sorcerers stood up at hearing her. Aliana yelled to them. “We have to help! Come on!”

Michael said, “I’ll get Leon. The rest of you start riding. We’ll meet you there.”

Michael did not run but flew out of the dining hall, taking down plates on the way.

Callie sprinted out and through the courtyard, but she was not fast.

She was the last one to her horse and was glad to see the others had not waited. Michael and Leon flew overhead, faster than any horse could gallop and straight as a crow flies. They would get there soon.

Callie stormed out on her black steed, the closest one ready for riding. They passed by many onlookers through the city. The people must’ve been afraid at seeing her expression, but she could do nothing to fix it.

She passed Tienna, the slowest rider of the bunch, and then caught up to the others as she rode out from the gate at the wall of the city. She yelled over the hoofbeats to Aliana, “Who has Eden’s other calling?”

“Tarak,” she said. “He dropped her at the rift before coming back and leaving with Zarin.”

Then he might be there already, but only if Eden had time to flick her ring. Callie still didn’t know what had happened to the rift, but if it had exploded or perhaps imploded, Eden might not have had a chance to signal for help.

Callie bit her lip nervously as she envisioned the worst. Everyone had seen the power the analyte portal had created when Illia was transported to Lycast accidentally. It had decimated trees and left a crater deeper than Tarak was tall. Eden might not just be dead but gone, without even a body to locate.

Callie had shared her fears of the rift with her mother and father. They had spoken about Xiffrik and believed his warnings. Her father had told Eden it would be best if she stopped visiting the rift until they could be certain she would be safe, but she had refused. She claimed to be getting close to making her own rift, but she needed more time close to the existing one. She'd said nothing short of imprisonment would stop her from visiting the rift, and Nykal would not do that.

Fatholl had shared that there were reports of rifts remaining open in Aathon for years, and it was not common for them to decimate anything nearby when they finally ceased to exist. However, the elf also recognized that this could be because of how mana was altered by Monrra. She may have stabilized artistry and esitry in a way that the two energies did not cause such a volatile reaction as they could here.

Callie and Reuben were the best riders and soon broke ahead. It didn't take very long for them to locate the destruction. Small clumps of dirt were scattered around the forest. Deeper in, upended bushes and saplings lay around.

Soon they came across halves of trees that looked as if they'd been snapped apart by an angry giant and tossed indiscriminately in various directions, some treetops here, some trunks with roots there.

Then they came to the hole the rift had created.

It was not a hole. It was not a crater. It was a chasm as big as a city and as deep as a mountain was tall. There was no sign of a rift any longer.

Leon and Michael were flying around in its bowl, screaming for Eden and Tarak. Callie's heart slammed in her chest. *Why are they calling for Tarak as well?*

She felt tears surfacing but fought them back.

She and Reuben dismounted and peered over the edge. Basen hobbled over holding his arm near his shoulder, dirt covering him from head to toe.

“Careful,” he said. “The ground may be unstable.”

They quickly backed away. “What have you seen?” Reuben asked, as Callie was still finding her voice.

“The rift pulled in the ground long before it exploded. Eden fell before she could get away with me. The rift took down the ladder, otherwise I would’ve gone down to help. Tarak came soaring in and flew down there soon after it all began. I couldn’t see what happened to either of them after. There was too much debris in the air.”

The other sorcerers arrived. Callie rushed to Aliana. “Can you feel them?”

But Aliana didn’t seem to hear her as she stared at the chasm. “Oh my god!” she yelled in horror.

“Can you feel them?” Callie screamed.

Aliana shut her eyes and held still for a moment. “No.” She showed pain as she opened her eyes again.

Reuben announced, “Maybe they’re just too far. Everyone spread out. Search!”

Callie only realized then that the ground she’d traveled over was not even but made up of wet, recently unearthed dirt. It extended at least a mile in every direction. If Tarak and Eden were alive somewhere, they would probably be buried beneath it.

She could do something better than search physically. She closed her eyes and opened her sense of mana, drifting into the other plane like falling into a slumber. She lost herself in the physical world as her mana connected her to the system of mana.

It was an ocean of red and blue energy, and she floated above. She could not just feel but see the mana of the other sorcerers as they scattered around nearby. She could even tell

that they were panicked as frazzled lines of mana outlined their bodies.

The plane of mana did not show people exactly where they were in the physical world, but in the case when people were right next to her physical body, they were almost always somewhere close in the realm of mana.

The moving sorcerers, she could find easily. It was when a living being lay still that she had trouble, even when they were nearby. Their mana tended to blend into the mana that shaped the shifting and buzzing ocean of energy.

Something off-color stood out. It was a little blob most resembling blue, though there was a silvery white to it that made it appear pale and sickly. She had seen this once before, when finally locating Tarak in this realm while he was dying from esitry poisoning.

She tried to connect her mana to it as she had to Tarak's once before, but something was different this time. She had no response. It felt like trying to speak to someone asleep. First she had to wake them up, which meant that in this case, their mana had to revert back to a state that could connect with the rest of the plane.

Callie didn't know how to do that. When she had spoken to Tarak through his mana, he had received her message and assisted her in joining their mana together. Then and only then could she connect his mana to the ocean of energy, which fixed the anomaly that caused his mana to sicken him.

Was this mana too weak to wake up? No, that wasn't it, she realized, as she investigated it closer. The mana wasn't too weak. The host was. They were buried around here, or were slowly being crushed and not getting enough air.

She fell back into the physical world with a stumble.

"I sense one of them!" Aliana yelled from across the chasm.

Callie got back on her horse and rode around as all the sorcerers followed Aliana away from the chasm.

Eventually Aliana stopped and started to dig with her hands. Leon and Michael landed nearby.

“Move, Aliana,” Leon said.

She tripped and stumbled out of the way as Leon cleared layers of dirt at a time with gusts of wind.

The long and powerful back of Tarak was uncovered. Everyone helped brush away dirt from his head, then his limbs. He was not moving.

Callie practically fell on top of him in her hurry to check his pulse, but he grumbled as he seemed to come back to consciousness.

“Thank god!”

“Eden needs help,” he muttered as he rolled over, half dead.

She was lying flat on her stomach with her head turned, her body mostly buried by dirt. Michael cursed as he and the others hurried to free her. She was limp as Michael put her over his shoulder and carried her a few feet over, to where the ground was flat enough to lay her down.

“Call for Jon!” he was yelling.

“I have been,” Leon growled. “He’s probably still on the way back from Rohaer and too far.”

“Goddammit,” Michael whimpered as he put his ear over Eden’s mouth. “At least she’s breathing.”

Callie helped Tarak get to his hands and knees. He mumbled, “We were...dark realm...sick.”

He seemed to be improving before her eyes, leaning back to sit on his heels. “I think I am going to be fine, actually. I just needed to get out of there and have some air.”

He peered over at Eden, who Michael was trying to wake up.

“Eden, can you hear me?”

Leon put his hand on Eden's head and another on her stomach. "She's battered up, but there's nothing life-threatening. I can heal her light wounds, but they aren't causing her to remain unconscious. It has to be the esitry poisoning."

Jon suddenly crashed down nearby. "Shit! What happened here?" He put his hands on Eden, accidentally pushing Leon over.

"The rift must have exploded," Leon said as he got himself out of the way. "There's nothing left to heal."

"That's right. I feel nothing. Eden?" Jon tried.

Her eyes barely opened. "Michael," she muttered.

"I'm here."

"I'm sick with esitry poisoning."

"Jon, can't you heal her?"

Jon seemed panicked as he moved his hands around her head and body. "I don't know how. My mana can't fix what's wrong with her."

"Keep trying!" Michael yelled.

"I am!"

Callie looked at Tarak again. "Are you sick as well?"

"I was, but I seem to be better. My mana must know how to be beat it after the last time. Can you help Eden heal like you helped me?"

She was already halfway toward falling into the other plane, taking Eden's hand as she closed her eyes. "I'll try again now that we're close."

She had already found Eden's mana right beside her, but it was impossible to reach Eden in any meaningful way. Her mana was too changed. It was like trying to read a book in a foreign language.

Something terrible that Jon said jolted Callie back into the physical realm. "It's like her whole body is dying all at

once. My mana can feel that, but it doesn't know how to fix it."

Callie said, "Because the problem is not with her body but with her mana. Something has changed the way her mana behaves, and that's poisoning her body."

Michael yelled, "Well somebody needs to do something!"

Eden took his hand. "I regret hurting you more than anything else I regret, and I have a lot of them."

Michael shook his head. "Save your strength, Eden. Jon just needs time."

"I do, Eden. I might be able to figure this out."

"I don't know why I didn't realize how important you are," Eden said, ignoring Michael's warning. "I've never loved anyone before, but I know now that I love you." Tears slid down her dirt-covered face. "I'm sorry."

"I forgive you, Eden, all right? Please, just save your strength."

She closed her eyes and groaned in pain.

"Jon?" Michael asked.

"I'm trying."

Callie went back into the other realm and tried again. No, she knew right away that there was nothing she could do in the short amount of time they seemed to have. But maybe someone else might.

She yelled for help, the ocean of mana rippling and transferring her message out in every direction. She might not be able to feel where an Ancient was, but she trusted one of them might be able to feel her.

She screamed and screamed, the force of her message creating waves that seemed to shake the entire ocean. She feared she might be causing even more problems as the whole plane of mana started to jitter as if it was becoming unstable.

"Stop before you mess everything up," said a familiar voice. "Where are you?"

“Curdith Forest.”

“I’m coming.”

She opened her eyes.

Jon sweated and stared down at Eden’s unconscious body like a puzzle. A crack like air snapping turned Callie around. A portal formed over the center of the chasm. It spewed out Xiffrik, who went from looking smug to screaming in terror as he realized there was nothing to catch him beneath his feet.

He fell out of sight but came back shortly after, standing on a hovering pedestal of sartious energy. Shaking his head and wagging a finger at Callie, he soared toward them all.

“You could’ve warned me, princess!”

“I’m sorry. It’s Eden. She has esitry poisoning.”

Tarak complained, “You called *him* here?”

“I didn’t know what else to do.”

Tarak took a spot beside Callie protectively as he grumbled.

Xiffrik didn’t seem concerned for his own safety as he hopped down among everyone and his sartious platform turned to dust.

“I’ve never dealt with esitry poisoning personally. This should be interesting.”

“Hurry, she’s dying,” Michael said.

“She’d better not yet because I have to figure this out.”

Jon explained, “Her mana is poisoning her body in a way that I cannot heal.”

“Yes, I realize that. Fortunately, a good psychic is able to manipulate a person’s natural mana. That is how we make them feel things.” He put his hand over Eden’s forehead and closed his eyes. “In this case, her natural mana is at war with an energy that is unnatural to her body. It’s why we feel sick when our bodies are fighting an illness, but in this case the

unnatural energy seems to be altering her mana so drastically that she's not going to survive.”

“Will you shut up and fix it!” Michael yelled.

“I already have. It was easy.” Xiffrik stood up.

Eden's eyes popped open.

Michael took her hand and crouched beside her. “How do you feel?”

“Much better. Who's that?”

“I'm Xiffrik, the Ancient who saved your life.” He bent down and dusted off his legs.

Leon spoke. “We're not going to let you alter mana for saving her life.”

Xiffrik turned and shrugged. “That's fine. You're going to work with me in the end anyway.” He fluttered a hand. “How about a celebratory feast instead?”

Tarak said, “I actually like that idea.”

Leon pointed at the Ancient. “You're not going anywhere near the castle.”

“I had a feeling you'd say that. Aren't you tired of being so predictable all the time?”

As soon as Xiffrik finished speaking, he seemed to begin listing things with his fingers. “An insult...” he muttered as Leon spoke.

“You're an arrogant idiot—” Leon stopped as he realized Xiffrik had predicted this.

“Anger,” Xiffrik muttered as Leon spoke again.

“Don't think you fucking know me—!” Leon stopped as he seemed to hear what Xiffrik had muttered.

“You'll tell me to leave,” Xiffrik said as Leon started up again.

“Just get out of here, you—! Fucking hell! Get out!”

Xiffrik shrugged, unamused. “Fine.” He turned and started toward the chasm. “I keep telling all of you this could be fun and easy for everyone, but none of you are listening to me.” He turned around. “In time you’re going to have to work with me. You won’t have a choice. I hope then you remember that I saved her life and I can save all of yours.”

Leon said, “It doesn’t count if you’re saving our lives from you!”

“Oh, the danger is not going to come from me.” Xiffrik wiggled his finger and spoke in a high-pitched voice. “You’ll seeee!” A sartious platform condensed in front of him. It took him to the center of the chasm. He made a portal and jumped inside, the platform falling and remaining intact out of Callie’s view. She heard it shatter deep below.

Michael helped Eden out of the soft mound of dirt. “Are you sure you’re all right?” he asked her.

“Better than all right. Now that I know what esitry feels like, I’m certain I can connect to it and the other realm.” She pulled her hands inward and grunted. A blue sphere formed in front of her. It lasted only a breath. Eden panted as she fell to a knee. Michael put his hands on her as if to help her up, but then she started laughing.

She looked up with a tired expression, dirt caked into every pore.

“Did you see that?” Her head swung around as if to make sure everyone had been watching.

“Airinold’s taint,” Leon muttered with a grin. “We got ourselves a summoner.”

Aliana pulled Eden up to her feet and gave her a hug. “I don’t care. That was not worth it. You scared us to death. Look how sweaty Jon is!”

Jon looked down at his shirt almost completely soaked. “Hey, half of this sweat came from my flight back from Rohaer.”

Callie hadn’t noticed when Basen Hiller had joined them, but now she saw him hobbling over and holding what, upon

closer look, appeared to be a dislocated shoulder. “Sorry to interrupt you all but, Jon, think I could have your help here? I’m actually in terrible agony.” Basen’s calm tone elicited a few chuckles.

Jon stopped in front of the headmaster. “You’re not going to like this.”

“What?”

“The process of healing a dislocated joint involves pushing it back into place, and that’s easier done with my hands before my mana gets to work.”

Basen muttered a curse.

Tarak asked him, “Why did you not move farther away from the rift? I told you to.”

“I did move back. *Way* back!” Basen gestured with his uninjured arm. “But look at this gigantic chasm! I thought I was safe a half mile away, but even then I was still thrown off like a doll.”

“That fucking Xiffrik was right,” Leon growled. “These rifts must be taken care of before this happens anywhere populated.”

“He already took care of the one in Livea,” Callie reminded Leon. “But there could be others in places we haven’t discovered.”

Basen grunted as Jon put his shoulder back into place. Jon then healed him, squeezing out another quick grunt, but soon he was done.

Basen was breathing harder than Jon as he straightened his back and rubbed his shoulder. “Thanks,” he said. The headmaster glanced out over the chasm, then let out a frustrated breath. “I had just about connected everything.” He pointed across the chasm. “But I can’t have a portal that drops me to my death. I’m going to have to establish a new one somewhere else and then break this one.”

Leon asked, “How long is that going to take?”

“Possibly another day.” Basen let out another sigh.

“You’d best come back to the castle with us,” Leon said.
“Take a break.”

“There is still daylight left. I’d rather be here as long as I can handle it. Will you bring me something to eat and drink?”

“I’ll have Michael bring something for you.”

Michael said, “I want to make sure Eden is all right.”

“I’m fine,” Eden said as she touched his arm.

Michael shushed her. “You’re not supposed to say that.”

She laughed as he smiled at her.

Callie couldn’t help but notice Tienna forcing a smile that did nothing to hide her sadness.

“Michael,” Leon chided.

“I’ll get the portal-maker all the food and drink I can carry.”

“Thank you,” Basen said.

“Let’s find a better spot for a portal,” Leon offered as he gestured for Basen to follow him. “Michael, come along so you know where to bring Hiller’s meal. We’re going to create a marker, maybe a large rock.”

Michael followed after them. “Tell me again why you can’t bring his food later?”

“Because I am busy.”

“So am I.”

“I’m more important,” Leon added.

Michael groused something Callie didn’t catch.

Tarak leaned toward Callie and whispered, “Your bedroom tonight?”

She shushed him but couldn’t keep her mouth flat.

Tarak leaned back. “Better stop smiling,” he whispered.
“Even the birds can see it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The next morning, Tarak awoke late after spending the beginning of the night in Callie's room before sneaking out. He smiled as he remembered the feeling of her lips against and around more places than one.

Going in and out through her window was not easy, but it did seem safe. He had figured out a weak gravity spell did not break the glass as he had feared, and it did a decent enough job getting him inside without too much effort, though it would take more practice before it became easy.

Sneaking in and out was not fun. He longed for enough time to have passed so there would be no need to hide their relationship. Or if Tarak learned how to make himself invisible. He hadn't had much time recently to practice that, or really anything, but he had been thinking about it. Glass seemed to be key, because it was solid like Tarak was, and yet light passed through it. If his mana could figure out how glass worked, perhaps it was all he needed to turn himself invisible.

Or he was wrong, and that was a way of thinking that would do nothing but waste effort. What he really needed was help from someone smarter than he was.

He was late to breakfast and saw that every sorcerer was already out in the courtyard, except Callie. She was probably eating in her room to avoid both of them showing up late, which could be suspicious. He took his oats from the dining hall and brought them outside to see what everyone was gathered around.

Eden looked to be in the midst of opening a small rift. She groaned and strained, her hands shaking.

"Come on, it's okay," she seemed to be saying to her pet in a sweet voice. "You'll be safe."

Saffy suddenly popped through. There was a little cheer and some applause among the other sorcerers. Michael whistled with two fingers in his mouth, which seemed to startle Saffy.

“Now you’re a real summon—!” Michael interrupted himself with a scream as Saffy bit down on his shin.

“Saffy, no!” Eden chided.

Her pet let go of Michael’s leg.

Michael took a few steps away and hissed as he rolled up his pants. Blood trickled down from bite marks. “You little bastard!” Michael started toward Saffy, but the blue creature flew up at Michael’s face and snapped at his nose. Michael screamed...a lot like the way a frightened girl might scream, and fell away to avoid it.

Laughter bubbled up as Eden called her pet to her shoulder and stroked him down his back.

“You scared him when you whistled,” she said with a grin.

“I thought you could control him.”

“To an extent.” She offered her hand as Michael sat on the ground.

He looked at Saffy, then at Eden.

“He won’t hurt you,” she assured.

Michael cleared his throat in annoyance as he gestured at his bloody shin.

“Again,” she specified.

He let Eden help him up.

Aliana asked, “What does it feel like to open a rift?”

“Like I’m pulling something very heavy, then holding it awkwardly. It’s uncomfortable, but it has gotten a little easier. I imagine it will continue to do so.”

“Have you connected with any other beasts?” Aliana asked.

“I hope not,” Michael commented.

Eden ignored him. “No, not yet, but I plan to.”

Arthur said, "I'd assume the bigger beasts are even harder to control because they'll be less dependent on your leadership. I don't think even Monrra had complete control of the creature she unleashed in Curdith Forest."

Callie had come out from the keep while Arthur was speaking. She put her hand briefly on Tarak's back before anyone seemed to notice her. Then she dropped her hand and stood nearby.

"I think it was Basael who told us that summoners have caused nothing but problems in Aathon," Callie said. "Eden, I do hope you won't bring any beasts here that you cannot completely control."

"Yes, Eden," Michael echoed as he looked down again at his bloodied leg. "I very much agree with that sentiment. Where is Jon, by the way?"

Callie said, "He took my father to Rohaer early this morning. They should still be on the way there."

"Lord and bane," Tarak commented. "Jon has done nothing but fly people back and forth since we have returned. No wonder he is always in a mood. I would be, too, if I did nothing but carry people on my back and heal. Does he not need a break?"

"I'm sure he wants one," Callie said.

"Oy, why isn't Tarak the one taking your father to Rohaer?" Aliana asked. "You can fly safely now, can't you?"

"I am certain Nykal prefers Jon," Tarak said. "When one man carries another on his back, there is an uncomfortable squishing of certain parts. Hours of that? No, Nykal and I are not ready for that yet."

There were a few chuckles, but they didn't know the real reason Nykal would always prefer Jon. Jon was not involved with Callie against Nykal's wishes. That alone would make the trip too awkward.

"Well, I'd even settle for Leon," Michael said while he continued to eye Saffy. The little creature fluttered about happily. "Speaking of..." He saw Leon emerge from the keep

wearing the same scowl as always, though Leon did lift an eyebrow at the sight of Saffy.

“You got him through?” he asked Eden rhetorically. “I hope you can put him back, too.”

“I can, but he can stay with us for hours now before he starts to fatigue.”

“I wouldn’t say any of that is worth you almost dying, and we still need a goddamn artistry mage. Tienna, it’s been a while since I asked because of all the Rohaer bullshit. Have anything to report?”

“No,” she said with a downward look.

“Leon, can you heal my leg?” Michael asked.

Leon barely glanced at it before he put his hand nearby and closed Michael’s wound.

Arthur asked, “Why is it Tienna’s responsibility to learn artistry?”

Charlie answered, “Because Leon and I are almost certain it’s in her tree. She is supposed to be experimenting with each note. Are you, Tienna?”

“I am,” she said, “but I’m not very good at it, as you know.” She spoke softly as if uncomfortable.

“We’re going to need an artistry mage before we see Monrra again,” Leon warned her.

“We have a portal-mage from Ovira,” Arthur said. “Perhaps we might be able to trade someone for an artistry mage to train Tienna.”

Callie corrected him. “There isn’t artistry in Ovira, only in Aathon. That’s where Monrra’s from. Xiffrik controls the mana in Ovira, which I suppose means he has no skill over artistry or esitry, either.”

Tarak asked, “I wonder who would win in a fight between them. It almost seems destined to happen.”

“Before that,” Leon commented, “we need to be in better shape to fight back either of them.”

Arthur asked, "I'm confused. Monrra took a portal from Aathon to here, but she's not a portal-mage?"

"No," Callie said. "She's a summoner. Like Eden, she makes rifts by pulling esitry into our realm until it breaks a hole between the realms, but her rifts are large enough and strong enough for her to go through them. She takes herself into the dark realm, then makes another rift from there to step into our realm. That's how she traveled from Aathon to Dorrinthal, but it's my understanding that she needed Wolf to be here in Lycast or she would've had trouble locating it from the dark realm."

"That's all correct, but there's too much we still don't understand," Leon said. "We're hoping Hiller can at least shed some light on a few things."

Tarak asked, "So we are going to ally with the portal mage and his people after all?"

"It seems so. The benefits outweigh the dangers. Oh, there he is now." Leon approached Basen as the portal-maker came into the courtyard. "Do you need something?"

"I finished," Basen announced. "The portal is ready, and I'm eager to return." Basen had dark circles under his eyes. Tarak had never seen the man cast or fight, yet he looked formidable even if he'd hardly slept. He was not large, but he had a strong physique. His messy black hair needed a wash, as well as his gray tunic. He wore the look of someone on the brink of either relief or defeat, one last step before home.

"You're early," Leon said. "The king had to go to Rohaer."

"He *left*?"

"You heard what happened there. He's needed."

"And so am I," Basen complained. "I have obligations in Kyrro! I am the headmaster of a prestigious school. The headmaster! I also have a wife who misses me more than your king would be missed in Rohaer if he'd waited just one more day."

Leon said, “The king doesn’t need to be here. I just need to decide who’s going to Kyrro with me and you. I need eyes there, and I trust my own more than anyone’s, but I’m not going alone. Something could happen.” He glanced at the sorcerers. Tarak tried to avoid his gaze.

Basen’s head tilted down slightly as he glanced at Leon skeptically. “You have that kind of authority?”

“Authority? We don’t need authority for this.”

“What if there’s a conflict?” Basen asked. “You need someone to have the power to settle disputes. Is that you?”

“That doesn’t sound at all like Leon,” Michael interjected. “Maybe we should wait for the king.”

“You be quiet,” Leon snapped. “I will settle any issues.”

Basen seemed to be in his own head as he held his hand over his chin, his eyes downcast. “Now that I think about it, I would say it’s the *entrusted* power to settle disputes, not specifically authority.”

“Yeah, that’s definitely not Leon,” Michael said.

Leon seemed to ignore Michael, saying, “You will have your own damn authority, Basen, so long as my people are safe in your land. There won’t be any issues. Now I need at least one of these daisies to volunteer.”

They all fell silent as Leon glanced at them.

“Or Michael will go,” Leon added.

“Hey!”

“You’re the least needed here.”

Michael opened his mouth as if to object. He closed it before opening it again. “Good god, you’re serious, aren’t you?”

Leon stared at Michael until he had his questions answered.

“I cannot be the least needed!” Michael said. “I take serious offense to that!”

“Instead of taking offense, you should do something about it. I keep telling you to learn another spell, but you’re too lazy.”

“Maybe I will learn another spell just to spite you.”

“Good, that’s what I want.”

“Fine, you know what? I will go, and I’m going to learn something important while I’m there, and it will be something no one else could have learned,” Michael stated confidently.

“Not even Hadley?” Callie asked. “She’s very good with understanding mana, and I think she’s been there a long time already.”

“Oh, goddammit,” Michael muttered. “I forgot about Hadley.”

Basen seemed interested in moving things along as he gestured impatiently with a roll of his hand. “So is it just the two of you coming with me, then?” he asked Leon and Michael.

Tarak wasn’t the only one who felt someone fly by overhead. They all looked up to see Jon passing over the courtyard with a thin man with long gray hair on his back... and as Tarak realized who it was, he also realized that Jon had just made a grave mistake.

Hopefully, Basen had not identified the elf. Jon looked down and appeared alarmed as he noticed Basen. He quickly tried to navigate in through one of the windows of the keep, but all were locked.

Fatholl never looked back, but Tarak could hear him arguing with Jon about hurrying up, Jon arguing back that he couldn’t get through a locked window. Tarak faintly made out Fatholl muttering how Jon said Basen wouldn’t be back yet, and Jon replying that he shouldn’t have been.

Basen stared all the while with a confused expression.

Jon fluttered around and pushed on a few different windows before Randy opened one of the previous windows Jon had tried. Jon was breathing so hard that Tarak could hear

him panting from below. Quickly, Jon tried to get within the window, but he didn't clear enough space for Fatholl. The elf smacked his head against the top. "*Dishaw!*" Fatholl growled in elvish. Jon apologized, and soon the two of them disappeared within the keep.

Tarak tried not to stare directly at Basen, but he couldn't bring himself to look anywhere else as he needed to know the headmaster's thoughts. He could see the other sorcerers doing the same dance with their gaze.

Basen stared up at the keep for the longest time, looking as if he'd seen a ghost. Eventually, his gaze finally settled back down on Leon. He pointed his finger up at the keep and asked slowly, verging on anger, "*Who* was that on Jon's back?"

Leon seemed unsure how to answer as he looked like he would soon speak but nothing came out.

Basen repeated the question, this time with anger, "Who was that on Jon's back?"

Leon muttered, "I think you know already."

"That's right, I do! But do *you* all know who he is?"

Tarak told everyone, "Let me handle this." Basen faced him as Tarak continued. "He warned us you would be upset, but he has not done anything to give us reason to distrust him. He even fought an Ancient's army with us and potentially saved some of our lives."

"God's mercy." Basen shook his head and looked fearful as if Tarak had told him war was coming to his land. Then his eyes went wide as if he was in the midst of watching a horrific accident. "God's mercy! I just finished connecting our territories with portals! The amount of time and effort it took to establish a portal in Rohaer..." He shook his head again as he seemed to be speaking to himself. "I don't even know if I can undo it. This is bad. This is *very* bad." He suddenly turned as he swung his finger at Tarak. "You said he warned you! He told you what exactly?"

Callie answered, "That he has murdered kings, and not during wartime. That he took you prisoner at some point. That

he fought a short war against you, but he lost.”

“That’s not everything,” Basen said, “but it should be enough for you to see that he should not be anywhere near... anyone! Yet you still allow him in your keep? He must be manipulating all of you with psyche! Did he tell you that’s why he was exiled by his elves in Ovira? He was doing the same to them!”

Leon spoke. “He did tell us that. He has also shown us what manipulation of psyche feels like and has vowed not to do it. He has upheld his promises and taught us things we never would’ve learned without his help. I was not quick to trust him, but he’s proven himself enough to at least remain here for now. I’m not saying it’s going to be much longer, but he did fight with us against an Ancient, as Tarak mentioned. He is not an ally but a helper. You don’t have to trust him. Just trust us.”

“I cannot trust you if you are with him, don’t you see?” Basen groaned in frustration. “I had a bad feeling about this. I should have listened to my instincts, but I had a debt to repay to Jon.” He headed toward the stables. “I’m taking a horse to my portal location right now, and I’m leaving all of you here.” Basen spun around and kept speaking before anyone could say anything. “You all kept this from me until now. You were going to keep it from me until I took some of you back to Kyrro! Why? Why ruin everything?”

Leon became visibly angry, “Because of this reaction! Had we told you earlier, you never would’ve connected Lycast to Rohaer. I don’t give a shit if we are connected to your territory or not. We could never go, and I’m fine with that. One of us is going to learn how to make a portal, hopefully soon, and we need to travel between Lycast and Rohaer as fast as we can. Go if you want.”

“I will!” Basen continued toward the stables.

“We’ll never see each other again, and that’s probably for the best!” Leon walked after him.

Tarak didn’t understand why Leon was so angry. “Maybe calm yourself?” Tarak suggested.

Callie added, "There's still a lot to discuss."

"No there's not," Leon countered, then raised his voice to make sure Basen heard him as everyone followed the portal mage across the courtyard. "We have Ancients who can see into the future, and they have seen nothing but war and death, and I have a feeling it's because of you and your people. You're selfish."

"*I'm* selfish?" Basen spun around again. But he stopped himself as he waved his palm. "You're all being manipulated. It's not worth my breath."

"Psychics cannot continue to manipulate anyone unless they are nearby!" Leon yelled, red in the face. "From someone who comes from a place filled with psychics, I would expect you to know that!"

Basen screamed his cheeks red as well. "Not him! Not Fatholl. He is different. He gets in your brain like a disease." He waved his hand down again. "Why am I even trying? All of you are too far gone."

Callie spoke worriedly, "Leon, What about Hadley? How is she ever going to get back?"

"She's going to..." Leon stopped himself and yanked at his hair. "Ah fuck! I forgot about Hadley."

Jon landed among them. "What about Hadley? What's going on?"

Basen put himself in Jon's face, "You knew about Fatholl, and you didn't tell me?"

Jon glanced over at everyone else. "Did he connect the portals yet?"

"You too, Jon?" Basen yelled. "I thought you were different." He shook his head and turned away. "I should have never come here." He had almost made it out of the courtyard by then, the slowest exit Tarak had ever seen. Everyone followed, but it was Jon who kept himself the closest behind the portal mage.

“You have an obligation to not only our people but to yours,” he said.

Basen muttered something to himself and did not turn around.

“Basen,” Jon entreated.

The portal mage ignored him.

“*Basen!*” Jon screamed in fury. It was an unnatural and horrifying sound to hear someone usually so calm scream like that. It was like the walls of a house cracking.

Basen turned, though he showed no fear as he waited with an impatient look on his face for Jon to continue.

“I went halfway across the world, then back again. I did it to benefit mankind. I could go anywhere now. I could align with anyone, but Lycast is my home. It always will be. I know these people. They would go without sleep and food to better the lives of their citizens.” Jon looked back at Tarak, who tilted his head and shrugged, then continued. “At least some of them would. The others are a little lazy, but they mean well. My point is they are not manipulated. We only want to keep peace and stop Ancients from empowering themselves to an unstoppable level. I would expect the same from you. Did you not commit treason to save lives?”

Basen looked as if he might argue, but then he resigned himself to giving a single nod. “Yes.”

“Did you not go through hell and nearly lose your life to put an end to war?” Jon asked rhetorically.

“Which time?” Basen quipped.

There was a little chuckle from the audience as the tension broke.

Basen hinted at a smile but lost it as he sighed. “For you, Jon, I will give this a tiny chance. Let me talk to Fatholl.”

Fatholl stepped out from the nearby stables. “I am here, Basen Hiller.”

Basen startled. “Shit, Fatholl, you always have to make an entrance, don’t you?”

Fatholl’s expression held no emotion. “Manipulation has only led to problems. I have sworn not to manipulate anyone unless it is requested by my allies in a reasonable way. For example, I was just in Rohaer questioning hundreds of people. Because of manipulation and lie detection, we can be certain we have discovered the identity of every guilty member who still lives. They are all being sentenced and searched for as we speak.”

Tarak asked, “Everyone involved?” He noticed Jon nodding as Fatholl answered.

“Everyone,” Fatholl confirmed. “And in one day. That’s the power of psyche. One man leads me to another, who leads me to many more, and so on. Most still need to be taken in, while some have already been found and captured based on information I obtained through psyche. Nykal is there with Barrett deciding on a best course of action, but Rohaer is safe.”

Fatholl looked at Basen pointedly. “These people would have killed Barrett and Jon. Now there will be no threats against either of them. People will see the power of psyche. They will be scared to commit treason, and some will think twice even before committing minor illegal acts because they know they could be caught through questioning alone. So long as the leaders who control the psychics are good, all will be well. You have met Barrett, Basen, and you have met Jon and some of the others here. Haven’t you determined they are good?”

“I suppose,” Basen muttered.

“Then I ask you,” Fatholl continued, “what could I do to manipulate them? You know psyche has limitations. I could never convince these people to grant me kingship or turn against their morals. Even if I could, I don’t want that.”

“What *do* you want this time, Fatholl?” Basen asked aggressively.

“To stop the Ancients and revert mana back to a free state in every kingdom across the world. Then I want to unite every race and territory. Think of what could be accomplished.”

“And you would lead them all,” Basen assumed. “Is that right?”

“I would assist however I am needed.”

Basen chuckled without humor, then he sighed as he looked at his horse. “You must know that even if you do not use psyche ever again I would still despise you. When you are nearby, it is like looking at a gigantic centipede. Think about how disgusting that would be. That is how I look at you. How am I supposed to enjoy myself with a gigantic centipede squirming around? How am I supposed to eat, to think, to do anything? Life cannot go on until you are either destroyed or so far away that I can’t imagine you showing your disgusting self again anytime soon.”

Tarak knew Fatholl had done terrible things, but without seeing any of these things firsthand, it was a little difficult to hear Basen describe the elf in this way. It felt too much like an exaggeration, but was it? Was Fatholl a different person back then, or had Basen simply gotten in Fatholl’s way and suffered the consequences?

There was no doubt in Tarak’s mind that he and the other sorcerers were now on the same side as Fatholl. As long as things stayed that way, then all should be fine. It was an ominous thought, however. Basen’s words should not be ignored.

“Life must go on, Basen,” Fatholl stated firmly. “It will go on with or without you. I have faith that someone here will acquire the ability to make a portal. These people are determined in ways that exceed even your pupils at the Academy, and with mana free, they have the means to achieve their goals.”

Basen put up his hand. “Stop. Every time you talk, I feel you wiggling your way into my mind. You’re so damn good with words and psyche that I can no longer trust anything you

say. I need some time to think, but I'm too damn tired." He looked as if he was about to mount his horse.

"We have known each other a long time," Fatholl said. "When have I lied?"

"Oh, I don't know," Basen replied sarcastically as he looked over his shoulder. "How about the time you tried to kill me after we agreed to murder your brother?"

Michael commented, "Whoa."

Fatholl's face twisted up. "I wish someone else here was a psychic so they could see that you, Basen, are the one twisting words. You and I both know that we had an agreement that led up to the plan to stop my brother, and you broke your word."

"So I'm supposed to *die* for that? Haven't you realized by now that there are other ways to get what you want besides killing anyone who disagrees with your plan?"

"I am doing it now," Fatholl seemed to be speaking with restrained anger.

"Oh great," Basen said sarcastically. "Only after you have murdered hundreds of people and krepps. Or is it thousands? I'm guessing you don't even know anymore."

"I would have thought you had grown up since we last spoke, but you're still a child!"

"Yup, a child who stopped multiple wars, leads the Academy of Kyrro, and works closer with the queen than her own advisers, *and* who doesn't trust psychic elves who murdered thousands of people and wanted to commit genocide, by the way." Basen glanced at the sorcerers watching. "Did he mention that to any of you? He tried to use me to kill an entire clan of krepps who did nothing but annoy him."

"Again you twist what happened, Basen, and for what purpose?"

Tarak realized Fatholl was not completely denying any of these accusations. That meant there was at least some truth to

all of them.

“Maybe so they can finally see you as you are,” Basen told the elf.

Leon shouted, “All right, I’ve had enough of this! Here’s what’s going to happen now. If this damn elf is willing to kill his own brother, he’s even sicker than I thought, but for now he has proven himself to be loyal and useful.”

“Leon, you can’t possibly—”

“Let me finish, Basen! You will like it in the end. You’re going to take some of us through that portal and into Kyrro. We are going to get to know some of your psychics, and you will choose one of them to return here to question Fatholl. Either all of us will be satisfied with the answers he provides while he cannot lie, or none of us will be satisfied and we’ll send him the fuck away. Either way, you will stop this bickering and all of us can go back to being useful again. Fucking hell, some of the most useful and powerful people in the kingdom all standing around with our thumbs up our asses listening to two daisies call each other names. I’m sick of it! We’re going now.”

Leon began pointing, “Tarak, Jon. You two are going to Kyrro with me. Jon, I need you there to tell me about everyone and everything. When I feel like I’ve gotten a good grasp on it all, Basen will send you and Hadley back in a portal. The king needs a day in Rohaer anyway before you return to pick him up. If it turns into two days because you’re busy in Kyrro, it’s not the worst thing. He has a lot to do there. Tarak, you’re the only one besides Jon who can safely travel long distances with someone on your back. We might need that, and I trust you to stay alive almost as much as I do Jon. What’s more is that your family could be there, and they are a hell of a lot easier to deal with when you are with them.”

Tarak supposed Leon was right.

“I volunteer to go as well,” Callie said.

“No way,” Leon replied. “We need you to stay and find out if you can communicate across the continents.”

“It’s probably impossible to speak to someone that far,” Callie replied.

Fatholl interjected, “No, it should be possible.”

“I mean it’s probably impossible for me,” Callie specified.

Basen then mentioned, “I know someone who could potentially communicate with you so long as you could receive a message. Someone besides Fatholl,” he added as he eyed the elf.

“You can speak to people in the realm of mana?” Callie asked Fatholl.

“I have not gone there in some time, but yes, I should still be able to.”

“Why haven’t you gone there?” Callie asked.

“Because there is too much information that can sometimes be overwhelming. I prefer to deal with people in person now, not read pure mana.”

Callie looked confused, perhaps excited. One thing was certain. She clearly wanted to ask more but knew this was not the time.

“I should warn you all,” Basen said, “that a portal covering even a short distance is disorienting. I have never taken a portal as far as we are about to. It might have serious repercussions.”

Leon asked, “Could it kill any of us?”

“No,” Basen answered right away, though he seemed to be in thought. “I doubt it,” he said, though still with a hand over his chin. “*Probably* not.”

Fatholl said, “I have yet to hear of anyone taking a portal this distance. I would also assume that it cannot kill the user, but I cannot guarantee this.”

“Xiffrik claimed to have transported people between the continents using portals. In case he was lying, we’ll take a chicken with us,” Leon said. “The animal will go first. Then

Michael. You're going now because we need to test the safety of the portal, and I choose you."

"Oh come on," Michael complained.

"We're going to make sure the chicken survives first," Leon assured him.

"Oh good! What a conclusive test that will be!"

"That's the best we can do for you," Leon said. "Fetch the chicken you want to use."

Michael grumbled as he walked off, "I'll learn a new tree soon enough, then you'll be the most useless."

Basen told Fatholl, "It will be Reela."

Fatholl seemed to understand what he was saying, though all Tarak understood was that Basen looked to be waiting for a reaction.

"Is that supposed to change my decision to let myself be questioned?" Fatholl asked rhetorically. "Reela or anyone. It doesn't matter to me."

"It will be Reela," Basen repeated.

"Fine."

"We'll see if it's fine or not." Basen looked over toward Jon. "This is not an alliance."

"It might not be an alliance, but it's the beginning of trust," Jon countered. "Keep that in mind, even if just as a favor to me for all the healing I've done throughout Ovira."

"I will trust all of you when I can trust the centipede, or, more likely, when he is long gone from your kingdom." Basen mounted his horse.

CHAPTER THIRTY

It felt like ages since Tarak had mounted Dagaric. As Tarak rode along with the other sorcerers through Newhaven, Dagaric had more bounce to his step, more sway to his head. If Tarak didn't know any better, he would assume his horse was happy for Tarak to ride him again.

But later, when they arrived at the forest and Dagaric would not stop, Tarak realized he was wrong. He jumped off his mount, flopping onto something too hard to be dirt.

"You big bastard," Tarak moaned as he rolled over and looked at the indents of pebbles on his arms.

Dagaric whinnied in Tarak's direction as if laughing at him.

"Do you think that to be funny?" Tarak popped up, wrapped his arm around the massive neck of the horse and gave him a friendly wrestling.

The horse grunted and easily pushed him away. Tarak stumbled back and tripped over a small rock, falling on his arse. The horse whinnied at him again.

Tarak got up and gestured as if he would kick the horse, but Dagaric darted off and turned back with another taunting whinny.

"Tarak, pay attention," Leon called from a short ways off.

He went over to join Leon, Basen, Michael, and Aliana. The ranger would not be going with them, but she had come to see if there was anything she could sense. Everyone seemed to be gathered around her as she closed her eyes.

Basen had established a new portal location a ways off from the chasm, still in the forest but not too far from its edge. A large rock with a crack marked the spot. The chicken would go into the portal first, and then Michael. While the chicken had no idea how little everyone thought of it, Michael seemed very aware as his mouth lay flat, his eyes beady as he held the caged bird.

Aliana spoke as Tarak joined them. “I feel the portal location connected to another place.”

Leon asked, “From how far away did you feel it?”

“Not far at all, but that might change.”

Basen reached into his pack and pulled out the glowing bracelet of akorell metal. “It never changed for me. I can only feel a portal location when I’m nearby. Anyway, I’ve been away long enough. It’s time. Michael, is it?”

“Yes.”

“Are you and the chicken ready?”

“I have no idea, but just do it already.”

Basen flicked his wrist and there was a flash of light as the akorell bracelet lost its brightness. A massive crack, or more like a quick rip, reverberated through Tarak’s bones as a shot of air blew everyone back except Basen, who held strong with a crouch. In the span of one blink to another, the portal grew from the size of a fist to Tarak’s height.

Something was very different about this portal compared to the rifts Tarak had the unfortunate luck of getting to know firsthand. He could clearly see what was happening on the other side. It looked like a battle but not just between men. There were large manlike lizard creatures—*oh, krepps, of course*. They appeared to be grappling with much smaller humans, and winning, naturally.

“Shit!” Basen yelled. He sounded equally panicked and strained, his hands shaking. “I have to get there. Forget the chicken, Michael! Go, go!”

“What the hell’s even happening in there?”

“What does it look like?” Basen yelled. “Krepps are fighting my people.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“I have no idea. If any of you are coming with me, you’d better go now, or I’m taking this portal myself and leaving all of you here.”

“Go, Michael!” Leon yelled, even giving him a shove.

Michael had at least drawn the chicken out of the cage and thrown the bird into the portal by its legs, but it seemed impossible to keep track of the bird as it disappeared.

“Hold on, the chicken might’ve died on the way through, and even if I survive, I could die by whatever’s happening on the other side!” Michael hollered.

“I’m about to go!” Basen yelled. “Last chance!”

“I’m going,” Jon said and jumped into the portal.

“Fucking coward, Michael!” Leon screamed as he ran into the portal after Jon.

“Are the rest of you going or not?” Basen asked with urgency.

“I will,” Tarak said, but something stopped him. A krepp tumbled into the portal from the other side, then came out shrieking almost instantaneously. The creature seems to have trouble getting up as everyone stood back. It spoke in another language, the sharp claws on its hands and feet thrashing about. It managed to rise up, but teetered violently into Tarak. He caught the creature, which felt like a mass of muscle and not much else, and could barely straighten the lizard-man out enough to push him back the other way. Basen yelled the entire time to shove him back inside. Eventually, Michael seemed to find his courage and helped Tarak push the creature back through.

“See you on the other side!” Michael jumped into the portal.

Tarak jumped in right after him. There was little sensation of anything besides a tense pull to his body before he flew out through the other side. Although he seemed to have remained upright throughout the portal, he came out flying parallel to the ground. He braced for impact as he put his arms out in front of him. They caught, causing him to roll. His back hit the legs of something firm that turned out to be a krepp, who then tripped on top of Tarak.

Tarak squirmed out from underneath the heavy creature and tried to stand, but everything was spinning around him. He couldn't make sense of anything. As the krepp on top of him came into focus, Tarak scanned the creature's hands for a weapon but soon realized it didn't matter. The claws of the beast were sharp enough to draw blood as the krepp dug them into Tarak's face and pushed him against the grass.

The krepp yelled out something that sounded like a victory chant, but the creature screeched in alarm as Tarak flung him off with what must've been surprising strength. Tarak got to his feet and swung a look in each direction for his comrades, his dizziness gone. He was surrounded by the dark gray lizards standing on two feet, their eyes bright with a lust for a battle, but not for blood. They grappled with humans, pushing them to the ground and forcing them to submit as one krepp had tried with Tarak.

He was about to aid Michael, who lay flat on the ground with a krepp on his back, his arms up in surrender, but a deep bellow stopped everyone.

“Aken jek, ezcar krepps! Kraw! Farrio lyloll!”

Tarak caught sight of the man screaming. He was not young, not old, but he was huge for a mortal, if he was one at all. He was Tarak's height, though with much more girth to his bulging muscles.

The krepps hissed and lifted fists in celebration as they eased off the dorrin they'd forced to submit. Tarak realized then that even Leon had been beneath one of them, muttering curses as he got up and dusted himself off. Tarak joined him as Michael and Jon soon came to stand nearby as well. The races separated.

The krepps seemed to be riding out their victory as long as possible, celebrating with each other with shakes of their fists and recanting of their epic win over the physically weaker race.

“What the fuck is happening here?” Leon asked Basen as the headmaster met with the large man who seemed to know at least some of the kreppen language.

“I’m trying to figure that out myself.” The headmaster addressed the large man. “Cleve?”

“Who are they?” Cleve asked as he pointed to Leon’s group. He had the same smooth accent as Basen and appeared to be around the same age of about forty.

But a krepp shouting in heavily accented common tongue interrupted them. “We defeat you, *felk!* We win! Ba-say-hell is new god!”

“What!” Tarak blurted as the krepps cheered. Tarak realized then that he felt the presence of one of his family members. He followed the scent of mana to find Caarda turning this way and that to move between the small space among the crowd of krepps.

“Tarak!” Caarda called out.

“Father.”

Caarda broke through and walked down the gap between the races. None of the krepps were as tall as he was, but just about any one of them looked heavier.

“They’re related?” Cleve asked Basen.

“I suppose so. Cleve, what the hell is happening here?”

The group of humans was not as large as that of the fifty krepps. Most of the young men appeared to be around Tarak’s age, with a litter of wooden training swords scattered all around. Many of them seemed to be wearing thick tunics of boiled leather, giving Tarak the impression they had been training here before the krepps had arrived. There was fear among them as they stood behind Cleve and the headmaster.

“We release Ba-say-hell from prison now!” announced the same krepp who had claimed victory.

“Grandfather’s in prison?” Tarak asked his father as the krepps clamored.

Caarda gave a nod filled with frustration.

“Where are all the followers who went with you?” Tarak asked.

“They abandoned Basael before we reached the ocean because they began to starve.”

“You and Basael did not feed them?”

“He and I are incapable of taking care of the needs of mortals for a prolonged period. This we learned.”

“They probably lost their faith in their god.”

“I believe so, yes.”

Basael could not have been happy about that.

Meanwhile, Tarak overheard Cleve telling the headmaster, “They stormed into the academy and demanded to wrestle against the strongest humans for the freedom of someone named Bahsayhell. I tried to reason with them, but you know how krepps are. Besides killing them, all I could do was lead them here to wrestle our warriors.”

“Basael is my father,” Caarda interjected.

“I don’t know who you are or who Basael is,” Cleve said with aggression laden in his tone. “But it sounds like you are responsible for bringing the krepps here.”

“I would like to take responsibility,” Caarda replied, “but I cannot control them. It is like trying to control wild animals. I do not even speak their language. My father does, Basael. He incited them to come here after his arrest.”

The same krepp who presumably had the best common tongue announced again, “Free Ba-say-hell! Free him or fight with blood!”

“Why is Basael important to you?” Cleve asked them.

“God Ba-say-hell!” the krepp roared back.

The large instructor of warriors leaned down and muttered to the headmaster, “I’m about to lose it.”

Basen replied, “Fetch your wife. I’ll make sure nothing happens in the meantime.”

“I’m getting Steffen, too.”

“Yes, and hurry.”

The large warrior ran off with shocking speed considering his size.

Jon seemed to be listening to the krepps speak among each other. He told Leon with a soft voice, “The krepps are deciding which of us to challenge for blood.”

“And you want it to be you?” Leon asked.

“If it has to be someone.”

“Just observe and let one of Kyrro’s people deal with this,” Leon replied. “We’ll figure out what to do after.”

Tarak was still trying to grasp the idea that not only was Basael in prison somewhere around here, but he had gathered a group of krepps ready to fight for the belief that he was a god. What might have been even more surprising was that Jon seemed to understand what the krepps were saying.

Tarak asked Michael, “How can Jon speak their language?”

“He picked up kreppen quicker than the rest of us, so he took it upon himself to learn some.”

Of course he did. Tarak didn’t know why he was surprised. Was there anything Jon didn’t pick up quickly?

Tarak instead focused on what his father was telling the headmaster.

“Have you heard of Ancients?”

“I have.”

“Basael is one, and I am his son. Tarak is my son. You are the headmaster of the school, the portal mage?”

“I am.” Basen’s tone and expression held skepticism toward Caarda’s stated identity.

“We came here to fight against your Ancient for the freedom of mana. Your support would be beneficial to your people.”

“Hold on,” the headmaster said. “You’re talking about killing Xiffrik?”

“You know the name of your Ancient?”

Tarak said, “The headmaster had the displeasure of meeting Xiffrik, and the rest of us have as well.”

“He has gone to Dorrinthal?” Caarda asked with surprise.

“He goes all over,” Tarak explained. “The headmaster established a system of portals, and Xiffrik has been using it.”

“That...” A thought seemed to stop Caarda. “That may be the cause of the wars I have foreseen.”

“You’re the one I’ve heard about who can peer into the future,” Basen realized.

“My father can as well. Before leaving Dorrinthal, we saw fighting at a magnitude we have never experienced before, and nothing can be seen past it. Your portals may be responsible for that, but they may also be responsible for the salvation of mana. You have gone to Dorrinthal in search of an alliance, I expect?”

“Not exactly.”

Jon said, “I convinced him to come back with me and establish a portal so we may start an alliance.”

They could not continue the discussion as the krepps started yelling in their language at everyone. It felt as though a fight was about to break out when Cleve returned with two people around his age, a man of normal stature and a tall woman with a kind and beautiful face. Was she an elf? The tips of her ears were pointed, but not as drastically as Fatholl’s, from what Tarak remembered.

The man of smaller stature yelled in kreppen, and all the creatures stopped to listen. He didn’t seem to speak the language as well as Cleve, with a soft accent to each word and a serious lack of inflection as if misunderstanding the meaning of everything that came out of his mouth. However, he did speak each word quickly and clearly.

The krepps did not appear amused by this dorrin butchering their language, but as the elven woman began speaking in kreppen, and with a much better guttural accent,

they did appear to listen and seemed to lose some of their aggression. Was the woman casting a spell upon them with a subtle lift of her fingers? A psychic, probably. It seemed to be working.

Tarak wanted to follow what was happening, but a krepp had begun to pester him with pokes and even subtle pushes.

“Leave me alone,” Tarak told the creature with a swipe of his hand.

The krepp said something to him that elicited clucking laughter from many krepps behind him. Tarak looked closer and realized that this was the krepp who Tarak had thrown off shortly after arriving here. Lord and bane, what did here even look like? So much had happened so quickly that Tarak had no chance to look around. They seemed to be standing on a massive field of grass that was wider than the entire castle grounds. How big was this school? Tarak couldn't see the end of it in any direction.

In the distance stood many buildings, but they were too far for Tarak to make out much. There appeared to be many other young swordsmen training on the grass, but most had stopped and slowly crept toward the scene here. They did stay back, however, as if worried they might incite the krepps into more aggression.

The krepp trying to bother Tarak for a duel pointed at him and said something else. About a dozen krepps reacted this time. Their laughter sounded like monstrous chickens clucking. Some squatted and bounced. Others grabbed their abdomens. Half pointed at Tarak and seemed to repeat the same lines.

“Tushy felk! Tushy felk! Gryno tushy! Gryno tushy!”

Tarak asked Jon, “What are they saying about me?”

“Tushy means scared. Felk is human, and I am going to have to assume gryno either means large or strong, maybe both.”

“So they are calling me a coward for not fighting,” Tarak realized.

“They are animals,” Leon told him. “Ignore them.”

Leon seemed to be attempting to listen to the conversation going on between the academy people and some krepps. Tarak wanted to as well, but the krepp trying to incite Tarak pushed him hard this time. Tarak stumbled back. The krepps laughed harder.

“Loser!” the krepp taunted. “Loser, loser!”

“You do speak common tongue!” Tarak replied in anger, but the krepp just repeated the same word.

“Loser!”

Michael commented, “I think that’s the only word he knows.”

“I have had enough!” Tarak pulled off his shirt. “This foul-smelling arselicker needs to be taught a lesson!”

The krepps started cheering as they realized Tarak was going to fight.

“Tarak, don’t be an idiot,” Leon said.

“I agree with Leon,” Michael said. “All krepps do is fight. They’re strong and vicious.”

“Not stronger than me.”

“They could be,” Michael warned.

“We are about to find out.”

Tarak put his hands up, as did the krepp. They lunged into each other.

Tarak grappled with the shirtless creature, his head and neck rubbing against the hard scales of the lizard-man. Tarak grunted as he failed to throw the krepp down as he’d hoped he would. The creature moved quickly around Tarak’s back and tried to pick him up, but Tarak crouched and slipped out of his hold.

Michael was right. Not only was the krepp strong, but he had clear experience with wrestling. They grappled again, but Tarak soon found his head trapped in an armpit.

The odor was unbearable. “You smell like a bog!” Tarak yelled in frustration, then heaved the krepp off the ground.

The creature yelped in shock. But without the krepp letting go of Tarak’s head, he could not throw his opponent. So Tarak kept lifting and prying, eventually slipping his head out. The krepp squirmed around to ride Tarak’s back. He put his hands over Tarak’s eyes and started bobbing and gyrating, which elicited more laughter from the krepps.

Tarak grabbed an arm and tried to throw the krepp over his shoulder, but the creature went with the momentum and somersaulted through the air to land on his feet. He responded by diving at Tarak’s knees, grabbing him and lifting him before Tarak could prevent it. But the krepp seemed to underestimate Tarak’s weight as the creature fell to its knees while Tarak fell on his arse.

The krepps laughed even harder as there seemed to be a pause in the aggression from the creature. He backed away and pointed at Tarak as he seemed to explain something, confusion appearing to crease his scaly brow. The krepp did not have eyebrows, just creases in his scaly skin where the hair should be on a human. A small and narrow tuft of black hair sprouted from the center of his otherwise bald head. He looked like he was accusing Tarak of cheating as he pointed.

A krepp came out from the audience and calmly bent to pick up Tarak. He stood straight and allowed the krepp to see how heavy he was. The creature managed to pick up Tarak but strained and dropped him quickly. He pointed at Tarak and seemed to agree with the other.

Tarak gestured for one of them to test their strength as he motioned for them to come close and then held up his hands. One came from the large group and assumed the position. They locked fingers and started to push, the creature’s foul breath in Tarak’s face. He managed to slide the krepp back a few steps as he gained momentum, eventually pushing the krepp over.

Another volunteered, and Tarak defeated him in the same way, and then a third. Tarak won easily. Finally, the biggest

krepp of them all, one almost as tall as Caarda, compared strength with Tarak.

Tarak thought he might win this time as well, but the krepp grunted and wheezed and seemed to gain strength as his eyes crossed with anger. He pushed Tarak back a few steps before Tarak found the last of his strength and evened out the fight.

The krepp, however, had not just wrestled three krepps before, and Tarak soon lost his stamina and found himself pushed backward. He gave up and released his hands, but pride washed over him as the krepps cheered and squat-pop-danced around him as if accepting him as one of their own. He found himself cheering and adopting their squat and pop dance, their enthusiasm infectious.

The celebration did not last long. By the time Tarak had put his shirt back on, and he noticed the serious looks of his comrades and the anger on Leon's face, he realized there were more important things to worry about than proving himself to krepps. Everyone had formed a loose circle. Tarak hurried over as he heard Cleve complaining.

"It seems to me that all this trouble is because of you people from Lycast."

"You—!" Leon immediately calmed himself, though his voice still held frustration. "We are dealing with *your* Ancient in Dorrinthal right now. He is there causing problems because none of you here have done anything to weaken him."

"You still haven't explained why any of that matters," Cleve growled back.

The elven woman and the other man who knew kreppen seemed to have appeased the krepps for now as the creatures took to wrestling each other for sport. The man and woman came over to join the argument between Cleve and Leon. There were no introductions, though, just a few tense looks as everyone seemed incapable of becoming comfortable with each other.

“Allow me to explain everything,” Caarda said. “I know Ancients better than anyone, for one is my father.”

Cleve didn't look like he wanted to listen until the headmaster looked at him sideways and said, “They are a problem, Cleve, a big one.”

That seemed to calm the warrior instructor somewhat as he waited for Caarda to speak again.

“You have a restricted system of mana here because your Ancient—”

“Xiffrik,” Tarak interjected.

“Xiffrik has changed mana,” Caarda went on.

“You keep talking about mana,” Cleve said. “We don't have that here.”

The smaller man added, “We've also never heard of Xiffrik. Are you certain about this?”

“They are,” answered the elf. “I can feel all of their certainty.”

“You must be Reela,” Tarak realized.

She tilted her head. The uncomfortable feeling of psyche went through him, but it was a short spell.

Reela looked at the headmaster. “You told them about me?”

“Just wait until you hear why, but we'll get to that later. I'll take over, son of Ancient. Xiffrik is real. Mana does exist.” Basen addressed his people. “And it is restricted here. You've all seen Jon heal better than caregelow. That's because mana is free in Dorrinthal. I've seen all sorts of things after going back with him. Enchanters can connect rings so that when one shakes, so does the other. They use it to signal for help across ten miles. We could've used those for at least twenty-five years. There are also sorcerers who can conjure water, wind, and this one can even make gravity and light.” He pointed at Tarak. “Show them.”

Tarak found it more difficult here to grasp the right notes, but he did soon manage to make a sphere of gravity to pull everyone a step toward it.

“Now an illusion,” the headmaster said, then told the group, “I actually haven’t seen one yet, but I was told he can.”

Tarak didn’t want to startle the krepps, but he couldn’t think of a more powerful illusion than to encase everyone in complete darkness. It was much harder than his spell of gravity. He could feel everyone watching him as he contorted his hands and mind.

“It is much more difficult here than in Dorrinthal. Hold on.”

Eventually he cast it, and darkness fell upon all of them.

There were many sounds of shock before Tarak lifted the spell, transforming it into a black wall that he used to surround them. Then he let the spell fade.

“Bastial hell!” muttered the smaller man. “How are you doing that?”

“That’s Steffen by the way,” Jon told his people. “He’s a chemist. Is Hadley all right, Steffen?”

“She’s very well. She’s been continuing to learn fast, and she’s even taught us a few things about plants we didn’t know.”

Tarak answered Steffen’s earlier question, “I make illusions like any other spell, with mana.”

Leon continued for him, “It’s the same way Jon heals or that I make water. Every spell, everything that all of you cast is with mana. Here it’s simplified to make certain spells easier to grasp and others nearly impossible. Everything you cast, though, *everything* empowers your Ancient, Xiffrik. He’s been here for a thousand years, I presume, feeding off sorcery, and now he’s unstoppable here, but we may have a chance to stop him from taking control of mana in Dorrinthal.”

“That’s not right,” Steffen said. “People haven’t been in Ovira for that long.”

“Xiffrik controls Greenedge too,” Basen told the chemist.

“Oh.”

Reela asked the headmaster, “I see you’ve met him. What is he like?”

“Eerily friendly and annoyingly playful.”

Cleve said, “He doesn’t sound that threatening.”

Tarak took it upon himself to explain better. “Xiffrik treats all of this like a game. He believes no one has a chance at stopping him from taking control of mana in Dorrinthal, so he has fun at our expense.”

“And he might be right,” Leon added. “He can fly away from battle or even take a portal back here whenever he’s in trouble. The only way to stop him for sure is for him to lose his power. To do that, we need someone here to take back control of mana from him. But seeing as how none of you are likely to be able to do that, we’ll settle for keeping him out of our territory until we come up with something better.”

“They don’t need much from us,” Basen said. “For now,” he added ominously. “They just have the tiny little problem of Xiffrik wanting to change their mana...and Fatholl whispering in the ear of their king.”

There were three different reactions from Basen’s people. Cleve screamed, “What!” and looked as if he wanted to slap Leon even though they had just met. Reela put her hand over her face as she looked down and shook her head. Steffen seemed more curious than anything else as he asked, “How long has he been in Dorrinthal?”

“Not long.” Basen gave a sigh. “But still long enough.”

Leon said, “Just because I haven’t sent him away doesn’t mean I’m ready to defend him. Go on and tell Reela, Basen.”

“I was working up to that.” He addressed the elf. “You agreed with me that it would behoove us to connect the territories. That is why I left with Jon.”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“Would you also agree with me that we need to know what in god’s world Fatholl is doing before we can trust these people?”

“I do.”

“Then it looks like I’m taking you back with me.” Basen spoke with resignation.

“Bastial hell you are,” Cleve said. “You only just returned. We need you here.”

“Nothing, *nothing*, could make me take a portal back to Dorrinthal *yet*. I’ve barely slept. I’ve done nothing but establish portal locations. I’ve barely had a decent meal, even. I’m exhausted. As soon as we’re done here, I’m going to see my wife and sleep. Then we can discuss Reela’s brief departure to question Fatholl. Now what else do we need to decide *right now* before I go do these very important things?”

“I would like my father released from prison,” Caarda said.

The headmaster rested his forehead against the tips of his fingers. “Have you told me yet why he’s even in there?”

“We went to your largest city in hopes of convincing the people that their mana is being manipulated. My father felt the need to perform a demonstration of sorcery no one has seen before.”

“I saw him,” Steffen said. “He went to the market and toppled a bunch of shops with one of those gravity spells. The people were upset. The guards came to put him under arrest.”

Tarak asked his father, “Basael did not fight?”

“He wanted to, but I convinced him not to.”

“I do not have the power to release prisoners,” Basen explained. “Only the queen does.”

“We need to meet with her anyway,” Leon said.

Basen put up a hand. “I’m not letting your foul mouth anywhere near her, and that’s for your own benefit.”

“What the fuck do you mean for my own benefit?”

Basen gestured as if Leon had given him an example. "You want her to trust you and work with you, don't you?" he asked rhetorically. "Then let your sorcerers speak for you."

"What do all of you want?" Reela asked. "Because it seems to me that Basen is the only one who needs Fatholl questioned. The rest of you follow Fatholl blindly. Is that right?"

"Hell no," Leon responded. "I want Fatholl questioned, too. I may have trusted him during battle, but battle is simple. You kill or die, and he killed the sorcerers of an Ancient named Monrra trying to take Dorrinthal. So I know he at least is aligned with us in that, but that's the most I know about him. He seems pretty strong, arrogantly strong. Are you sure you can question him?"

"I can," Reela answered confidently.

"Are you related or something?" Leon asked. "Your ears are like you're a half-elf."

"I am a half-elf, but I have no relation to Fatholl."

The headmaster interrupted with a tired voice, "What else needs to be decided right now?"

"Where is Hadley at this time?" Jon asked.

"Jon, it's very good to see you again," Reela said. "I'm sorry it's taken this long to say so."

"It is," chimed in Cleve and Steffen.

"You all as well."

"Hadley's still here with the chemists," Steffen said. "I'm wondering why she hasn't mentioned anything about Ancients."

"She and I had never heard of them before we left. I just found out after bringing the headmaster back to Dorrinthal with me."

"It's been a recent thing for all of us," Leon grumbled.

"What else?" the headmaster asked with a clear desire to leave.

“We need to discuss this further,” Cleve implored him. “Once you rest.”

“We do, and in the meantime I’ll have Desil show them around and bring them to the queen. Out of all the sorcery I saw in Dorrinthal, I never saw anyone do what Desil can.”

“What can he do?” Leon asked.

“I’m not going to ruin the surprise. Stay here and I’ll fetch him as the rest of you deal with the krepps.”

“You still haven’t explained what we should do with the krepps,” Cleve said in clear irritation.

Caarda suggested, “Freeing my father might be your only option. After a display of strength and sorcery, he has convinced the krepps he is their new god. I could ensure that all of us remain out of your cities and school until a plan for Xiffrik is in place.”

“For now, that is best. I’ll tell Desil to explain the situation to the queen.” The headmaster looked over to address Jon. “She trusts him as if he were her own son. I don’t see there being any issues unless your Ancient causes them.”

“He is not our Ancient,” Leon corrected. “He barely left our territory without us coming to blows.”

“I’m going to be honest,” Basen said. “I don’t know what in god’s world is happening with all the Ancients, and I’m too tired to figure it out right now, but I do expect everything to be clearer by tomorrow. And no fighting! I brought you all here as guests. You didn’t see me starting anything in your territory, even when I found out all of you had been keeping Fatholl from me. I expect the same respect from all of you. Jon, you’ll make sure?”

“I will.”

The headmaster walked off, leaving an awkward silence behind him.

“What should we do as we wait for Desil?” Michael seemed to be asking everyone.

“I think duels are in order,” Cleve announced with a hint of a smirk. “I want to see what you Dorrinthal people can do with a sword. Who’s the best among you?”

Jon stepped forward. “I’ve been wanting to challenge you for a while, Cleve, but we never had the time.”

“You, Jon?” Cleve sounded surprised, though he did fetch a protective tunic and a wooden sword for Jon from one of his many watching students. “I would’ve thought the foul-mouth had you beat. He looks more like a swordfighter.”

“I haven’t wasted years learning sword fighting,” Leon said, “because sorcery has always sufficed. Jon comes from a small town where he did nothing but swordfight for all of his entertainment, and he was trained by the best.”

“Maybe I won’t go easy on him, then.”

A chicken walked by that seemed to catch everyone’s attention. It clucked and picked at the grass as Cleve and his students looked at it with confusion.

“He came with us,” Michael explained.

“Just get him off my field,” Cleve replied.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Tarak asked Jon, “Are you really a better swordsman than Leon or Michael?”

“I’m probably a better swordsman than almost everyone in Dorrinthal,” Jon replied.

“That cannot possibly be true.”

“You can fight me before Cleve and find out.”

Tarak felt everyone’s eyes on him as he thought about it. “Yes, I think I will. Not that I would consider myself an expert, but I cannot accept you are as good as you say. You have no time to train!”

“He is,” Michael said. “Tarak, how many times have you even used a sword?”

“A real sword or a practice sword like this one?” Tarak gestured with the wooden one Cleve handed to him.

“Any sword,” Michael specified.

“Let me think. There was the time we fought the murderous thieves in the brothel. Then there was the battle against the Ancient, but I cannot remember if I even drew my weapon.”

“And?” Michael asked.

“I believe that is all.”

Michael laughed as he shook his head.

Jon was getting a feel for his practice weapon when he stopped. “You’re just wasting everyone’s time, then. Let Cleve go first.”

“Nonsense! Have at me!” Tarak whipped his weapon around in what he hoped was an impressive display of skill, but he lost hold of the handle. The wooden sword flew off and smacked one of the lads watching in the shin. He hissed as he hopped around.

“My apologies, young sir!”

Jon sighed as he walked over to heal the young man.

Cleve handed Tarak another weapon. “If you throw away this one, it’s the last time I let you duel anyone on my field.”

Tarak took it and gave it a few practice swings, ensuring a good hold above all else. He pushed away a protective tunic that Cleve was handing him.

“Unnecessary. I heal.”

“You heal like Jon?”

“No,” Jon said. “Because he’s related to an Ancient, he heals naturally.”

Steffen stepped toward Tarak. “I’d like to see that.”

“You will,” Jon said.

“Cocky cocky,” Tarak replied. “No sorcery, correct?”

“None. First to two points wins. A point is scored by disarming or striking the opponent.”

Knowing Jon could heal, and seeing him in a protective tunic, Tarak figured he wouldn’t have to hold back. He charged at the shorter sorcerer and swung hard at Jon’s side. *I would like to see him block this!*

Jon did not try to block it but jumped back to avoid it. Tarak stopped his swing and swung back the other way as Jon thought he might have an opening. This seemed to surprise Jon as his eyes flashed, but he jumped back again. He was quicker than he looked.

Tarak spun and sliced at Jon again, but the healer kept stepping back. Tarak spun faster and swung harder, yelling out his aggression, and still Jon moved away with shock on his face.

“Hold on,” Tarak stepped back to stop the fight. “I need a longer sword.”

“You fight like a maniac!” Jon complained. “What are you even doing?”

“Beating you, of course.”

Cleve walked over toward a barrel of wooden swords and looked through them before finding what must've been the biggest one. Tarak took it from Cleve's hands and put its tip against the ground. The handle on the other end came up just past Tarak's stomach.

"Much better," Tarak said, then let out a battle cry as he charged at Jon again. He kept up his same impenetrable strategy of swinging and spinning, then stopping and swinging back the other way with more spins. "Do not run, coward!"

"You fight like a crazed giant!" Jon complained.

Tarak spun after him wherever he went, but eventually Jon slapped Tarak's sword down with his own weapon and poked Tarak hard in the abdomen.

"Stop joking around," Jon complained.

Tarak had not been, but his loss called for a new strategy anyway. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Tarak wasn't quite sure how else to approach besides swinging hard at Jon's midsection, where he could not duck under or jump over. *Perhaps less spinning.*

Tarak approached Jon and still swung hard, but he was ready for a counterattack this time. What he was not ready for was the counterattack to come from down low.

Jon tripped Tarak with a sweep to his ankle, then struck Tarak hard on his bare arm.

"Gah!" Tarak got up. "You kicked me!"

"You asked for it."

Steffen requested, "Let me see your arm."

Tarak showed the small welt on his arm quickly fading.

"You're not casting anything right now?" Steffen asked.

"No. Jon, you cheat with a kick!"

"Cheat? Was this not a duel?"

"We never agreed on kicking."

“Kick, punch, grapple. Do whatever you want. The whole point of the duel is to practice for real combat.”

“Oh, I see! First to three points wins now that I know the rules.”

Jon seemed hesitant as he turned slightly away from Tarak. “I’m not sure I like the look in your eyes.”

“Do you concede?”

“No.” Jon seemed to find his courage as he deftly swung his sword around, putting to shame Tarak’s earlier show of swordsmanship.

Tarak approached cautiously and watched Jon’s weapon for clues. Jon held it up but did not move it besides that. As Tarak closed in, Jon slowly lowered the tip and backed away. Tarak could tell by the way Jon walked that he was ready for anything. Tarak, on the other hand, had no idea what to do. As soon as he made a move, Jon would counter.

Damn, he probably is the best. Surprise might be Tarak’s only option. He leapt at Jon and used his sword to swipe Jon’s out of the way. He would land on Jon and pin him.

It was a terrible idea.

Jon ducked out of the way as Tarak face-planted. He rolled over and yanked his gigantic sword out from underneath him.

“Ow,” he muttered.

“Tarak, stop embarrassing all of us and let Jon fight that other big fella,” Leon said.

“Fine.”

Cleve gestured for Jon to come at him. Jon had a smile at first, but then he tested Cleve with a jab and lost it immediately at witnessing the speed of the heavier man as Cleve deflected his blow.

Cleve attacked with a flurry of strikes. Tarak couldn’t tell what was happening as Jon met swords with Cleve and danced

back. The two of them shifted around as their swords slapped and scraped.

“Lord and bane,” Tarak muttered to Michael and Leon. “I was clearly outmatched.”

Jon and Cleve separated. Cleve grinned while Jon did not.

“Why did you not make such quick work with me the first time if you are that good?” Tarak asked Jon.

He and Cleve lost their fighter’s stance as Jon looked at Tarak. “Because you fight like a madman. I had no idea what you were doing.”

Cleve said, “The best swordsman does not fear skilled opponents. It’s the complete amateurs that pose the most risk, because only they might do something so dumb that the best might not expect it.” Cleve looked at Jon as if about to engage again but seemed to realize what he’d said. He turned back to Tarak. “I don’t mean to offend.”

“I am not offended. Sword fighting seems archaic to me anyway. I do not see the point when everyone uses sorcery.”

A number of Cleve’s students voiced their anger with Tarak’s comment, some sending off nasty insults about his intelligence.

“What?” Tarak accused. “Prove me wrong, then! Any of you.”

“I was enjoying fighting Jon,” Cleve said, his eyes narrowing at Tarak, “but now I need to make an example of you. Jon, next point wins.”

“Fine.”

Cleve casually strode toward Jon, eliciting a confused expression. Jon eventually attacked, but Cleve broke into the same stance as before. He moved too quickly for Tarak to see exactly what he’d done, but he seemed to use his weapon to swing Jon’s sword around until he could step in and trip Jon over his foot.

“Damn,” Jon said as he let Cleve help him up.

“Shield,” Cleve called, and one of his students tossed him a wooden one. “Seeing as how Jon can heal my injuries, just don’t burn any hair and we’re good.”

“I cannot use fire anyway,” Tarak said.

“Then defeating you would be too easy.” Cleve pointed at Leon. “Are you a fire mage?”

“You don’t want to test me. Trust me.”

“I do.”

“I could *kill* you by accident! Can’t you tell I have an anger problem? I don’t want to start a war here over nothing.”

“You won’t kill me.”

“Don’t be a fool.”

“Can you cast water as well in case the grass catches?”

“Yes.”

“Everyone clear away,” Cleve announced. His students were the first to move. Everyone else soon followed.

“Please don’t kill him,” Michael muttered to Leon.

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to use fire against him without doing that.”

“Just go easy on him.” Michael and the others moved away. “Who cares if you lose?”

“I do!”

“I’ll stand ten yards away,” Cleve announced as he paced back. Then he turned around. “Go ahead,” he announced.

Leon lifted his hand. Tarak heard a few people muttering that he didn’t have a wand.

The time it usually took for Leon to gather a fireball was about the same time it took for it to travel across ten yards, less than the span of a quick breath. But Leon made an annoyed face as nothing happened.

“Harder to cast here, hold on. All right, I got it. Ready?”

“Go ahead.”

Cleve jumped and rolled out of the way as a fireball struck where he'd stood. He dashed at Leon with incredible speed considering his size and age.

Leon muttered a curse as he formed and shot another fireball from in front of his aimed hands. Cleve crouched to lower his head below his shield. The fireball slowed his momentum but didn't stop him. He was about to impale Leon with his wooden sword when a gust of wind swept Cleve sideways.

The stocky warrior turned and braced against the wind. He strained to maneuver his shield back in front of him, and that's when he started to trudge toward Leon.

"Goddamn spells are harder to cast here!" Leon complained, then groaned in effort as the wind picked up. It pushed Cleve back but didn't roll him over. Cleve just crouched low and held steady.

"I'm assuming you can't keep that up forever!" Cleve called out. "But I can stand here as long as it takes."

"Fucker's right," Leon grumbled. His breathing had increased, but he did not yet appear fatigued, just pissed off.

Leon tried different angles with his wind, most likely attempting to take the shield out of Cleve's hands or throw him off the ground. Nothing worked.

"Watch your hair!" Leon warned as he let out a jet of fire.

Cleve kept up his shield as he darted through the fire and slammed the blunt tip of his sword into Leon's chest. Leon was hurled backward as he clutched his injury and shouted a number of curses. Cleve threw down his flaming shield and stomped on it as smoke wafted off burns on his arms.

Jon put his hand over Leon and healed him, then strolled over to Cleve and fixed his burns.

"You're lucky this was not in Dorrinthal," Leon told Cleve, though he did shake the man's hand.

"Maybe our next duel will be."

Tarak told Cleve, “That was impressive, but you would have no hope of defeating me if I were to use sorcery.”

“Try it.” Cleve paced away from Tarak. “How far do you want me?”

“It does not matter.”

He noticed then that all the krepps had come to watch. A few were pointing and asking questions of Reela and Steffen. They probably wanted to know if this was for sport or something more serious. Tarak didn’t know anymore. It almost felt like they were trying to prove something to each other.

“Jon, you could heal any injury so long as I do not kill him, correct?” Tarak asked.

“Yes,” Jon said. “But I’m sure you couldn’t kill him anyway.”

“I certainly hope not.”

Tarak almost wanted to lose. He had not foreseen how Cleve could beat Leon, but it had happened. Tarak had always wondered if someone could win against his gravity. He could not envision it, but he was starting to see that there was something exceptional about Cleve. If anyone was going to win against him, it was better here than later, when it really mattered.

Cleve remained somewhat close. Tarak judged him at five yards away considering he appeared half as far as when he’d announced he was standing ten yards from Leon.

Cleve appeared relaxed as he waited. “Go ahead,” he told Tarak.

Tarak walked a bit closer, then casually made a sphere of gravity above Cleve’s head. The warrior tried to resist its pull but could do nothing to keep himself from being plucked off the ground. He did, however, keep his composure as he was hoisted up. He ignored the black sphere above his head and watched Tarak approach.

Tarak had planned to poke the flailing warrior with his long practice sword, but with Cleve’s steady gaze on Tarak’s

sword, he found himself hesitating. Tarak reduced the pull of his gravity spell to keep Cleve suspended. He walked closer still.

Cleve was all too calm during all of this. He looked down at Tarak as if he'd been lifted by gravity a hundred times before.

Tarak went to poke Cleve in the boot, but Cleve lifted his leg out of the way. Tarak extended his sword, but Cleve kicked Tarak's sword out of his hand.

"Damn you." Tarak wanted to fetch it, but he wasn't sure he could maintain his spell accurately enough. The large warrior was extremely heavy, and Tarak's spell was exceptionally more difficult to maintain the farther his sphere of gravity remained from his person.

"Please do not die from what I am about to do," Tarak implored, "but I cannot lose this, can you see?"

"Do your worst. I won't die."

Tarak empowered his spell as much as he could. He pulled Cleve into the air, his spell moving above the warrior's head. Up and away Cleve flew until Tarak was too far from his spell to control it any longer.

Tarak realized his mistake when Reela screamed in horror at watching her husband flip off like a catapulted man.

Cleve tumbled through the air far and away, spiraling and eventually coming down at least thirty yards away from everyone. Tarak cursed as he sprinted toward Cleve with everyone else but stopped when he noticed Cleve had landed gracefully and was now jogging back toward them.

Tarak, dumbfounded, kept running toward the warrior to ensure he was all right. Yes, he was fine. He was even sprinting at Tarak...and with his weapon still in hand!

"Oh shit!" Tarak yelled as he realized the duel was not over. He turned and shrieked as Cleve closed in on him. His sword was so far! Would it really do any good, though? He felt a shadow come over him just before he was taken down.

Cleve pushed Tarak's face into the grass and poked him in the back with his sword. Then he used the back of Tarak's head to get up off him. Tarak turned around and saw the warrior offering his hand. He let Cleve help him up.

"How did you not break anything?" Tarak asked.

"I used bastial energy to strengthen my limbs."

Michael commented to Leon, "Like your strength with mana?"

"It's probably the same spell. Damn, we have a lot of testing to do. Where's that Desil person?"

"He teaches far from here," Cleve said. "But I'm sure he'll be here soon. I hope you all see now that a trained warrior is just as valuable as a sorcerer. We also train with bow, so there is the range capability to consider, too."

"Yeah, you proved your point," Leon muttered. "There aren't a whole lot of swordsmen in Dorrinthal who dedicate their lives to sword and bow like you clearly have."

"One last duel with me," Tarak proposed. "This one will be fast, and I am certain you cannot win."

"I accept. I will stand five yards away." Cleve seemed to be enjoying himself as he spoke with urgency, as if trying to squeeze in as many duels as he could.

Tarak was done going easy. "Are you ready?"

"I am."

Tarak encased Cleve in absolute blackness. Cleve gasped. Tarak's mana told him where Cleve was within. He could feel Cleve moving one way, so Tarak moved the large block of darkness the same way. Then his mana told him Cleve was dashing the other way, so Tarak followed him with the cube of black.

Then, surprisingly, Cleve started to chuckle. "All right, that is something I cannot defeat, and I'd rather not deal with you charging in with your sword. You clearly know exactly where I am. I yield."

Tarak let his spell come to an end.

“How can you follow me with that?” Cleve asked as he shook Tarak’s hand. “Can you see within it?”

“No, but my mana tells me where you are.”

Steffen commented, “Like psyche.”

“Speaking of.” Reela rolled up her sleeves. “Anyone care to duel me?”

Cleve and his students laughed as if they knew how impossible defeating her would be.

Tarak remembered how Katalaya had collapsed from Xiffrik’s psychic spell of pain. She’d said that it was the worst agony she’d ever felt. Tarak looked at the others to see if one of them might volunteer.

“Anyone?” Leon prodded.

Jon was shaking his head, though he was stepping forward. “Only because I’m curious. I was almost killed by a psychic paining me, and that was the worst feeling I’ve had in my life, but I figured out how to resist her at least somewhat. I’m curious if I can do the same to you.”

Cleve blew air out. “You should be curious of many things, but that is not one I’d waste my time with.”

“Let’s go,” Jon said anyway. “Give me your worst, Reela.”

“I apologize in advance.” She lifted her arm.

Jon couldn’t seem to make a sound, couldn’t even move, as he collapsed, but everyone could see the agony plain on his face. Reela let down her hand soon after.

Jon groaned and strained for breath. “I couldn’t speak, couldn’t *breathe*.”

“Fuck,” Leon said. “And this is what we have to deal with when we fight Xiffrik? How the fuck are we supposed to resist that?”

“You can resist it a few different ways,” Reela explained. “You can feel something stronger than the pain, but it has to be different enough from pain to take your mind elsewhere. For example, feeling determined to stop the pain is not ever going to stop it.”

“What else?” Leon asked.

“When people are asleep, psyche doesn’t work on them. Some have figured out how to put their mind in a state not exactly like sleep but similar enough that psyche cannot reach them. Desil is one of those people. He takes his mind to another plane.”

“How many people can do that?” Leon asked.

“I’ve only met three. Desil, Leida—the headmaster’s daughter—and Fatholl.”

“Of course fucking Fatholl. You’d better hit me with it, woman. I’m responsible for these sorcerers, so it’s only prudent to test it myself.”

Tarak wondered aloud, “Callie can go to the other plane. That is how she is expected to communicate with Desil. Maybe she can resist psyche as well.”

“So can your grandfather,” Michael reminded Tarak.

Reela lifted her arm. Leon collapsed but was not plagued by the same inability to speak. In fact, he had a whole lot to say, and each word was worse than the last.

“My god,” Reela uttered as she stopped her spell. “You are very troubled!” she complained.

“I apologize for my language.” Leon eased up from his hands to his knees, then shot Reela a look. “But goddamn, I’ve never felt sustained pain like that before. Xiffrik can do this to all of us, and there is only one who *might* be able to resist. Do you see the problem we are in if you all refuse to stand against him? If not, then I am not the only one who is troubled.”

“I see the problem you are facing, and I am willing to meet your king, question Fatholl, and even meet Xiffrik, as it sounds like such a meeting might be inevitable.”

“Reela,” Cleve began, “he could be dangerous even for you, especially with Fatholl there. What if they are working together?”

“Then we are all in more trouble than we’ve come to realize,” Reela answered swiftly, “and there would be all the more reason to find out as soon as possible.”

“Xiffrik isn’t working with anyone but himself,” Leon said. “Fatholl’s motives are harder for me to understand, but the elf has nothing to gain by helping Xiffrik.”

“We will figure this out, but I cannot promise we will be allies,” Reela replied, though with a caring look toward Jon. “There are still too many unknowns.”

“I understand that,” Jon said. “I appreciate your help in the meantime.”

“I take it you had no idea Fatholl had gone to Dorrinthal?” Reela questioned.

“I only found out after I returned. It’s the same with the Ancients. I had fought against demigods, as we called them—I told everyone all about the war, as I’m sure you remember—but I’d never heard of Xiffrik or of the concept of Ancients changing mana everywhere.”

Reela nodded.

A young man approached their group.

“This is Desil,” Reela announced. He appeared younger than Tarak had assumed he would be.

Tarak asked his group, “This is the sorcerer who uses mana in a way no one else can?”

“And can communicate with Callie, more importantly.” Leon stepped toward the young man with dark blue eyes and dusky brown hair. “Leon,” he introduced himself.

Desil gave his name and shook Leon’s hand, then Jon’s, Michael’s, and finally Tarak’s as they each gave their name.

“How old are you?” Tarak asked.

“Nineteen. What about you?”

“Seventeen.”

Tarak noticed Desil, Cleve, and a few others looking toward Reela. She noticed as well and told them with a laugh, “Come on, can’t all of you tell he’s not a liar?”

“No, but he is a shit,” Leon said.

Tarak gestured at everyone with frustration. “Thanks for that! Now all of them have an impression about me that was undeserved!”

“Don’t be such a shit, then. Desil, did Basen fill you in on everything?”

“No, he said he left a lot out that I will soon learn. He did mention all four of you can fly.”

“That’s right.”

“Then I’ll take you all to the queen now, or I suppose one of you will be taking me? Basen said to go with Jon.”

Jon looked well past the point of enjoying all the responsibility he had garnered for himself.

Tarak asked Desil, “Besides speak to others across long distances, what can you do with mana that is so special?”

Desil smirked. “I’ll show you before we visit the queen.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

As Tarak watched Desil figure out how to strap himself to Jon with an unnervingly quick understanding of how the harness worked, Jon turned back and told him, "I'd rather you didn't show anything until we've landed."

"No, I'm not going to cast a spell while on your back. I'm going to show you what I did with my sorcery last year."

Tarak was not the only one who looked at Leon as if their instructor might understand.

Leon did not. "What could you possibly have cast last year that we can see with our eyes now?"

Desil, smirking again, said, "You all seem like you don't like surprises."

"Damn right we don't when every goddamn surprise has been a terrible one."

"Let's go," Desil said, finished and seemingly confident he had strapped himself in properly. Jon looked over it, testing a few straps, then appeared surprised.

Desil pointed the opposite way Tarak was facing. "This way."

Jon took to the air. They all took off after.

Michael, Leon, and Tarak all had to keep distance from each other and Jon, because each of their spells could disrupt the others' flight. Jon was the only one whose mana did not pose a threat of disruption because it was contained closely around his body. That prevented Tarak from hearing any of the conversation between Desil and Jon as they flew over the Academy.

Was this really a school? It looked more like a city with a school in the middle of it. It was vastly different from Newhaven. There were no walls around the outskirts. The streets were straight and long, and everything seemed to be planned out and organized. There were certainly no beggars, no hawkers, and no children running around without

supervision. People strolled slowly as if enjoying the scenery. Others chatted leisurely with each other. Some waved to others.

I wonder what the taverns are like. I bet they are just lovely.

Peaceful mountains dwelled just outside the city. They were strangely straight and smooth on top, and relatively short for mountains. A long road split them down the middle. There didn't seem to be a single turn to it. The whole thing didn't look right. Nothing was this neat and organized in nature. It was as if not only the road between the mountains has been carved out by man but the mountains themselves had been smoothed out and...were those barricades at the far and close ends of the mountain summit? There were tall slabs of rock standing at the edges like walls of a house.

Jon landed past the rocky barricades. The flat mountaintops stretched on too far a distance for Tarak to judge accurately. Without flight, the wide path splitting them might take half a day to traverse.

“Such mountains cannot occur naturally,” Tarak commented after landing near Jon. Desil had unstrapped himself from the harness and walked toward the edge that overlooked the pathway below. He moved with fluidity as if completely unafraid of the deathly drop.

“No, these mountains were very different before,” Desil spoke as he walked. He stopped near the edge, crouched down, and ran his head along the smooth wall. “This is my sorcery.” He tapped the mountainside as if it was a prized squash he had grown.

Leon asked, “What are you saying you've done?”

Desil got up and extended his arms with a smug grin. “This.” He gestured all around the flat mountaintop. “And that.” He pointed down at the road.

Leon was shaking his head. “No. I don't believe it.”

Desil knelt down and smacked the mountaintop with his palm. “Give it a feel.”

Everyone showed their confusion.

“Go on,” Desil said. “Give it a good hard slap.”

Tarak knelt down with everyone else and slapped his palm against the smooth mountaintop he stood upon.

“It’s hard?” Desil asked rhetorically.

“Good god!” Michael gasped and pointed at Desil. “No way.”

“You’re ruining the surprise,” Desil complained.

Michael didn’t seem to hear him as he was telling everyone else, “Charlie predicted there would be someone who could change the state of nature like Charlie can change metal.”

“I want to see it before I believe it,” Leon told Desil.

Desil waved his hand. Everyone startled as their boots fell into the mountaintop as if it had become mud.

“For all that is holy,” Leon uttered as he tried to pull out a boot, only to almost fall as he wobbled.

Michael did actually topple over, splashing into the stone. Could it even be called stone anymore?

Desil relaxed his limbs, and the stone reverted back to its usual form, trapping Tarak’s boots within. He almost twisted his ankle trying to pull them out before one finally sprang free. He bent down and used his hands to help himself free the second one. The others needed a bit more help from Desil as he softened the stone only where they stood.

“You reshaped these mountains, all of them?” Jon asked in awe.

Desil went down to his knees and flattened out the lumps in the stone that his little trick had created. “I did. The road between Kyrro and Tenred used to be twisted and sloped, making travel difficult on foot and just about impossible with a wagon of any kind. Now trade is easy between the territories.”

“I’ve heard about the constant warring between you all,” Jon said, “and that lasting peace was finally only reached recently, but I hadn’t gotten a good look at these mountains before. Isn’t there anyone else who can do what you do and helped you?”

“A few have some skill with Majlan—that’s what we call it, magic of the land—but none seem able to reach my skill. It keeps me busy.”

“This is too much,” Leon said. “No wall could keep you out. No castle.”

“No dungeon, either,” Desil added.

“There has to be something you can’t move with Majlan?” Leon asked.

Desil leaned away slightly. “Yes, but why are you so intent on knowing that?”

“I’m the instructor of these pups, and I’d like to know what I’m dealing with.”

“Well, I’d rather keep my limitations to myself for now, thank you very much, but I would be happy to escort you all to the queen now.”

“One thing first,” Leon said as he reached into his bag and took out a familiar box with a glass panel. Tarak remembered it as a vibmtaer. The glass panel changed color depending on the frequency of mana used nearby. “Cast that spell again, preferably somewhere not under our feet.”

“What is that?” Desil asked as he took it from Leon’s hands and held it up for investigation.

Leon snatched it back. “It’s called a vibmtaer. It translates the frequency of mana into color so I can tell what you’re casting. I can already feel you’re in the elemental tree, my tree, and I have a good feeling what I’m about to see when you cast your spell. The glass will change to a blood red. Watch. Do it.”

“I don’t quite understand some of the stuff you’re saying, but here it goes.” Desil lifted his hand and seemed to cast as

Leon held the vibmtaer nearby.

Leon was nodding as the glass panel changed to the color he'd predicted, red like blood, though maybe a bit darker. "Charlie and I predicted this. You're casting the mastery spell of the elemental tree, Upper C, Middle C, and Lower C. If I had a color chart with me I could show you what I mean, but for now you'll just have to take my word for it. Show him an illusion, Tarak."

Knowing where Leon was going with this, Tarak made an illusion of a black wall around them.

"Whoa," Desil uttered in shock as he turned to look in every direction.

Tarak had a bit of fun, slowly enclosing the growing walls of black around them as if they would be crushed.

"Whoa!" Desil shrieked as he spun and looked for an out.

"Stop that, Tarak," Michael said. "It's creepy."

Tarak let his spell come to an end.

"That was just an illusion?" Desil asked.

"Yes." Tarak made a small black sphere near Desil.

The mage wafted his hand through it. "That is incredible."

"I use the same notes as you do," Tarak told Desil. "But my spell is in the divination tree."

"Notes and trees?" Desil asked.

"It's simple," Leon said. "Everyone has mana, but only sorcerers have figured out how to use it. A spell requires mana to be at the right frequency and with the right intention behind the cast. You and Tarak are both splitting your mana in the exact same way—into three of the same frequencies. Show him." Leon held the vibmtaer in front of Tarak.

He cast a simple illusion of a black sphere away from everyone and watched the glass panel change to the same red color as Desil's spell. He had never actually tested these complex spells in front of the vibmtaer because there had been

no need once he had learned how mana worked. It was fascinating to see someone using the same notes with such a different result.

“Whether it’s making any sense to you or not, we’d better go see your queen,” Leon said. “There’s lots to do.”

“I understand what you’re saying.” Desil stepped into the harness still attached to Jon and started looping belts into buckles. “You’re saying that we all have something called mana that seems to be connected to us, and it’s mana that transforms into a spell.”

“Yes, actually.” Leon sounded surprised.

“But that’s wrong.”

“My ass!”

“It is!” Desil argued, and undid the straps to free himself. “Many people make fireballs by using what’s already in the air, bastial and sartious energy. It has nothing to do with ‘mana’ that’s connected to them. I would say psyche has something to do with that, because psychics manipulate our natural energy in order to make us feel things, but bastial and sartious energy come from the earth, nature, and the air. It’s all around us. I can feel it right now.” Desil closed his fist. A ball of bright light hovered in front of him. “I would be able to make a fireball with this, but I have no control over sartious energy.”

Leon pointed at the glowing ball of light. “That did not come from the air. It came from your mana.”

“Sir, it did not. I can feel it, and I can feel bastial energy within my body. They are different. In fact, I can use bastial energy in my body to cycle—oh god, this is so hard to describe to someone who doesn’t understand bastial energy. Let me see. I can use my own body’s natural bastial energy to keep up my stamina. It allows people who know how to cycle to move quicker and run longer. Cleve is a master at it. He can even use it for practically inhuman strength and speed.”

“Wait, just wait.” Leon shook his head as he held up his palm. “What you’re describing is strength through mana.”

“Through bastial energy, yes.”

“No, that’s not what I said.” Leon approached Desil with the vibmtaer. “Cast it.”

Desil shrugged and put his hand nearby. Leon predicted the color before it showed up. “It will be orange.”

The vibmtaer proved his words true.

“What are you saying this means?” Desil asked.

“I’m saying *that’s* mana!” Leon gestured at the vibmtaer with frustration. “It’s all mana. We have it all figured out, so I have no idea why you think you feel something in the air when it’s coming from your body.”

“Bastial energy used for stamina *is* from my body!” Desil replied with equal frustration. “But bastial energy used for light, heat, and fire is in the *air*. It’s possible to draw upon your natural bastial energy for extra power, but the result is detrimental—chills and sapped strength. Mages draw from the air. I am certain of this.”

“There is no mana in the air for anyone to connect to!” Leon shouted. “I’m getting angry.”

“Yes, you are,” Michael agreed.

“Test it,” Jon said.

Everyone looked at him.

“Test Desil’s bastial energy from the air.”

“It’s not my bastial energy,” Desil specified, “but go ahead and test it.” He closed his fist and made another ball of bright light. Tarak stepped closer to see if he could feel anything, but his senses only picked up a lot of heat.

Leon held the vibmtaer close. Everyone watched the glass panel turn the same orange color as before.

“Bastial energy,” Desil said.

“Don’t speak like you understand anything about what this is saying,” Leon spat back. “Now that I’m closer I can feel that you’re not using my mortal magic tree with *this* spell, but

you were with your ‘cycling’ bullshit.” Leon reached up as if to touch the burning ball of light. “What the fuck is this?” he muttered to himself. “It’s the same note as Strength in the mortal magic tree, but it’s in another tree. What *are* you?” he asked the energy.

“Don’t yell, but I think I know what it is,” Desil said.

“What?” Leon asked.

“Bastial energy,” Desil repeated.

“You fuck—”

Tarak grabbed Leon’s arm, but Leon seemed calmer than Tarak had first thought as he relaxed in Tarak’s grasp.

“I’m not going to hit the fool! You think I’m crazy?”

Tarak let go, and Desil let his spell come to an end. The ball of bright light scattered.

“Even if he’s wrong about what he’s doing, he’s still doing something incredible,” Leon seemed to be telling Desil. “So let me get this straight. You can convert stone into liquid ___”

“And water into ice or vapor, and dirt and soil into liquid, and more.”

“You can do all that,” Leon continued, “and you can strengthen your body with mana.”

“I’m not as good with strengthening my body as I am about keeping up my stamina.”

“And you can also make light and heat.”

“I can call bastial energy to cluster together from the air, and yes that creates light and heat. It can even form fireballs when combined with a little sartious energy, also from the air, but I have no grasp on sartious. Bastial energy is very easy to manipulate for many people here. It isn’t in Dorrinthal?”

“Not easy, no. And I wasn’t done. You can also enter the plane of mana to speak with people across far distances?”

“I can, yes.”

“At will?”

“Sure. There’s more that can be done in the other plane than just speaking to people across long distances, by the way.”

“Like resist psyche?” Leon asked.

“Yes.”

“Resist psyche how well?” he asked.

“I can make myself completely immune.”

Tarak shared a look of shock and delight with Michael and Jon, but Leon put up his hands as if halting their reaction.

“Take yourself to the other plane. I want to see what color comes up on the vibmtaer.”

“First I would like to understand how it is you can tell exactly what my mana is doing by the color displayed.”

“The frequency—”

“Is converted to a color, I understand that, but didn’t you say earlier that a spell involves splitting my mana into multiple frequencies?”

“Yes, the vibmtaer is combining the multiple colors of each frequency when there is more than one. That’s why it’s sometimes impossible to tell what someone’s casting if we get a color like brown. There are too many possibilities. But if I have a good idea what to expect and I see that same color, that is proof that my theory is right.”

“What do you expect to see when I move my mind to the other plane?”

“I have come to expect it is another mastery spell.”

“Which means it should show the same notes as my Majlan, and his illusions, blood red.”

“You catch on way too quick.”

Desil gave a wry smile.

Michael asked, “So which tree would this mastery spell be in?”

“Through testing with Callie, I’ve come to believe that all her new spells, including this one which she cannot reproduce for the vibmtaer, are in my tree of mortal magic—the same tree psyche is in,” Leon replied. “I confirmed it with Fatholl’s spells.”

Desil had his hands lifted but lowered them. “Did you say Fatholl?”

“Yes, we know what he’s done...” Leon began, but Desil’s face of anger seemed to stop him. “Didn’t Basen mention him?”

“No. Fatholl’s with you?” Desil shouted. “Fatholl the elf?”

“Yes,” Leon answered.

“When? How?” But Desil put up his hand as if to interrupt himself. “You can’t possibly know what he’s done, or you would’ve brought him up as soon as you saw me.”

“We’ve heard all about him.”

“So you’ve heard he tried to kill me?” Desil shouted.

“That...” Michael uttered, “we hadn’t heard.”

“Yes, on many occasions!” Desil yelled louder. “And he imprisoned and tortured Leida! What is he doing with you?”

Tarak remembered Leida as the name Reela gave for the headmaster’s daughter. She was probably romantically involved with Desil.

Tarak decided he had let Leon do enough damage already and spoke before Leon could. “Fatholl showed up and manipulated everyone with psyche, then admitted he had done so as proof of how easily we can be manipulated. He convinced us to let him help us, and he proved himself by standing beside us in combat and killing our enemies. We could never trust him completely even if he fought beside us, which is why Reela will be going back with us to question him.”

“Good. That is good!” Desil repeated. “God, Fatholl! The elves should’ve hanged him.”

“The switching plane spell,” Leon reminded him.

Desil nodded. “Hope I don’t feel Fatholl in there. I haven’t been in a long time.” He closed his eyes, then opened them again, and he didn’t seem wholly there anymore. There was a sheen to his gaze as his eyelids lowered as if he was falling asleep.

Leon showed the vibmtaer to Desil, but the sorcerer didn’t seem to notice it, so Leon pointed it toward everyone else. It was the same red color as the other mastery spells.

Desil came back to himself. He turned the vibmtaer for a look this time and nodded. “I think we have a lot to learn from each other.”

“We sure do.”

“Off to the queen for now.” Desil stepped into the harness attached to Jon and started strapping himself in again.

Tarak walked up to Desil and asked, “Did Basen tell you about Callie?”

“He did mention I might be able to communicate with someone of that name.”

“Did you hear from her just now?”

“No. It’s unlikely I can reach her unless she’s ready to receive me and I know where to look for her.”

Tarak didn’t very much like the idea of Callie “receiving” anyone except Tarak, but he ignored the urge to mention it. “Are you saying it will be impossible?”

“Not at all. She should be able to find me easily even if I have trouble locating her.”

“How is that?” Tarak asked.

“Because I know how to extend my presence like calling out my location. I’m sure we’ll figure out a way to communicate, but she might need a lot of practice first.”

Michael asked, “What’s your queen like?”

“She can be firm, strict, even uncompromising, but she’s smart and does what’s best for everyone.”

“Sounds like Nykal,” Michael commented.

“They’re very different,” Jon said. “And Desil’s leaving out something important.”

“What?” Michael asked as Desil smiled at Jon.

“She’s a psychic,” Jon said.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Tarak followed the others through the air a little farther behind like before to keep from disrupting them with his gravity spell. They passed back over the Academy and kept heading south toward a dense forest shaped somewhat like a Y. Jon shifted to fly adjacent to the tall trees and not over them. He headed over a large city, and this one did remind Tarak much more of Newhaven.

Kyrro City was the name of their capital here, where a castle dwelled in the middle and dwarfed everything around it. The city itself followed the trend Tarak was used to of twisted and crowded roads, dirt in easy to wash places, and a noise of busy voices.

The castle was taller and larger than Nykal's castle in Newhaven. There was no wall around it. The courtyard acted as an entrance to the castle, decorated by trimmed shrubbery and stables and other dwellings Tarak was less familiar with. Most were made of the same white painted stone of the castle, with smoke billowing out of little chimneys.

Tarak caught up as Desil and Jon finished removing the harness. "This is a beautiful place," Tarak said.

They all started the long walk down the courtyard toward the large white doors of the keep.

"I'm going to tell Beatrix you said that," Desil replied. "She keeps changing the design. It's been the only thing she's been indecisive about since she became queen last year."

"There's not much protection outside the castle," Leon commented as he glanced around.

"There used to be. Kyrro has a long history of kings dying from stabbings, poisonings, and hangings. Even Beatrix's father was poisoned not long ago, but we all have a feeling it's going to be different now. Beatrix removed the curtain wall around the castle. She's made it more accessible to everyone."

"Including enemies."

“We have none,” Desil told Leon.

“You will.”

“Yes, we will, and it is because of Beatrix’s open leadership and accessibility that everyone will fight to defend our land.”

“The poor won’t,” Leon said. “The rich who want more will use the war.”

“No. We have a weapon.”

“Don’t say love or some shit like that.”

“A real weapon,” Desil said. “Of which the threat is enough to deter anyone from attacking.”

Jon nodded as he faced Leon. “I haven’t seen it, but I’ve learned how it works. It could destroy an entire army in seconds.”

“What is this weapon?” Leon asked.

“It’s hidden in pieces so as to be assembled when necessary,” Desil explained.

“Sounds like a lie.”

“Ask Fatholl about it when Reela is there if you don’t believe me,” Desil suggested.

“What does Fatholl have to do with it?”

Desil stared at Leon as if expecting him to figure it out.

“That’s why he tried to kill you,” Leon realized. “You had something to do with the creation of this weapon, and he wanted it.”

Desil nodded.

“What is the ale like here?” Tarak asked.

“Tarak,” Leon chided.

“Judge me. I do not care.” He had tried to find a better time to ask, but there had been none.

“Oakshen has the best ale in the world,” Desil said. “It’s the city east of here. There’s dozens of bars you could try.”

“Bars?” Tarak asked.

“A place that serves ale.”

“So a tavern?” Tarak figured.

“No, a tavern has food and is open throughout the day. Bars only open at night and are for the sole purpose of drinking and socializing.”

“Now that—”

“There’s no time for that,” Leon interrupted.

“Leon, one must meet the people here as well as the sorcerers. What better way than to drink with them?”

“Don’t you think I want to try out these bars, Tarak? But we have a job to do.”

They arrived at the castle, where a couple of guards awaited. They both looked toward Desil.

“Foreigners,” Desil explained.

“From where?” asked one man.

“Dorrinthal.”

Both guards seemed confused. “Where is that?” one asked Desil.

“Far away. We can trust them.”

The guards moved aside and gestured for them to enter.

“Damn,” Michael muttered with surprise. “You have a lot of clout for a nineteen-year-old.”

“The queen and I went through a lot together.”

“Don’t tell me she’s your age,” Leon griped.

“No, she’s...in her twenties, I think? Maybe early thirties?”

“That’s not much better,” Leon mumbled.

“You don’t look older than thirty,” Desil accused as they started up a long flight of stairs.

The room they had entered was not a place Tarak could even comfortably call a room anymore. It was the largest chamber he'd ever stepped into, like walking inside a hollowed-out mountain with white stone walls and black wood making a long staircase that traversed back and forth from the awning of each floor.

"Mana has given me the appearance of youth," Leon answered.

Desil stopped. "Are you saying you are going to live longer because of mana?"

"Yes. Keep going." He gestured for Desil to turn and go on. Desil did but then stopped and shot a quizzical look back over his shoulder. He then went on. Nope, one more look.

"What?" Leon asked with irritation.

"How old *are* you?"

"Old enough to be tired of dealing with the same shit just a different year. Where's that queen of yours?"

"I have no idea. Usually out and about."

"Then what are we doing in the castle?"

"There's a pair of pants in my quarters I've been meaning to grab for a while."

"All right, Tarak. Now I'm going to hit him." Tarak restrained Leon as he continued. "We have things to do and places to be!"

Desil asked a man headed down the stairs, "Where's Beatrix now?"

The man yelled from the staircase, his voice echoing around, "Where's the queen?"

A woman a floor above leaned over the banister and yelled back, "At the dining quarters, last I saw."

"No," yelled a man Tarak could not see from his vantage point. "She finished up and went to her quarters."

Desil headed back down the stairs. Tarak and the others moved aside for him to take the lead.

“Who’s looking for me?” shouted a woman from the first floor. She stepped out from a nearby wall.

There wasn’t a hint of fear or worry in the eyes of anyone in the castle, and Tarak soon realized that this was because all of it had found a permanent home in the expressive and dark eyes of the queen. She had black hair that had been tied back and wore a tunic that, besides its blue color, was rather normal. She had light skin with round cheeks, freckled and reddened by the sun.

“I was really hoping the fetch my pants,” Desil was muttering to himself as he waved to the queen at the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve come with foreigners!”

“More?” She sounded bothered. She *looked* bothered as well as she put her hands on her hips and waited, but she relaxed as she seemed to notice something, or someone. “Oh, Jon. It’s good to see you again.”

He stopped on the stairs to bow, but Michael bumped into him. They both shrieked as Jon tumbled down the last five steps and landed on the queen’s feet.

“Michael...” he groaned.

The queen bent down and started to help him up, but Michael arrived to finish the job.

“I’m sorry, Jon, but did you have to stop like that?”

Leon ignored them as he gave a quick and stiff bow. “I’m Leon. I’m in charge of these runts. You know Jon, but that’s Michael and Tarak. Is there somewhere we can speak in private? There’s a lot we need to discuss.”

“We can talk right over here.” She gestured at a table oddly positioned in a corner nearby, close to the front doors. There were several chairs around it, all worn as if heavily used. The queen walked over and sat down at the nearest chair, then gestured for everyone to join her.

Desil was next to sit down. “How have you been?” he asked her.

“Things were a bit calmer until recently. And you?”

“I’m still failing to teach anyone Majlan, but Basen has kept me busy.”

“A talent of his, often at the detriment of everyone else. So he’s returned?”

“Just recently, with this lot.” Desil gestured quickly at them without looking over. “He’s gone off to rest.”

“Probably nearly killed himself establishing those portals.”

“Actually,” Tarak interjected as he sat on Desil’s other side. “It was a rift exploding that nearly killed him, and me. Sent me to the dark realm, it did.”

“*What?*” Desil asked.

Beatrix asked him, “Basen hasn’t spoken of that?”

Desil shook his head. “He did mention there was a lot to tell me but that I could trust these people enough to send Reela back with them.” Desil then asked Tarak, “What is the dark realm?”

“My warning,” Beatrix interrupted Desil.

“Oh right.”

She waited until everyone’s gaze was on her. “I tell this to everyone upon our first meeting. It is a warning. I am a psychic, and I will call out any lies. Announcing lies has made all my dealings easier than guessing why one might be lying, and it promotes the transparency that I’ve been trying to cultivate. If you don’t like it, you can leave.”

“I’d like it better if I could call out your lies as well,” Leon replied, “but I’ll take what I can get.”

“I don’t lie. Now get on with your business and keep your accusations to yourself.”

“I didn’t mean you’re going to lie—never mind. Oh wait, you can feel when I’m genuine, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then I will say it. I’m going to tell you everything, in fact. I don’t expect you to lie. I never did, but I also don’t expect you to help us. You seem to be set in your own ways with sorcery here, and lord knows change is not easy to implement until there’s a problem. We have the problem. Not you, but unless we have an army of sorcerers here ready to kill an Ancient when he runs from us in Dorrinthal, we’re never going to resolve our problem, and we’re going to lose people along the way. I can see by your face that you don’t understand what I’m trying to say. Let me tell it to you simply.”

“Let me,” Tarak interrupted. “I can use my grandfather as an example of an Ancient.”

Leon turned up his hand and gestured for Tarak to go on.

“Who is your grandfather?” Beatrix asked.

“That big arselicker who disrupted a bunch of hawkers in the market and is now sitting in your dungeon.”

“Oh, him. He looks much too young to be your grandfather.”

“That is why he is called an Ancient. He is over a thousand years old.”

She squinted her eyes. “I can tell you think you are telling the truth, but how could you possibly *know* that to be true?”

“We know, Queen, and there are more of them. They are all the same. They change sorcery to make spells more accessible, which causes other spells to become more difficult. The more that sorcerers use the Ancient’s changed sorcery, the more powerful that Ancient becomes because of their connection to the system of mana they have manipulated. Their change is not permanent, and although they are immortal, they are not gods. My grandfather came here with my father. They mean well, Queen, even if they are strange. They wish to stop the Ancient who changed sorcery here eons

ago. We have had the extreme displeasure of meeting him recently because he has come from Ovira to Dorrinthal to change our currently free system of mana. Before him, we recently dealt with the Ancient from Aathon who changed mana there. She had also come to Dorrinthal to change mana, and we stood against her. She almost killed me, but we drove her away without a major loss. Xiffrik has proven to be more frightening to us because he possesses power unlike any man. He is a psychic, a portal-maker, a fire mage, and he can create green blocks of something-or-other at his whim. He uses them to fly around like an annoying little fly.”

“Sartious energy,” Beatrix said.

Tarak pointed with a nod. “That is it.”

“He can fly with sartious energy?” the queen asked.

“We have seen him.”

“He needs to be stopped,” Leon added. “Once he changes sorcery, he is weakened for a time. I don’t know how long or how weak. Like Tarak said, we stopped Monrra, the Ancient who came before Xiffrik, before she could change mana to her liking. They both tried to convince us of the same thing. They want us to side with them while they weaken themselves to change sorcery. They claim they will grow strong and then protect our land from future Ancients and will limit sorcery to something that benefits our people. We fought back Monrra, and we’ll fight back Xiffrik, but both of them are going to keep coming until we kill them or reverse their change of mana in their home kingdom. That means we need your help for Xiffrik, and we’re probably going to need the help of the people in Aathon for Monrra. We’ll worry about that later. I’m glad you’re a psychic. You can tell how worried I am. We cannot allow these Ancients to have unlimited power, which they will if we do nothing.”

Beatrix had a look as if she’d been told she now had two kingdoms to watch over. A moment later, the annoyance left her face. She glanced at Tarak.

“I met Basael briefly. You seem unlike him.”

“I am. He is a powerful narcissist, but I still think he should be released from your dungeon. He came here to make your people aware of Xiffrik and the limitations of sorcery Xiffrik has imposed. Release him back into our care, and we will make use of him in this war against the Ancients.”

“Hold on, Tarak,” Leon said, then glanced at Beatrix. “Release him, yes, but we don’t want to deal with him any more than you do. Tarak’s right. He’s dangerous and full of himself, but the krepps in Ovira—who also seem to be shits like the krepps in Dorrinthal—have taken a liking to him. We’ll convince him to stay out of Kyrro, with the krepps, and let him build up an army of the rudimentary lizards to face Xiffrik. It’ll buy us time, at least.”

Beatrix faced Desil. “What has Basen said about all of this?”

“He told me to trust them and that they have incredible sorcery at their disposal, which would greatly benefit our kingdom. He also mentioned they are good people.”

“I’ll tell you what the headmaster thinks.” Leon leaned toward the queen. “He met Xiffrik, like the rest of us. You’ll speak to the portal-maker, I’m sure, but I’m confident you could save us all the trouble by getting your act together now while he’s resting. Xiffrik is going to return to your land if he is not here already. He’s beyond the skill of a normal psychic. He can read thoughts, feel intentions, and go through your mind like it’s a goddamn open book. Our kingdom and lives are a game to him because he’s confident he will take Dorrinthal as he has this kingdom. I don’t want to see what happens when he realizes he might lose. We all have to be ready for it.”

“Are you suggesting fighting him?”

“Yes. He has too much power, and he strives for more.”

“How can you be certain that he or any ‘Ancient,’ as you call them, are the ones responsible for the differences in sorcery between our kingdoms?”

“Because of my grandfather,” Tarak said. “Sorcery was different in Dorrinthal because of him, and these people remembered what it was like. Only once he and his offspring left did it change to the state it is now.”

“It’s free now,” Leon added. “It wasn’t before. Read my energy or whatever. Tarak’s grandfather had changed it to something terrible, and a lot of lives were lost. Now that mana is completely free, we are still learning everything it has to offer, but so far you’ve seen from Jon that we have flying and healing. We also have gravity, light, time, all the elements, strength, summoning, portals, control of metal, tracking, and more.”

“Explain time, control of metal, and tracking,” Beatrix requested.

“Basen will explain all of it. I don’t want to be here any longer than I need to be.”

“Have Basen explain callrings, also,” Tarak told the queen. “He was very impressed by them.”

Desil had his eyes closed, his head down, and now he was murmuring something. Everyone seemed to notice, but it was only Beatrix who had a worried expression.

“Desil, who are you speaking with?”

“It’s him. Xiffrik,” Desil answered.

“Tell him nothing!” Leon demanded.

“I haven’t, but he knows where we are. He says he’s on the way.” Desil opened his eyes and lifted his head.

“Does he know we’re here with you?” Leon asked.

“I don’t see how he could. He was just asking who I am, and when I answered, he requested my help introducing him to the queen.”

“Secure the castle!” Leon yelled as he stood up. “Have your sorcerers and archers ready. We could end this fucker right here and now!”

The queen stayed in her seat as she leaned toward Desil. “What is your take on this?”

“Didn’t you hear me?” Leon slapped the table. “This might be the only time we could ever surprise him, and surprise might be the only way to take him down.”

Guards gathered around the table. “My queen?” one asked.

“Hold,” she said as she finally stood. “I cannot put an order out to kill someone when they have committed no crimes and shown no semblance of a threat to anyone.”

“Because the threat he poses to our mana is not a threat to you,” Leon growled.

“You claimed earlier that you have met him, and you didn’t attack him then. Why would you wish to attack him now, in my kingdom, and with my army? Care to answer that?”

Leon sat. “Shit. I didn’t even realize I was trying to put the responsibility on you and yours. Damn, you’re right. I apologize, but everything I’ve said about him is true. He must be stripped of his power or killed if he refuses.”

She looked displeased as she frowned, but then she did nod. She looked at Desil.

“Did he say anything else?”

“No.”

“Queen Beatrix,” Jon said and waited for her to look at him. “I met Xiffrik when I returned to Dorrinthal. He summoned a desmarl into an underground cavern beneath a city. Tarak was there. The desmarl nearly killed both of us along with other sorcerers. Many people could’ve died. I’d even go so far as to say the entire city could’ve been destroyed if that beast was not stopped by us. When Xiffrik revealed himself after, he was entertained by all of it.”

“There’s something you’re not telling me,” she said with lowered eyelids.

“Well, he *claimed* that he brought a desmarl from Greenedge to collapse the earth onto an unstable rift that would’ve eventually destroyed much of the city, but I don’t believe him.”

“You don’t?” Beatrix questioned.

“All right, I suppose I’m not entirely sure. But he did almost kill all of us. If he really cared about our lives, he could’ve come through first to warn everyone that he would collapse the rift. I think he wanted to see what kind of opposition he might be dealing with if he was not welcomed to change sorcery.”

“I agree with Jon,” Tarak said.

Desil extended his arms, then held still as if he’d felt the start of a quake. “He’s teleported here.”

“Where?” Beatrix asked.

“To Basen’s location, outside the wall.”

“He can access Basen’s portals?”

Leon said, “That’s exactly right.”

“All of them?” Beatrix asked with fear.

“And more, I’m sure,” Leon told her confidently.

About twenty guards had gathered around the table by then. The queen faced them. “Barricade the door.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

The door slammed shut. Planks of wood as thick as Tarak slid into holders behind the door. A slew of swordsmen in simple leather armor took their place ten paces back. Archers filled in behind them, as well as robed sorcerers. More guards came and filled just about every open space. Tarak stayed with his group beside Desil and the queen, behind everyone else.

Xiffrik's muffled voice came through the door. "Knock knock."

Beatrix moved closer. "What is your intention with coming here?"

"I have come...!" He stopped. "I have a whole speech prepared for the queen."

"I am the queen. Say what you've come here to say."

Xiffrik cleared his throat. "I have come to introduce myself. I am Xiffrik, the one responsible for keeping mana safe and accessible for all people in Ovira and Greenedge." He paused. "I do not want or need anything from you or your people. You know this door is really—!" He grumbled something that Tarak couldn't pick up. "This would go a whole lot better if we could see each other."

Desil asked Beatrix, "Can you sense anything through the door?"

"His energy comes through faintly. There is no aggression." She raised her voice to tell her guardsmen, "Open the door."

No one questioned her, though Leon seemed surprised as he sucked in a breath as if to say something. Beatrix spoke to him before he could utter a word.

"I don't care how powerful you think he is. He will be slain if he tries anything."

Surprisingly, Leon began to nod. "I hope he does," he muttered.

Perhaps Tarak had overestimated Xiffrik. These people were confident. They had probably faced many psychics before.

The doors parted and revealed a grinning Xiffrik. He lifted his arms. “I am Xiffrik, the one responsible for keeping mana safe and accessible for all people in Ovira and Greenedge—”

“You already said that,” Beatrix interrupted, causing the Ancient to lose his smile and his gesture.

“Yes, but I lost my place.” He lifted his arms again. “I do not want or need anything from you or your people—hey, what are they doing here?” He pointed at Tarak and the others.

Leon said, “We’ve come to convince these people to break your system of mana. What are you going to do about that?”

“I’m going to finish my speech, that’s what.” The Ancient lifted his arms again. “It’s because of me that there have been no incidents with mana resulting in the deaths of innocent people. I disabled artistry and esitry from reaching here naturally.”

“You also disabled healing and water through mana,” Leon interrupted. “And a whole lot of other spells.”

Xiffrik glared at him from the sides of his eyes but did not drop his arms as he continued. “You may not be aware of everything I have done, but you can confirm with psyche that it all started as a way to keep the people in Greenedge, and later in Ovira, safe.”

“I’ve heard about all I can handle,” Leon told Xiffrik. “You are a prime example of someone who was not punished enough when you were younger. Well, there’s no age too late to start teaching someone a lesson.” He told the queen. “Have your archers shoot him in the nuggins and be done with this charade.”

Xiffrik pointed aggressively at Leon. “Maybe someone should shoot you in the nuggins!”

“No one’s shooting anyone.” The queen eyed Xiffrik skeptically. “You are the Ancient who controls all mana? You and you alone?”

“Well.” He dusted off his shoulders and fixed his hair as if receiving the highest praise. “Yes, me alone.”

“I’ve met a lot of powerful people, but you, Xiffrik, you are the worst.”

His smile flattened.

“Where were you during the atrocities committed by kings past?” Beatrix accused.

“I was unaware. Asleep!”

“What do you mean asleep?”

“After I changed mana, everyone was happy and worshiped me as their god. I stuck around for a century punishing wrongdoers and mediating peace between leaders. Eventually, I wasn’t needed anymore. I was bored, so I put myself to sleep. I figured someone like me would eventually come and try to take over. I would stay asleep until then, when I would *rise up* and protect my people once more.” He lifted his arms again. “The time is now. I feel all sorts of Ancients buzzing around these parts but even more interested in Dorrinthal. Upon further investigation I found out that mana has become free over there. I can’t have just anyone going there and changing it to their will. First of all, people are going to be peeved. Second of all, they might become more powerful than I am and eventually come here to threaten me and my people!”

Desil asked Beatrix, “Is he telling the truth?”

“It seems so, but he may be able to lie.”

“What would my reason be to lie?” Xiffrik asked rhetorically. “I’m already going to force the good sorcerers of Dorrinthal to work with me. Well, I can’t say all of them are good.” He wiggled a finger in Leon’s direction. “But most of them. Eventually even the angry one will realize that he has to work with me, and all of you will be better off after that. You

don't want Monrra controlling your territory, or Basael. They're *way* worse than I am."

"How well do you know my grandfather?" Tarak asked.

"He's been bickering with me in the plane of mana, and so have Monrra and others I don't believe you have met. I really wish all of you would trust me. I'm not so bad, but they are. No offense to you, Tarak, but your grandfather is verging on delusional. Now that's someone whose behavior warrants a shot in the nuggins. Am I right, Leon?"

"Just because he needs his nuggins shot doesn't mean you don't, also."

"Be quiet about shooting in the nuggins!" Beatrix announced. "I'm tired of all of you gross men in my castle. Monrra is at least a woman?" she asked Xiffrik.

Xiffrik, Leon, and even Tarak started complaining about Monrra all at the same time. They stopped when Beatrix silenced them by pushing out her palms. "You." She pointed at Xiffrik. "Speak."

"You think we're gross, wait until you see the disgusting creatures she'll bring through your parts. She has a whole army of them."

"They are of nightmares," Tarak agreed.

"But I can stop her," Xiffrik continued.

"On your own?" Beatrix asked.

"If she comes here? Yes. I'll scare her off with no problems or dangers to the people."

"And if she doesn't scare so easily?"

"I'll slay her and her nightmarish creatures before any harm comes to anyone here."

"What if I tell you to go to Aathon and slay her?"

"Well..." He took on a look as if she'd asked him to feed an entire city of people. "That's not so easy."

“So what I’m understanding is that there’s one of you, an Ancient, everywhere except in Dorrinthal right now?”

He nodded. “Everywhere that matters.”

“And many Ancients now want to change sorcery in Dorrinthal so that they will be empowered when the people there use their new system of mana.”

“Yup.”

“But the process of changing mana will weaken the Ancient for a time.”

“That’s right.”

“And all of you want to kill each other, but none of you have even a chance of doing that if you travel too far from the system of mana that empowers you.”

He clicked his tongue and snapped a finger toward her.

“If Monrra or Basael controls this mana, will they eventually be powerful enough to venture out and kill the other Ancients, like yourself?”

“Not Basael, because he controls nothing right now, but Monrra will be *incredibly* dangerous. So would the other Ancients. Yes, if they control Dorrinthal for even a few decades, they may grow to be powerful enough to come here and kill me, then take this system of mana for their own manipulation. There would be no hope of ever stopping them.”

Beatrix asked, “Leon, why not support Tarak’s grandfather and have him change mana to how you want? Then we can go back to the stalemate that existed for so long.”

Xiffrik, Leon, and Tarak all started complaining about Basael at the same time.

Beatrix pushed out her palms to silence them again. “I’m getting really tired of this. You, Leon, speak.”

“Basael is an arrogant fuck who knows nothing about what people need,” Leon replied. “We’re better off making mana free everywhere. Band together. Have your most powerful sorcerer undo Xiffrik’s change and then defend that

sorcerer against Xiffrik's wrath. Eventually none of the Ancients will be powerful enough to matter anymore."

"No one here can undo my change," Xiffrik said confidently.

Leon continued, "The only reason they've become this strong is because the idiots of the past let them change mana, and they've had centuries to become more powerful. That can be undone. Basael is an example. He's a strong sorcerer, but he couldn't stand against even a small group of us now that he no longer controls mana in our kingdom."

"Or—" Xiffrik put on an innocent look as he pointed at himself. "You choose one Ancient to trust and let him deal with the rest. That sounds much easier to me. Beatrix, you can either make this easy or difficult. The rest of them in Dorrinthal have made this difficult. Now they will be very unhappy with the way I have to do things."

"You see, he threatens us," Leon spoke as if telling on his brother to their mother.

"None of you will be harmed by me," Xiffrik protested. "I wouldn't say that's a threat."

"Then who are you going to harm?" Leon asked.

"You can't possibly expect me to reveal my plan?"

"Leon," Tarak reminded, "he just talks and talks, every time! I can barely stand it!"

"You all are free to go!" Xiffrik waved toward the door. "I came here to speak with the queen."

"What do you want from me?" Beatrix squinted as if a headache was spreading.

"Basael is the only one here who has the power to undo my change, but that's only if I stay far away for long enough to let him. I have things to do, so I'd rather not worry about him. I ask, simply, that you expel him and keep him away, or I will be forced to take action against him."

"You don't want him dead?" Beatrix asked.

“I don’t want anyone to die if it can be helped. I’ve never killed before, and I don’t plan to.”

She tilted her head as she regarded him skeptically.

“And I’m not a liar,” he added.

A silence held for a short while. Beatrix gave a nod then sucked in a breath. “I want to believe you have good intentions, but I need to see them before I do anything for you. I want you to undo your change to our magic system.”

There were a whole lot of gasps from the guardsmen, mostly from the sorcerers who stood with wands ready.

Xiffrik curled the corner of his mouth down and glanced off as if disinterested in continuing the conversation.

“You may change it back again, but this time with our input. We need time to study mana to see what is most beneficial and what might prove to be too dangerous to allow in our land. When you change mana this time, the usage of it must not empower you. We will also need some way to verify this. Then and only then will we work with you.”

“You must see at least *some* of the problems with your request because there are many! The biggest, most *glaring* problem is that if I give up my hold on the system of mana, I will be weak while all of Greenedge and Ovira turns into a battleground. It’s exactly what’s happening in Dorrinthal. Ancients will come swarming!”

“Then we will stop whoever comes here to change it against our will, as these people are doing in Dorrinthal.”

“Amen.” Leon gave a nod.

“Ignoring that for now, you also need to know that no one can change sorcery without the new system empowering them. It is not possible!”

“Then you will let mana be free, or we will see to making that happen.” Beatrix demanded.

“I’m liking this queen,” Michael murmured to Jon and Tarak. Where had Leon gone? Tarak glanced around but didn’t see him.

Xiffrik gave a sigh. “Your people are happy and safe right now. Your kingdoms have united. There is lasting peace. I cannot throw all of that away.”

“A lie,” Beatrix accused.

Xiffrik rolled his eyes. “I *could* throw it all away, but I’m not going to. It’s foolish! And what benefit is there for me?”

“We will welcome you into our society. You can spearhead the task of discovering new mana. You can teach, live among us. You would not be worshiped, but you will be an asset to the growth of sorcery and all of humanity in the end. You can stand with us as we defeat the other Ancients and free mana everywhere.” She lowered her eyebrows. “Or you can stand against us and die in infamy.”

“I’m really liking this queen!” Michael repeated louder.

Xiffrik put up his hands defensively. “This has gotten... *way* out of hand. I came here to issue a simple warning about your enemy Basael, and somehow I have come off as your enemy. I am not aggressive. The other Ancients are. I have never killed anyone and don’t plan to. You can verify that with psyche. Ask any other Ancient and their answer will be *very* different. You are going to have to pick one of us eventually, and I am *by far* the best choice!”

“I disagree. Now are you going to join us or not?”

Xiffrik stepped closer. The slew of guardsmen between him and the queen tightened their ranks. Xiffrik peered past them, at the queen. He smirked and spoke with infuriating confidence.

“You are uncertain, Beatrix. You think you could stand against all the Ancients, but you don’t know for sure. You wonder what victory would look like. Maybe it’s the loss of a few soldiers, or a few innocent civilians caught in the exchange. Or could an entire city be decimated? You might even lose your own life. You do believe me. I can feel all of this. You even think I may be the best of your worst options. You could side with me and see no fighting on your land. Most people would even prefer it. You know this!”

“Because my people don’t know the benefit of sorcery they are missing. I have more to learn on the subject, but you have come early and interrupted us.”

“Something has started that is not my doing, but I will be the one to finish it with the least amount of—”

Everyone startled as a bowstring snapped. An arrow flew into the groin of Xiffrik.

He gasped, then shrieked in agony as many guardsmen jumped away from where the arrow had passed in the narrow space between them. Leon emerged in the clearing. He stood up from his knees and handed off a bow he had apparently borrowed from one of the nearby archers.

“Good god, Leon, you *actually* shot him in the nuggins!” Michael shrieked.

“I’m tired of his shit!” Leon yelled as Xiffrik hobbled backward with his hands cupped around the arrow shaft. “I couldn’t bring myself to kill him because he hasn’t done anything *yet*, but he needs to learn a lesson!”

Xiffrik yelped as he tried to pull out the arrow, only for it not to budge. He continued hobbling backward as he looked around for other threats, whimpering like an injured puppy. “Fucking first time being shot,” he moaned. “And it has to be here?” Then he yelled, “I’ll have *your* nuggins for this, Leon!”

“You can’t handle my nuggins!” Leon yelled back.

“I vow I will have revenge against you for this, Leon! I swear it!”

Leon didn’t seem to be afraid as he rolled up his sleeve and marched toward Xiffrik. He passed by the queen and whispered, “You could finish him off right now and be done with this. I’ll help if you give the order.”

“I’m inclined to agree,” Desil said.

Beatrice appeared to be in thought as she stared at the wounded Ancient.

Xiffrik was almost out of the castle now, his pace slower than a snail. He finally yanked out the arrow and shrieked

from the pain as he collapsed to a knee. He held one hand over the wound as he used the other to keep from keeling over.

“Let go of your hold on mana, Xiffrik.” Beatrix demanded. “We can fight you. We can beat you.”

“But will you sacrifice this utopia you have built for spells that you can already access through allies in other kingdoms? No, you won’t, because you’re not an idiot like this one.” He pointed at Leon, though the small movement made him groan. “I’ve had enough of trying to reason with all of you. King Nykal will soon be forced to work with me. You will find out everything you need to know then.” He screamed in pain as he jumped onto a floating sardious block that seemed to appear out of nowhere, then he encased himself in the protective green material and flew off faster than a frightened bird.

“I’m starting to doubt we could have killed him,” Desil said.

“I am not sure if he is deserving of death,” Beatrix countered. “I need more time to think through all of this.” She glared at Leon. “You have no right to shoot anyone in my kingdom, especially not an Ancient who’s come to negotiate!”

Leon put his hand over the back of his neck. “Yeah, that was not the smartest decision. I apologize. My anger got the better of me.”

“What do you think he’s going to do to you, Leon?” Michael asked.

“Something painful.”

“I almost can’t believe you actually shot him in the nuggins,” Michael repeated. “You should probably let Nykal make most of the decisions from now on.”

“All right, enough of that. What I want to know, Queen Beatrix, is why he doesn’t just use psyche to convince us to join him,” Leon asked.

“Because as soon as we realize he is using psyche, we can never trust him again. All it takes is one time.”

“But if he’s the strongest in the world, can’t he continue to manipulate everyone indefinitely?”

“No, I’m certain he cannot. Manipulating the emotions of one person takes considerable energy, especially if they are trained in detecting and resisting psyche as many of us are. To sway an entire group would be impossible.”

“So then it’s decided,” Leon said with a casual upturn of his hand. “You can and should stand against him.”

“That is something we need to discuss in depth, but there is still much more to learn.”

“Yeah, take your time,” Leon grumbled. “We’ll just deal with all the shit that’s going to rain down on Dorrinthal in the meantime.”

“You will have Reela Worender for now, and depending on what she reports we may be looking at an alliance.”

Tarak held his breath. He could feel Leon and his peers standing like statues as if the smallest movement could scare off this burgeoning alliance.

“*May*,” Beatrix repeated. “I’ll need some time to think on what just happened. Before that, I’m going to need to speak again to the other annoying Ancient in my dungeon.”

Tarak followed the queen with the others but quickly caught up to Desil. He asked, “Did she say Reela War-Ender?”

“Yes, Worender.”

“Is that her title?”

“No, it’s her last name.”

“What a name! Perhaps I will choose something like that.”

“You can choose your own last name?”

“It is a task I have been issued. I am looking for inspiration. What is yours?”

“Fogg. Desil Fogg. Aren’t you more concerned about Xiffrik and what he plans to do in Dorrinthal to force your

king to side with him?”

“I am happy to let more important people worry about all that.”

“I wish I could let other people worry about those types of things,” Desil commented.

“You cannot?”

Desil shook his head.

“Why not? It is easy.”

“Maybe for you. I just can’t.”

“Ah, I know. Because you think you can make a difference,” Tarak realized.

“And you can’t?”

“Not by worrying, but when it comes time to fight, I will bring the tide of victory with me as I destroy my enemies!”

Desil grinned. “I would hope your grandfather is the same.”

“He is an arse,” Tarak muttered.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Beatrix and Desil took Tarak and the others into the depths of the castle. Dank and cold, the dungeon had received none of the same care and attention as the rest of the castle. The warden escorted them to the nearest prison, which held Tarak's insufferable grandfather. He was seated on a bed as they arrived but soon stood proud.

"I have played the part of your prisoner for long enough!" he barked. "You will release me or I will break out of here and *destroy* this cell in the process!"

"Let me stop you there and remind you of my warning," Beatrix said. "I am not only the queen but a psychic. For the sake of clarity, I will announce a lie, which was the first thing you uttered."

"It certainly was," the warden confirmed. "He tried to break out already and knocked himself unconscious in the process."

"That was but a small portion of my full strength!"

"Lie," Beatrix interrupted, but Basael didn't seem to hear her.

"I will destroy this whole castle if you do not open my cell!"

"Lie!" Beatrix said loudly.

"You dare—Tarak?" Basael only seemed to notice him now. "And you, the crude one." He pointed at Leon. "And the defiant one, and—I do not know you." He gestured at Jon. "What are you doing here?"

Tarak answered, "I will tell you soon enough, but first we have come to take your arse out of the dungeon." Tarak then asked the queen, "What do you need to hear before you order his release?"

The Ancient glanced her way, one hand clutching the bars.

“What is your intention here in Kyrro?” she asked him as her eyebrows lowered.

“I have come to stop the Ancient responsible for stifling your mana.”

“Do you wish harm upon anyone?”

“No one but the Ancient.”

It seemed that Beatrix was about to ask another question but Tarak interjected. “I apologize, but I have to ask. Grandfather, do you actually expect to beat Xiffrik in a fight?”

“Yes, but I may need to rely on support from the krepps and others who have witnessed and believe in my moral cause. He is surely strong here in his kingdom, while my power is subtracted.”

Tarak waited for Beatrix to call him out on his lie, but she told Tarak, “He really believes it.” Then her head tilted as she asked Basael, “Why would you risk your life to fight him? You must hope to gain something by killing him.”

“He threatens Dorrinthal, my domain. He must be stopped there or here, but he would not fight me there, thus it can only be here. What do I hope to gain? I wish to free mana.”

“Lie.”

Basael’s long mouth twisted. “I also wish to prove that I am the only trustworthy Ancient, because I am!”

Leon questioned, “Trustworthy to do what?”

“To lead by example for any surviving Ancients. Mana must be curated, I still believe this, but the people must be consulted.”

“Lie,” Beatrix said.

Basael continued quickly, “Mana is dangerous in its free form. I am glad to have a psychic here who can confirm I speak the truth. You must trust me to change mana now.”

“We aren’t trusting you with shit,” Leon said. “It doesn’t matter if you’re telling the truth. You’re not fit to control

mana. No one is fit for that.”

Basael kicked the bars. “Fit or not, it is happening, can you see! Or are you all too weak-willed to stand up to any of the Ancients who will come for Dorrinthal? Mana will be changed against your will.”

“Monrra came already,” Tarak informed his grandfather. “We fought her back after you and Caarda fled. We will do the same with Xiffrik or anyone else who attempts to change mana.”

“You did?” Basael sounded surprised. “Did anyone perish?”

Michael muttered, “Tarak almost did.”

Tarak shushed him.

“Aha!” Basael pointed. “That proves my point. You cannot continue to fight them back without my aid, or you risk death.”

“Michael,” Leon admonished.

“What?” Michael retorted. “Basael should know, and so should the people here in Kyrro. Tarak just about died, and so did you, Leon, and the king would have been dead by now if it wasn’t for Tarak shoving him away from Monrra’s rift before she could push him in. We can’t keep pretending all will work out. Someone is going to die eventually. We have to do something.”

“That’s what we’re *trying* to do now,” Leon replied.

“By withholding the truth about how dangerous it’s been? I don’t know why we’re acting tough. I mean good god, she’s a psychic.” Michael spoke to Beatrix next as he gestured at Basael. “You see what we’ve had as our Ancient. He’s practically delusional, as Xiffrik said, and yet I still think he’s better than your Ancient. We can’t keep letting them do whatever they want, but we can’t be the only ones to stand against them in Dorrinthal. They can teleport out whenever they’re in danger! We need your people on our side. Hell, we need more than your people. We need Greenedge and Aathon. We need everyone.”

“I agree,” Jon said. “I had no idea how connected we all would need to be when I left, but I’ve seen it now. I’ll do whatever it takes for the support of your people, your highness. We can’t have these Ancients dictating anything anymore.”

Beatrix put her hand over her mouth in thought and glanced between Jon and Basael.

“I would let the people decide how mana is to be altered,” Basael said. “You can confirm this with psyche.”

“I can,” Beatrix agreed. “I can also tell you are leaving something out. What is it?”

“I want control because I will keep peace.”

“Speak without leaving anything out!” she snapped, “or I will let you rot in my dungeon for another week and try again then.”

“I came here to stop Xiffrik! I want people to see that he is dangerous and I am not.”

“At least that was honest, even if you are still withholding something.” She gave a resigned sigh. “Tell me if you are a danger to anyone, anyone at all?”

“Only to Xiffrik and those who would fight to support him.”

“And why again is that?”

“Because.” Basael paused. “Because he wants Dorrinthal so he can become too powerful to ever be stopped. I would do everything to stop him, even if it kills me.”

“True, but you’re *still* leaving something out.” She put her hand over her forehead. “I don’t care enough right now to let this go on. I’m sure your desires will come out eventually. You have no power over psyche, which is the only reason I can confirm your honesty. It is not the same with Xiffrik. Psyche tells me he is being honest, but I cannot confirm with absolute certainty that he isn’t deceiving me by using psyche to alter his own energy. But you, Ancient, you should not lead anyone or anything. I would even worry if you had a pet dog.”

Basael seemed to be so shocked and angry that a sound came out instead of a word. “*Bwrah!*”

“And yet,” the queen continued. “I would still choose you over Xiffrik if I had to decide between you two right now, because you describe yourself honestly as not dangerous and, frankly, because I can see that we can imprison you if things turn south. Fortunately, we do not have to choose one of you. Fight each other for all I care, but far away from here. I need time to figure things out. Release him,” she told the warden, who already had the key ready.

The warden unlocked the barred door. Basael calmly stepped out.

“Will I have the support of the people in this fight against Xiffrik?” he asked her.

“I need time to decide that.”

“There might not be time.”

“Then you should teleport back with these others until you have the support you need.”

“Nonsense. I will stay with my son and the krepps. I will garner more support as I spread the truth about Xiffrik and his plans to dominate the world through usurping control of all mana. If Xiffrik attacks, I will slay him.”

“You are not permitted to bring krepps into my cities or cause panic to my people. You will stay outside Kyrro as we figure out what to do, and then you will be found again.”

Desil lifted his hand sheepishly. “I can speak to him in the other plane. We don’t need to locate him.”

“You can?” Beatrix asked.

But Desil was busy glancing at Basael as the Ancient yelled, “That was you, young human?”

Desil nodded, then muttered to Beatrix, “He’s...a little hard to deal with.”

“You answered none of my questions about who you are!” Basael complained. “Of course I would be angry. You

bothered me with all sorts of questions. Who do you think you are to pester an Ancient and then act inconvenienced when he wishes to find out who you are?”

“I didn’t want to reveal anything in case you were a threat. I’m Desil.”

“And?” Basael prodded. “What are you known for? You accompany the queen, yet you look too young to be the king.”

“There is no king,” Beatrix said. “Desil has proven himself in many ways, while you have proven nothing. Do not enter my cities again. Understand?”

Basael sucked in a breath as if to yell but spoke with a restrained voice. “I plan not to anyway.”

Beatrix asked Leon. “When would you like a portal back?”

“Now. I need to report back to our king.”

“I believe that can be arranged, but I have to confirm with Basen and Reela.”

“I would like to stay here for a while,” Tarak said.

Leon eyed him skeptically. “And do what?”

“Learn more about their sorcery.”

“That’s a lie,” Beatrix said.

“Find out about their culture,” Tarak tried.

“Lie.”

“Try to make peace with—”

“Lie,” the queen interrupted.

“Must you call out lies that have nothing to do with you or your people?” Tarak growled. “Drink! Can you see? I am going to stay and drink! Desil says you have the best drinks in the world, and I refuse to leave until I try them. One night is all I ask for.” He noticed the disappointed gaze of his grandfather in addition to Leon’s. “And...I suppose I am a tad bit worried about my family here. Xiffrik did say he wants my grandfather banished or he would be forced to attack him.”

His grandfather gave a nod. "I presumed that already. My presence is a threat to his domain."

Tarak asked his grandfather, "Can you undo Xiffrik's control of mana?"

"It may be possible, but it would be a mental wrestling match that I am likely to lose. Only if he is gone for days at a time might I have a chance, but I would be severely weakened by the end of it for at least a few weeks."

"You know what?" Leon asked rhetorically. "Fine, Tarak. Stay and drink. I have too much to worry about already, and you being gone for a night might make things easier for me."

"Seriously?" Michael asked in disbelief. "Then I want to stay and drink also."

Leon scratched his scruffy cheek as he gave Michael an irritated glance. "Is your presence likely to keep Tarak out of trouble or cause more problems?"

"Out of trouble."

Leon glanced at the queen, who showed him a nod.

"Fine."

Tarak and Michael both shook their fists in victory.

"Wait." Tarak remembered something. "The currency is not the same."

Desil offered, "I will make sure you both are taken care of."

Jon gave a sigh. "I have to return to ensure the king has a way back home...unless you think he needs more time in Rohaer, Leon?" he asked with hope.

"You want to stay as well?" Leon asked.

"I would. I haven't had a break in as long as I can remember, and I never had the chance to try the sakal I've heard a lot about."

Leon scratched his other cheek this time. It looked like he needed a shave. "No, sorry, Jon. You're needed. I can't say

whether the king wants to stay in Rohaer or not until you go there and find out. He might be waiting for you.”

Jon let out another sigh. “So we’re going back to the Academy to fetch Hadley and then leave in a portal?”

“Yes, with the half-elf psychic...right?” Leon asked the queen.

“Once I confirm.”

“Come with us and confirm while we’re there,” Leon suggested. “It will save us all time. Jon can take you.”

The queen looked at Jon. He gave her a confident nod.

She turned to Basael. “Do you swear to stay out of the cities until we meet again?”

“I will stay away.”

Leon said, “Anything else you need, Queen?”

“For now, no. I hope to meet your king the next time we speak.”

“I’m sure you will. He’ll probably never let me leave the castle again after he finds out I shot Xiffrik in the nuggins. Now let’s get out of this dungeon. It’s giving me bad memories.”

They all started toward the stairs, but Beatrix whipped her head toward Leon as she seemed to realize what he was saying.

Tarak walked in the back of the group with Basael, who was strangely silent through the short trip out of the dungeon. Ahead of them, Michael put his hand on Jon’s shoulder.

“Don’t worry,” Michael said. “We’re all going to relax once the king and the rest of us are back in the castle.”

Tarak’s attention drifted over to Leon demanding something of Desil. “You must ensure Tarak and Michael return to Lycast tomorrow.”

“We will return,” Tarak answered for himself. “So long as a portal takes us there.”

“I could send you back,” his grandfather said, “had I access to akorell. Come find me if you need me, and we may go in search of akorell.”

The queen stated, “I don’t want you searching for akorell either, Ancient.”

“I willingly handed over my akorell to you! Now I cannot enter your cities or your Academy, and I cannot even search for akorell in territory that does not belong to you? What do you expect me to do if the days go long during my stay here?”

“You will wait,” she stated. “I am sure plans will involve you soon enough, and I will return your akorell then.”

Leon asked her, “I hope you are not considering allowing him to have control over your mana after all, even if he would be better than Xiffrik.”

“There is one person I would trust enough to change mana and empower themselves in the process, and she is going with you back to Lycast. Everything is to wait until she returns and gives me her report about the state of your land and the depth of which Fatholl has his claws in your soil.”

“Fine, but I expect some of that akorell to find its way back to our castle,” Leon stated. “It was ours before we let Basael take it, and we’re going to need some when we have our own portal mage.”

“Seeing as how you let this Ancient take it in the first place, you must really have no idea how dangerous it can be. I will hold onto it for now.”

Leon opened his mouth to say something.

“For now,” Beatrix repeated.

“Just give us the damn psychic half-elf. I will put her in the same room as Fatholl and the king so we can move on from all this bullshit to the real problems we need to face.”

“You will keep her safe, right?”

“She seems pretty capable of keeping herself safe.”

Beatrix eyed him dubiously.

“I’ll be right beside her the whole time until she takes a portal back here.”

Michael muttered, “Or until she can’t take his company any longer.”

“I want her to have multiple guards at all times,” Beatrix demanded. “More than just you, Leon. Promise me her safety will be your highest concern.”

“I promise. I’m not about to cause even more problems than we already have by letting something happen to...uh.”

“Reela!” Tarak shouted with Michael and Jon.

“Reela, right.”

Basael asked, “Where are my krepps now?”

The queen frowned. “I hope far from my cities.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

After a brief goodbye with the others, Tarak took Desil on his back. Michael would fly along nearby.

“No harness?” Desil asked.

“Jon needs it for the king, and I did not bring the extra. I will not drop you. If we go down, it will be both of us.”

“That’s reassuring.” Desil tightened his grip with both his arms and legs. He pointed in the direction of the setting sun. “It’s this way. We’re going to Kayvol.”

“The best drinks are there?” Michael asked.

“It has every drink you could find in the larger cities.”

Tarak took Desil into the air with gravity. The onlookers around the entrance of the castle had already been amazed by Basael taking off with a similar spell, then Jon and Leon following with their own sorcery. There wasn’t much gawking and gasping as Tarak flew off with Desil.

Tarak flew over a portion of the large forest. The Academy resided in a clearing near the mountain path to his left, while a big city stretched out to his right. Farmland took the rest of the space between and all the way to a massive lake, where a river flowed out and back toward the forest.

Desil directed Tarak across the lake, to a small town consisting of no more than a hundred houses. “My mother’s tavern is just ahead,” Desil told Tarak as he pointed.

“Your mother?” Tarak didn’t hide his disappointment, especially as he saw that it was just a small two-story building. This might be the only time Tarak had a chance to visit a tavern in this other world, and he would spend it here?

Tarak landed near the front door. Desil hopped off. Michael crashed down soon after with a shriek. He rolled a few times, then got up and dusted himself off.

Desil stared the whole time with wide eyes, then asked, “Are you all right?”

“Fine. A little warning would’ve been nice, Tarak,” Michael complained. “It’s not easy to change direction suddenly with wind.”

“With any flying spell,” Tarak figured.

“That’s not true. Jon can change on a whim with his Argil.”

Tarak was no longer jealous of Jon Oklar, seeing how busy he was.

“I apologize,” Tarak said.

“So this is it?” Michael gestured at the tavern and showed a bit of a frown.

“It is.” Desil approached the door.

Tarak read the sign above the door. “The Magic Tavern.” He shared a look with Michael, both of them shaking their heads.

Desil pulled open the door. A flood of boisterous activity poured into Tarak’s ears and undid his frown. It grew into a smile as he stepped inside.

A lute player and a drummer created a lively tune as patrons sang and danced. The smell of sweet ale filled Tarak’s nose. Old and young sat around tables, crowding the small place, but smiles adorned their faces. The furniture caught his eye next. All of it was green and shimmering, somewhat translucent, as if made of something similar to an emerald. Then Tarak realized what it was.

“Is that the sartious energy that Xiffrik uses?” he asked Desil.

“It is. Xiffrik isn’t the only one skilled with it. Mother!” Desil interrupted himself as a petite woman with dark hair was just setting down a large tray of ales at a nearby table.

“Desil!”

They embraced.

“What brings you here?” his mother asked.

“We have some visitors from another continent.” He gestured at Tarak and Michael.

“Greenedge?” his mother asked them.

Tarak stepped forward and offered his hand. “A little father than that. I am Tarak.”

She shook, though with a confused expression.

“And I’m Michael.” They shook as well.

“Effie,” she said, then asked, “Where could you be from if not Greenedge?”

“Have you heard of Dorrinthal?” Tarak asked.

“That sounds familiar. I’m not good with geography.”

“Well, we heard you have the best drinks in the world,” Tarak said. “We would like to partake.”

“You’ve come all the way from Dorrinthal just for some drinks?”

Desil chuckled. “They’ve come for so much more than that, Mother. I’ll explain everything in the kitchen.” Desil held up a finger and told them, “I’ll be back soon.”

Tarak was content to stand and gawk for a while. The music was lovely. Laughter was abundant. He even witnessed more than one group raising their mugs and blessing the queen. The people here were happy. The people in Lycast would probably be happy as well if they weren’t so damn poor. Tarak found himself shaking his head with frustration. The first contact between Ovira and Dorrinthal in centuries, and it was tainted by Ancients.

“Our people should be trading and exchanging knowledge with these fine folks,” Tarak told Michael. “Not plotting how to deal with sorcerers who wish to dominate all mana.”

“We could be if we accepted Xiffrik as our Ancient.”

“You jest.”

“Yes, but think about how easy that would be! That bastard Ancient is forcing us to live the hard life. I don’t want to live the hard life. Do you?”

“I lived the easy life for a long time, and I never tired of it.”

“By the way, Eden’s told me she’s certain she would be dead if it wasn’t for your bravery.”

“She has thanked me many times.”

“Well, thank you from me as well.”

“You two have reconciled?”

“We have.”

“And Tienna?”

“Um.” Michael put his hand on the back of his neck. “It’s been weird between us now.”

“I am sure it has. Did you ever declare your interest in her?”

“I did not, and I am sure as hell glad. For once, being a coward has paid off.”

“Was it cowardice or did you decide my advice was no good for you?”

“It was cowardice. I wanted to take the chance, but I feared rejection.”

“And now?” Tarak asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Your feelings for her are gone?”

“It doesn’t matter. I have decided to be with Eden.”

Tarak decided not to press it, though apparently his expression belied his thoughts.

“My feelings will fade for Tienna,” Michael spoke confidently.

Desil returned, and with a tray of sartious mugs varying in size. There had to be ten of them! The lad had brought out

everything in the back!

Tarak jumped into action. "Here let me help you!"

"I've got it," Desil said too late as Tarak assisted Desil in guiding the heavy tray onto the table.

"Good god, Tarak," Michael commented, "I've never seen you help anyone with that much enthusiasm. Not even opening a door for Callie."

"That enthusiasm to open a door reeks of desperation."

"And did it not here just now?" Michael tested.

"No, excitement."

"Is Callie your lover?" Desil asked Tarak.

"Aye. And it is supposed to be a secret," he reminded Michael.

"Pretty much everyone knows. She's the princess," he told Desil.

"Oh!" Desil laughed.

"Speaking of," Tarak said. "I had hoped to bring her back a gift. I am looking for something unique to the land. Something beautiful and useful but small enough to be hidden and appreciated in secret."

"And remember we have no money," Michael added with an air of humor.

"I know just the thing," Desil replied without delay.

Tarak grinned. "My friend! What is there you do not know?"

"Friends already are we?" Desil asked with a laugh. "There is plenty I don't know, like what's to happen with all these Ancients."

"Let's have none of that," Michael said with a wave of his hand, then picked up the smallest sardonic cup. It was too short and round to have need for a handle. "To a night of fun without worry." He lifted it.

“Careful with those,” Desil warned, and pointed at the other one on the table. “They have sakal.”

Tarak grabbed another cup of the same size and lifted it. “To a night of fun!” he repeated. “Wait. You are not to join us, Desil?”

Desil took one of the larger mugs. “I prefer ale. Sakal is a bit strong for me.”

“Fun without worry,” Michael repeated.

They clinked. Tarak sipped the contents of his little cup.

“Hmm.” He shared a look with Michael, who seemed to have the same grimace as Tarak. “Mmm.” Tarak raised his eyebrows and smiled as the aftertaste came to his mouth, Michael mirroring him.

“This isn’t the best in the world, but it’s good,” Michael said, then had another sip. He smacked his lips. “I’ve had whiskey that’s fiery and a little sweet that really might be the best drink in the world. But this is not sweet at all. This is like...” He sipped again and smacked his lips. “A dry wine with twice the kick but the same mild burn.” He had another sip. “Actually, it’s really growing on me.”

“Mild? Sakal is mild to you?” Desil asked in disbelief.

“Sure is. I think I love it. Tarak, what do you think?”

“Everything in this era makes ale in my time taste like horse piss.”

As Michael chuckled, Desil asked, “What do you mean your time?”

“I am not from this time period.”

Desil squinted.

“I am from four hundred years ago,” Tarak specified.

Desil squinted a while longer. “Um?” He seemed to be thinking it was an unfinished joke. He glanced at Michael, who nodded.

“It’s true.”

Desil's mother brought out a tray with three plates containing cooked fish and roasted vegetables. Also on the tray was a large wheel of cheese and a loaf of bread.

An older patron saw the cheese and complained, "I asked about cheese earlier, Eff!"

She snapped back, "I wasn't going to open a wheel just because you asked."

"And what makes them so special?"

"They are friends of my son." She raised her voice to address the whole tavern. "I'm not taking any orders for the next half hour as I enjoy the company of my son, Desil, The Master of Earth!"

There was a collective groan.

"Again with the title," the older patron complained.

Effie practically pushed a young man off his chair so she could take it. He seemed a little perturbed but didn't complaint to the tavern owner as he stood.

The next half hour went by quickly as Tarak ate while Michael summarized the war that had occurred prior to Tarak's entrance into the era. Tarak took over, though there wasn't much left to tell. He spoke about his tainted lineage, his sudden transportation from his era to this one, and then on to the current state of Ancients.

Effie did not appreciate the idea of anyone controlling sorcery; not at all. She described the battles and conflicts of her time at the Academy with a palpable disdain for the power-hungry royals who had caused so much death and heartache. Then it was Desil's turn to share, and he, no doubt, won in terms of going through the most difficult journey of anyone there.

Effie was bothered a number of times about drinks and food. Desil offered to help, but his mother insisted he relax and finish his tale. Only after he was done did she stand up and start taking orders again. The young man whose chair she'd usurped was quick to retrieve it.

Desil went on to describe his recent time at the Academy as busy but peaceful. He had been using his ability to alter the earth just about every day, as reshaping the land seemed to make him as useful as Jon Oklar, and it cursed him in the same way of barely having time to spend with Leida, the headmaster's daughter, and especially not with his mother in her busy tavern.

"I have to warn the two of you," Desil said. "I hadn't entered the plane of mana, as you call it, in a long time. I was basically pulled there by curiosity when I felt your grandfather arrive," he told Tarak. "And I left as soon as I could."

Tarak asked. "Are you saying it may be impossible to reach Callie?"

"If she is not very skilled with communicating through that plane, then perhaps, but I'm willing to give it a try now if you think she might be ready to listen."

"I have no idea," Tarak admitted. "But I am curious to see you try."

Desil closed his eyes. He stayed that way for a long while before eventually speaking aloud.

"Callie, my name is Desil." He used a softer voice. "I'm here with Tarak and Michael."

Michael murmured to Tarak, "Should we tell him he's speaking here and not in the other plane?"

Desil answered without opening his eyes. "I'm speaking in both at the same time so that you can hear at least one side of the conversation."

Michael's eyes widened as he pointed at Desil, "This mage..." He shook his head as if in disbelief.

Tarak was equally amazed.

"Callie." Desil's face pinched. "I can tell you understand me, but I cannot understand your reply. You have to project your message toward me." There was a long pause, then he continued. "I can faintly hear you. Try to locate me first, then use the ocean of energy to amplify yourself. It's the only way.

I'm going to inflate my presence and basically scream to be found."

Desil's face twisted as if he was in pain. He continued. "Basael...Basael, stop. I'm not trying to speak with you. No—what? Xiffrik? No, I believe Leon left already." He paused with a deeper grimace. "No, I don't want to speak with you, either. I'm trying to reach someone else." His face fell, then anger took over. "No, Fatholl, I am definitely not trying to speak with you! You can crawl off and die somewhere for all I care!" Desil's brow lowered. "I'm not talking to you, Basael. I'm not talking to any of you. Leave me alone!"

He sat there with his eyes closed for a long while and eventually seemed to relax. "They're gone, Callie. Can you hear me?" Desil let out a soft gasp. "Yes, I can hear you now! No, the others left. They can't hear us." He paused. "Because I can tell when there's another presence able to hear me. I'm sure you will be able to eventually." Desil smiled. "Yes, it is incredible." He gave a laugh. "You're really good at this for someone who has just developed her skill." Then the tone of his voice changed to his normal tenor. "She's asking if Leon made a complete ass of himself while representing your kingdom."

"Yes," Michael said. "And tell her he shot Xiffrik in the nuggins, and now Xiffrik is looking for revenge." Michael's hand darted out. "But only toward Leon, I think. He knows our kingdom had nothing to do with that. In fact, I'm pretty sure everyone here knows that Leon's transgressions were because he's a crude fool. He didn't completely ruin our relationship with the people of Kyrro. Did he, Desil?"

"No."

"Can you tell her?" Michael asked.

"I did, as you were speaking."

Michael looked at Tarak again as he gestured at Desil. "This mage!"

"That's right, in the nuggins," Desil said in a softer tone. "Xiffrik limped away and flew off vowing to take revenge

against Leon.” He paused. “Yes, Michael’s right. He’s not angry at anyone besides Leon. Did Leon and Reela reach your castle?” He paused. “Good. She’s saying they’ll take very good care of Reela and keep her away from Fatholl until Jon brings the king back. What’s that, Callie? It’s a little hard to understand you now because this conversation has gone on a while.” He paused. “Tarak is enjoying the best drinks Kyrro has to offer.” Desil paused. “The strain is making it very difficult to understand.” He paused. “No, the best *drinks*.” There was another pause. “Can you hear me, Callie?” He shook his head. “I can’t understand you anymore. Take a rest. I hope you can hear me. Take a rest, Callie!”

Desil opened his eyes, his breathing a little heavy as if he’d exerted himself. “I can’t understand her. I imagine she probably needs a longer rest than I do, so I’ll give her some time.”

“Knowing Callie,” Tarak said, “she is still there.”

“I doubt so. She must be extremely fatigued.”

“Try,” Tarak said.

Desil closed his eyes again. “Callie are you—Callie, you must rest! We cannot understand each other. Rest! I will not return for some time.” He paused. “Callie, I can understand you are straining yourself like screaming, but I cannot understand you. I bet you can barely understand me. Callie, go. Go, Callie! Rest!”

Desil opened his eyes. He gave a sigh, then sipped at his ale.

“So was she there?” Michael asked with a slight slur to his words.

Desil grinned politely as he set down his drink and stood up. “Let me fetch something as we wait to contact her again.”

Michael turned to Tarak. “Not much sense of ‘umor on him.”

“It was not very funny.”

“Really? I thought it was hilarrus.” Michael hiccupped.

They sipped on their various drinks. Desil and Effie had already described each one to Tarak and Michael, but there were too many to keep track of. It didn't matter much to Tarak. They were all delicious. The haze of alcohol dulled his senses. These drinks were strong, though they didn't all taste that way.

“Lord and bane!” Tarak exclaimed as he realized Michael had now finished the last of his samples. “I am losing the fight against these drinks, and I usually can take more than you!”

Michael replied with a heavy slur, “You cannot take more den me, you serrus? This isn't that...mush...oh now dat you mention it, I'm cratered! Good god, when did dat happen?”

Desil returned with his hand closed around something. He came over to Tarak's side of the table and opened his hand to set down a red gem. It was about the size of a small rock, cut by a jeweler to a shape similar to an oval but with ridged sides. Tarak picked it up to hold in front of his eyes.

The gem was somewhat large and probably worth a lot, but it wasn't the most beautiful gemstone he had seen. The analyte jeweler who had sold Tarak's gift for Illia had a collection of gems that looked more expensive than this one. Tarak could only partially see through it. He felt nothing from it.

“What is it?” Tarak asked.

Desil sat back down in his chair and leaned over the table. “That's a rujin gem. It comes from rujin flowers, which are rare. Many of them are needed to make it, along with bastial energy. A chemist must melt them down and combine them with the energy to form the hard stone.”

“Does it do something?” Tarak asked.

“Have you heard anything about dajriks since you've come here?”

“Not a word.”

“They are large beasts that live for thousands of years, but after they've been alive for too long, they can't sleep much anymore because of what people used to believe were

nightmares. Now it's pretty clear that their minds are pulled into the plane of mana in a way that prevents their body from gaining rest. They go mad." Desil flipped his hand. "There's a lot more to it than that, but these rujin gems were created by another creature called slugari to end the restless nights of a dajrik that protects them."

"How many astrange crechures are livin' here?" Michael asked.

"Just those two, oh and the marros, I suppose."

"Marros?"

"Intelligent birds that are very protective of their island. I have a few scars from dealing with them."

"Good god," Michael replied. "How you haf a moment's peace with all dez crechures running around?"

"There aren't many around anymore. I've had more problems with Fatholl than with the creatures. That's why I obtained a rujin gem." He pointed at the stone. "It was only because of that stone that I could stop entering the other plane when I was falling asleep. Fatholl would always drag me there and force me to answer questions about the situation in Kyrro before he let me rest. It was pretty clear that he was looking for a way to obtain a ship. The elves had banished him from their land, and he wasn't welcome here, either. I don't know how he got one, but eventually he stopped bothering me and it seems he made it to your continent."

"He went to Aathon first," Tarak informed Desil. "I did not know he was a murderous arselicker."

"Yeah," Michael agreed. "I doubt he'd a bin taken into the castle if anyone knew, but he *has* helped us. That makes all dis confuzing."

"I'm not worried about it," Desil said. "Reela will straighten out everything." He pointed at the gemstone again. "You can give that to Callie when you return. She probably won't want to use it for a while, seeing as how we should be in contact, but having the option for later on would be the best gift you can bring home out of anything else in all of Ovira."

“Are you sure you will not need it?”

Desil did not appear pleased, but he gave a nod. “I need to be able to be reached from now on, not just by Callie but by others. It’s best I don’t block them out. She’ll need to keep it really close to her while she sleeps for it to work. If she doesn’t want to use it, she can set it somewhere across the room and it will have no effect on her.”

“Thank you, Desil. This is much appreciated.”

“I sink I’m done, boys.” Michael placed his palms on the table. “I’m cratered. I’ve gotta sleep before I get spins.”

“Yeah, you sound pretty drunk.” Desil then appeared shocked as he seemed to notice all the empty cups in front of Michael. “My god, you finished everything! How is that possible?”

“Lots of practice.” Michael stood with a wobble. “A bed?”

“Upstairs. I can show you.”

“I may as well sleep, too,” Tarak said. “It has been a long day, and I am halfway to ‘cratered’ as well.”

It was a little difficult getting Michael up the stairs, seeing as how he demanded that he could do it on his own and nearly fell over the railing. Eventually Tarak pretty much carried him into his room. Michael managed to step out of his boots and take off his coat before he collapsed onto the bed with a groan.

Tarak turned to Desil. “Thank you for everything. Where is my room?”

“It’s this one,” Desil said with a frown as he stared at Michael curling up with the blankets. “We all have to sleep here.”

“Why? I saw another room on the way to this one.”

“That’s my mother’s room. I have some extra blankets and pillows for you and Michael. I was going to set them down on the rug and take the bed.”

They both stared at Michael, who had begun to hack out some sort of strangled version of snoring.

“Is he all right?” Desil asked.

“I have no idea. Fetch the blankets and pillows. We will move him to the floor so you can have your bed.”

“I like that idea.” Desil lifted his hand as if something jolted him. “It’s Callie again.” He closed his eyes.

Tarak shook his head, still at a loss for what it must feel like to be spoken to by anyone, even someone as lovely as Callie, completely at their whim. It was no wonder Desil had sought out the rujin gem. Hopefully Callie would appreciate the gift.

“I do not believe we can talk much longer than we did before. Not until you are more experienced.” Desil paused. “Yes, Tarak is well, but Michael is passed out drunk in my bed.” Desil paused, then chuckled a bit. “I see. Well, we are about to settle in for an early night. Can you make sure Reela is safe and comfortable?” He paused. “Good. And is there any word from your king—your father?” he corrected himself. “I see. I think we would all like to meet him more so than seeing Leon again.” Desil paused. “Yes, it’s becoming difficult to understand you. Good night, Callie.”

“Tell her good night from me as well.”

“Tarak says good night.”

“And that I miss her lips.”

“And that he misses...your lips,” Desil added uncomfortably.

“And I miss her hands...”

“And your, um, hands.”

“In my pants.”

“I’m not going to say that. Good night, Callie. It was a pleasure meeting you. I imagine we will speak face-to-face one day.” He paused. “Yes, thank you. Good night.”

Desil's mouth opened as he cocked his head at Tarak.
"You're a scoundrel."

"You had not figured that out by now?"

"And you're with the princess? No wonder it's not supposed to be public. Is she secretly a scoundrel, too?"

"First of all, it is no secret that I am a scoundrel. Everyone knows. Second of all, it is public to the people who matter in my life, and they all approve."

"Approve, really?"

"That might be a bit of an exaggeration. Thirdly, Callie is not at all a scoundrel but the sweetest, most beautiful girl I have ever met."

"Yeah, she sounds like that, so forgive my confusion."

Tarak scoffed as he gestured at his tall, muscular body and his chiseled, handsome face. "Do you not have eyes?"

"I hope you are as confident in combat as you are about your looks."

"I am."

"Have you trained your whole life?"

"No, hardly at all."

"Then your confidence comes from...delusion?"

"I was the only one to defeat your big warrior instructor in a duel!"

"Were you?" Desil sounded surprised.

"That is right, but I suppose I should probably take some more time to train. I have used a sword twice, no three times, including today."

"You should. I thought I was training hard each day before I became involved in things, but it didn't take me long to realize how wrong I was. Mentally I was ready, which counted for a lot, but physically, *magically*, no. Train hard, Tarak. Many people will thank you later."

"You seem like a person worth taking advice from."

Desil chuckled as his eyebrows lifted. “Oh do I? I’ll take that as a compliment.” Something jolted Desil again. Tarak figured it was Callie until Desil closed his eyes and looked bothered. He listened for a moment, then spoke to Tarak.

“It’s your grandfather. He is speaking with Xiffrik and wants us to hear.” He paused. “Xiffrik also wants us to hear. It sounds like they’re arguing.”

“What do they say?”

Desil spoke quickly as if trying to catch up, “Basael says, ‘Xiffrik challenges us.’ ”

“Us?” Tarak questioned, but Desil didn’t seem to hear him as he continued.

“Xiffrik says, ‘I am giving Basael a warning that he is to stop trying to turn my people against me, or I will be forced to silence him. Do not involve yourself, Desil. Only Basael needs to die, and only if he refuses to leave.’ ”

“It sounds like his nuggins are back in good health. Michael! Wake up. Something is happening.”

Michael snorted as he sat up. “What’s wrong? Good god, I’m da’unker than when I zwent to bed!”

“You have barely been asleep at all. What are they saying now, Desil?”

Desil was shaking his head with a grimace. His eyes remained closed.

“Who are them?” Michael asked Tarak.

“Xiffrik and my grandfather. Desil, are the krepps still with him?”

Desil put up his hand. “Hold on, they are arguing. Xiffrik is giving him one last chance. He says he will make a portal for Basael to return to Dorrinthal, but Basael refuses. I don’t know about the krepps. I’m not sure where anyone is during this conversation, just that they’re somewhere in Kyrro.” Desil started to lower his hand, but it rose back up. “Xiffrik warns us again to stay away. I think he’s about to attack Basael.”

“Ask my grandfather where he is.”

“Where are you, Basael?” Desil asked with his eyes closed. “He didn’t answer.”

“Is my father, Caarda, with them?” Tarak asked.

“I don’t think so. Now Xiffrik is yelling that he will kill us, too, if we interfere.”

“Shit, Tarak,” Michael grumbled with a slur. “Basael’s not worth dying for.”

“It is about much more than that. Xiffrik aims to slay him and take Dorrinthal as his next kingdom. I will not stand by and let that happen. Will you?”

“Goddammit.” Michael stumbled over to his boots. He slipped his feet into one and then the other. He leaned over as if to start tying them, only to slowly teeter over sideways.

“You never untied them, anyway!” Tarak growled as he helped Michael up. “You will be looseless—useless! Lord and bane I am drunk, too!”

Desil opened his eyes with a worried look on his face. “I’ve determined they’re not far from here. Are we fighting or not?”

“Signal your army!” Tarak demanded as he turned and stormed into the hall. Or he tried to, but his drunkenness pulled him into a wall. He bounced off and fell on his bum.

Desil tried to pull him up but couldn’t do much to overcome Tarak’s weight. “You’re too heavy! There’s no signal for the army. You have to take us to the castle or the Academy, and then we’d have to rouse people together. It will be at least a couple of hours before they reach Xiffrik and Basael.”

“We do not have the time!” Tarak rose up but stumbled backward, falling back down into the bedroom and taking Desil with him.

“Can either of you really fly right now?” Desil picked himself up.

Tarak stumbled over to the window. “We shall find out! Come on, Michael!”

“No way I’m jumpin’ out that fuken window while dis drunk! Ima take da stairs.” Michael stumbled out of the room.

Tarak tried to open the shutters but couldn’t until Desil unlocked them. They suddenly sprang open and slammed shut again from Tarak’s strength. He threw them open a second time, and they slammed shut again.

“Blasted things, I will rip them off!” He was about to grab one but Desil held them open.

“I really don’t think you should be flying anywhere in your state.”

“I cannot let my grandfather die, even if he is an idiot!” Tarak climbed onto the windowsill.

The sounds of Michael screaming and tumbling downstairs turned Tarak and Desil around.

“Oh god.” Desil reached out for Tarak. “Don’t hurt yourself, too!”

“I can heal!” Tarak turned back and jumped as he cast his spell of gravity.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Tarak rolled over onto his back and cursed as he tried to gather himself. What just happened? He remembered jumping and making his gravity spell. It had worked too well. Tarak had overcompensated during his drunkenness and started with a sphere too powerful. It had lurched him off the windowsill and spun him through the sphere, breaking the spell as well as his concentration.

He groaned. "I must rise up. My grandfather." Pain shot through his ankle. It didn't seem to be broken. It would heal fast. But his back! He yelped as he lay back down, his head thudding against the grass.

As he waited to heal, he heard hurried footsteps coming toward him. He turned his neck and saw Desil dashing out with the faint glow of the city behind him.

"You're alive!" Desil stopped and crouched over Tarak. "Can you move?"

"I will be fine soon. Where is Michael?"

"Lying on the floor of the tavern. My mother's having people help him back into bed. He sustained some injuries and is not going to be able to fight. I saw you throw yourself before I left. You made it all the way out of the city. I figured I'd find a corpse."

"I am fine now." Tarak hopped up. "I must join the fight. Which direction from here?"

Desil pointed in a direction. Tarak had no idea which way it was, where *he* was, or how far from the battle he was, but he would get to Basael before Xiffrik killed him. Basael was a terrible grandfather and an even worse Ancient to change all mana, but he was better than Xiffrik because at least Basael could be reasoned with.

"I'm coming with you," Desil said to Tarak's shock.

"You are?"

“Yes.” Desil went around to Tarak’s back. “Stay low to the ground in case we fall.”

Tarak crouched and let Desil climb up. “Why are you coming?”

“Because you need me, and I believe in this alliance.”

Tarak was about to take off but a thought stopped him. “If you die, I will bring the wrath of your whole kingdom back with me to Dorrinthal.”

“Then best not let me die.”

Tarak made a sphere of gravity to pull him and Desil off the ground and realized his earlier mistake. His spells were more difficult to cast here, his grip on mana loose and dulled, almost like the way alcohol had affected his senses, but once the spell was formed, there was no change to the strength. He had overcompensated greatly before and wouldn’t again.

It was probably not the same issue for Ancients who derived nearly all of their power from the system of mana they had altered. Their strength was certainly diminished when traveling far from their system.

Tarak remained low to the ground as he and Desil shot forward at a blurring speed. It became obvious where to go as pillars of flames illuminated the night just ahead. Tarak weakened his spell and shifted it behind his head to slow himself steadily. Soon he careened into the battlefield and landed. Desil jumped off his back.

The heat was immense. Tarak dashed toward the back of Xiffrik as the Ancient lowered his hands and the pillars of flames as tall as three-story buildings slowly dissipated. Scattered around the burned land, but not on top of it, lay a whole slew of krepps, writhing and shrieking, clearly not burned so no doubt in agony from psyche. Ahead of them and at their center, like a fallen leader, lay Tarak’s grandfather, unmoving, blackened, perhaps already dead.

Xiffrik looked over his shoulder to see Tarak coming. He raised his hand to cast a spell, and a thick shell of sartious energy appeared in front of him. Tarak shattered through it and

got his hands on Xiffrik for but a moment. Agony collapsed and immobilized him.

As Tarak writhed on the ground as useless as the many krepps nearby, he saw Desil leap over him and tackle Xiffrik. The psychic spell came to an end. Tarak rose up a little slowly, everything still aching as if he'd just recovered from esitry sickness. Desil separated from Xiffrik and tried to drive a dagger into the Ancient, but Xiffrik made another wall of sartious energy between them, blocking the attack.

From his knees, Xiffrik waved his hands around, and the sartious shell grew walls and a roof, encasing Desil. He looked all around, then leaned back and began to kick.

At least he was safe in there for now. Tarak ran to his fallen grandfather.

“Basael!”

His grandfather groaned as Tarak rolled him over. He was alive, though without much skin, certainly no hair, and most of his shirt burned off. Except for his height, he was unrecognizable.

Xiffrik collected a fallen sword Tarak had failed to notice prior. He trudged toward them. “Move aside, Tarak. I don’t want to kill Basael, but—”

“Then let him live, you arrogant shit!”

Tarak could hear the krepps collecting themselves behind him. Xiffrik pointed and called to them in kreppen. They did not appear aggressive. Perhaps even they were deterred by the pain.

Xiffrik told Tarak, “I told them the same thing I will tell you, which is to respect the more powerful Ancient. Basael has not only interfered with my plans to change mana in Dorrinthal, but he attempts to undo my control of mana here in Ovira and in Greenedge. I told you when we met that nothing is going to stop me, and that includes you. If you will not work with me, step aside.”

Tarak made the densest, most powerful sphere of gravity he could between him and Xiffrik. It pulled them together as

Tarak prepared his feet. He knew he couldn't kill Xiffrik, but at least he could buy his grandfather time to escape, and what better way than a kick with all of Tarak's weight into some recently healed nuggins.

Xiffrik made another damn wall of sartious energy. Tarak's feet slammed into it. He maintained his spell of gravity, however, with it now pulling the two of them and the thick sartious wall up, up, up into the air.

Xiffrik thrashed about but couldn't free himself from the pull of Tarak's spell. They were taller than the trees, then taller than the mountains, then as high as the birds would dare to fly.

"Stop, stop!" Xiffrik yelled. "You will fail to breathe and fall and die!"

Tarak did notice himself struggling for breath more than he should. He couldn't seem to regain his stamina. Xiffrik was right. Tarak felt he would pass out at any moment.

He let his spell cease to be. His vision had collapsed to almost nothing. He fell with Xiffrik and the twirling block of sartious energy. It was going to be difficult to muster the strength and the finesse he needed to form a sphere of gravity that would slow him without injury, but he had a better idea.

He swam through the air and grabbed hold of Xiffrik's shirt as the Ancient formed a sartious platform beneath his feet. Tarak set his own boots down on top of it.

Xiffrik used mostly elbows and arms to shove Tarak away. Tarak tried to keep hold, but the Ancient turned out to be stronger than he looked, and much less fatigued.

Tarak spiraled away. Flipping around, he had little hope of creating a static sphere of gravity that could pull him in a single direction. He spread his limbs to figure out which way was down because of airflow.

He screamed and lost what little breath he had left as he saw the ground coming at him fast.

He made a sphere of gravity to repel him from the ground. It stopped him too fast, tearing muscles all across his body, but at least he didn't slam his head into the ground.

He fell the last little bit and found himself incapable of even rolling over. All he managed to do was turn his head and locate Xiffrik. The Ancient looked to be flying on top of sartious energy, headed toward the charred area of grass where Tarak had last seen Basael as a crumpled ball of soot. Desil remained nearby, still kicking against the inside of his sartious cage.

Tarak rose up against his better judgment. “Basael!” he yelled.

Caarda flew over Tarak. The gravity he used to propel himself pulled Tarak off the ground. He got his feet underneath him, but his torn muscles prevented him from stopping himself from tumbling over again.

By the time he was up, Caarda had landed in front of Xiffrik. Tarak fell over himself in his attempt to make it over to them.

“Do not take another step or you will be destroyed,” Caarda warned.

What was his father talking about? Caarda could not destroy Xiffrik any easier than Basael could, and there was no point in lying to a psychic. Strangely, however, Xiffrik did stop and let down his hands.

“Who are you?” Xiffrik asked.

“I am the son of Basael, the father of Tarak, Caarda the Wise.”

Tarak had not heard this title, but the people had probably given it to him.

“You actually expect to destroy me?” Xiffrik said in surprise. “Do you not know who I am?”

“I know.”

“Then explain how you hope to defeat me.”

“I warn you, and that is all I will say about defeating you. Discussions are to be made in peace. If you do not approve of Basael’s message to the people of Ovira and Greenedge that your power over mana should cease, then go to the authorities.

Speak with your kings and queens across the continents, and we will join the discussion. Or fight and die.”

“Father, just destroy him already if you can!” Tarak yelled, still having no idea how Caarda might be able to.

“Oh, it’s a trap of some sort of sorcery!” Xiffrik said with a laugh. “I didn’t know sorcery can be used as traps. That is fascinating! It’s right between us. I can feel you thinking it.”

Caarda looked frustrated as he waved his hand. There was a feeling of pressure releasing, irking Tarak’s mana similarly to when Caarda used his Time spell.

“How did you do that?” Xiffrik asked.

Basael grumbled from behind them, “My son.” He managed to stand. “I told you to stay out of this.” His skin seemed to have healed, but his hair and clothes not so much. He had bulging muscles across his bare chest, making him appear more like a krepp than a human in this moment.

“I cannot let you die,” Caarda replied.

The sound of someone coming on horseback turned everyone. Desil’s mother, Effie, rode straight to Desil. As she dismounted, she waved her hand and the thick sartious energy encasing him turned into a cloud of dust. He disappeared behind it until he stepped through, taking a spot beside his mother as his eyes challenged Xiffrik and his mouth turned up in a smirk.

Xiffrik glanced from them to Caarda, then all the way around to Tarak. “All of you mean to fight for Basael?”

“We do,” Tarak answered.

Xiffrik scoffed as he answered. “Why? Have none of you *met* him? No, I can feel that you have. You know him. How do you all regard him? Yes, I can see that it’s not that different from how I regard him. Then I ask again. Why?” He paused as he turned his head in the direction of everyone. “You all think of me to be more dangerous than he is, but that’s not true. I never created a system of mana like dteria, which caused addiction and changed the caster’s personality to be consumed by power. That was Basael.”

“I also gave the people water, flying, and healing,” Basael said. “Dteria was to ensure I had enough power to stop the other Ancients, and that included you, as they can see.”

“I couldn’t make those things because I don’t know how!” Was it just frustration or dangerous anger that sharpened Xiffrik’s tone? “But I am willing to learn. I would be the first and only Ancient to work with the sorcerers. I have told all of you this...so...many...times! What do I get for my patience? I’m labeled as dangerous, and I take an arrow in the nuggins!”

Tarak made his way over to Desil and Effie. Tarak leaned in and asked Effie, “Can you keep Xiffrik from using sartious energy?”

“I should be able to.”

“Then we slay him here.”

Xiffrik swung a finger in Tarak’s direction. “I feel that! This! This is what I’m talking about! You wish to kill me? Why? Why? Basael has come here to undo centuries of work. I have told him to leave. I gave him the choice, and he opted to stay and fight.”

Effie said, “Actually, he has a point.”

“He uses psyche to manipulate,” Basael claimed.

“That is not true. I don’t need psyche because I am clearly the better Ancient to choose, but even with all of you... and your *misguided* thoughts...” He flailed his arms around as he shouted. “I’m still not going to use psyche to convince anyone of anything because it wears off!”

The krepps began to gather around. They all started to chant in their rough voices.

“Fight! Fight! Fight!”

One stepped forward and yelled out, “We see strongest! We pick leader!”

Xiffrik casually turned over his palm in Basael’s direction. “I’ve already defeated him.”

“No!” yelled the krepp who seemed to understand common tongue well enough. “He rise up. He strong! He live against fire!” He transitioned into kreppen to say something that elicited a cheer from the other krepps.

Xiffrik groused. He rubbed his hands through his hair, then took on a mean look as he surveyed Tarak and the others surrounding him again.

“I’ve had enough,” he warned. “Words have not worked. It’s clear I won’t be left alone in my own kingdom, so come at me, then. Basael, you will die if you fight me. You must be gone, permanently, either by choice or not. This is your last warning.”

Basael’s hands fisted. “You cannot defeat me.”

“I just did, except Tarak came and saved you while you were unconscious! Can you really be this dense? My god, you are. I feel it. You actually didn’t realize you had been saved. All right, I’ve had enough. Basael, prepare to die if you do not remove yourself from here. To the rest, find out what happens when you push me to my limit. At least it will give me reason to prove myself to these krepps as the one who should lead them.”

Effie asked, “You *want* to lead a bunch of krepps?”

“Not exactly,” the Ancient muttered, “but it’s better than Basael having control of them.”

Tarak called to his grandfather, “Basael, leave this kingdom. You cannot stop Xiffrik. He is right. You lost, and I saved you.”

Basael scowled in what appeared to be confusion. “I was caught off guard!”

“You rambled on about fighting for long enough for me to nearly kill myself getting here!”

Caarda answered, “Xiffrik chooses to control mana and slay whoever means to stop him. That is enough to warrant death.”

“We fight,” Basael announced. “To the death!”

“Arsefuck,” Tarak grumbled as his blood went hot. At least he didn’t feel drunk anymore as his body readied to fight.

Desil asked his mother quietly, “Should we?”

“Best not,” Tarak answered. “Just hand over your sword, my dame.”

“It’s Desil’s sword actually.” Effie passed it into Tarak’s hands. Usually they felt strong and capable, but as he whipped Desil’s sword around with them and nearly lost control of the weapon, he was beginning to feel a little less strong and a lot less capable.

Xiffrik made a shooing motion toward Desil and Effie. They scooted back. He kept motioning for them to go farther, and they obliged, walking back until they had almost disappeared into the night. That’s when Tarak realized that they were not that far from Desil’s town, and many people had come to watch with lanterns lifted.

Michael hobbled out from between the crowd. He seemed incapable of putting any weight on one leg.

“Issit over? I camas fast as I could.”

“No,” Xiffrik answered him. “I am just about to kill Basael and anyone who fights for him.”

“Well hol’ on lemme get a saword,” Michael muttered drunkenly and swung his heavy head around in each direction.

Michael was a stronger swordsman than Tarak, probably even while drunk. As Tarak handed over Desil’s sword to Michael and pretty much tore a pitchfork out of the hands of a burly farmer in the audience, Xiffrik went on with an announcement.

“This is my kingdom. I will not leave, and I will not allow my mana to be altered or reverted by anyone but me. This is your last chance. Leave or you will die, Basael. Tarak, Michael, Caarda, I do not want to kill any of you.”

“Basael,” Tarak tried again. “Give up and spare us from having to defend you.”

Basael answered, “You need not defend me.”

“But we do.”

Caarda announced, “Mana must be free. We need to fight anyone who wishes to control it.”

“Fine with me.” Xiffrik pointed his hand and took down Caarda with a spell of pain. He dashed toward Caarda’s crumpled body and looked as if he would show no hesitation about running his sword through Tarak’s father. Basael stepped in front of Caarda and made a large sphere of gravity that threw back Xiffrik.

Tarak and Michael went ignored for now. Tarak used gravity to hurl himself at Xiffrik’s back before a psychic spell could debilitate him.

It turned out Xiffrik didn’t have to look at Tarak to hit him with the spell of pain. It struck the same moment that Tarak became airborne. He lost control of his body, flying toward Xiffrik as the Ancient made a thick beam out of sartious energy and swatted Tarak away with it.

There was a horrific crack. Tarak was worried some part of his body had snapped in half, though he couldn’t feel anything past the worst agony he could endure. He rolled away from the fray, the psychic spell coming to an end, and sat up for a look at himself. He seemed to be fine. It was the pitchfork Tarak had wielded that had snapped in half.

Xiffrik rode the beam of sartious energy into the repelling sphere of gravity of Basael but couldn’t get close enough to disrupt it. He tried to cast fire into it, but the flames turned around and licked his face. Tarak was actually impressed by his grandfather. Basael had somehow cast the gravity repeller in a way that only repelled on one side. He and Caarda on the other side were seemingly unaffected.

Xiffrik zipped around, up, sideways, back down, but he couldn’t seem to get past the repeller. Tarak didn’t know how his grandfather had lost before, unless he had let his spell come to an end in a foolish attempt to hurt Xiffrik—*yes that is exactly what must have happened*. Tarak had better do something before that occurred again.

He rushed toward the krepps. “I need a sword!”

Spit covered him as the krepps hurled insults.

“I will bring you great honor!” Tarak yelled.

A tremendous amount of spit splashed him again.

He wiped it from his vision. Rage took over as he met eyes with the krepp who had spit on him from close enough to punch.

Tarak grabbed the hilt of the sword as the krepp still held onto it. He tried to rip it out of the krepp’s hands, but the creature held on to the hilt too tightly. Tarak put his whole body into it, throwing both sword and krepp around him and into another krepp who was apparently about to strike Tarak from behind. It knocked the sword out of the hands of the backstabbing krepp. Tarak picked it up from the ground and used it to block an attack from a third krepp, but he did not see the fourth. He screamed as a blade ran down his back.

Tarak ignored the agony and jumped into the air as he pulled himself away with gravity. Krepps jumped after him, one taking hold of his foot. The immense weight pulled Tarak back toward the ground, but he increased the strength of his spell. It was damn difficult to cast in this kingdom, but Tarak managed to get himself and the creature up over the horde of krepps, though he had to put everything he could into the spell.

He surveyed the battlefield. In his absence, it appeared that Michael had somehow managed to stick his sword into Xiffrik’s leg and was now coiled on the ground in agony from psyche. Xiffrik pulled the sword free from his leg and looked ready to use it to maim or even kill Michael.

Tarak took himself and the enraged, frothing krepp on his leg above Xiffrik’s head and let go of his spell. Xiffrik must’ve sensed them, looking up and forming a shell of the green energy. The krepp struck first, his bare feet slapping down before flopping to his hands and knees. Tarak landed on top of him, pushing both him and the krepp through the shattering energy and onto Xiffrik.

Pain tore through every muscle in Tarak's body as psyche hit him harder than a brick wall. The krepp screeched into Tarak's ears, no doubt struck by a similar type of spell. Xiffrik wiggled out from between them, prying out his hand and aiming it quickly as if in desperation. Tarak felt immense heat across his back. The nearby scream of his grandfather rang out.

Vision blurred from what felt like muscle-tearing pain, Tarak managed to get his arm over Xiffrik's head and moved it around until he had Xiffrik's hair in his grasp.

"Get off me!" Xiffrik tried to push Tarak, never letting up his spell of pain, but Tarak might've started to become used to it. Or perhaps it was sheer determination that gave him enough strength for a monumental flop onto Xiffrik's head, burying the Ancient in Tarak's chest as Tarak grabbed hold of Xiffrik's hair with both hands now.

Xiffrik's hands grabbed Tarak by the sides and sprouted flames.

"Gah!" Tarak yelled as he rolled away, his shirt on fire. The psychic spell of pain ended, but a new agony of being burned replaced it.

Tarak rolled along the dirt until the fire went out. He sat up and waved the smoke out of his way to see Xiffrik pushing out burned hands and creating a sartious barrier to stop a fireball from striking him.

Had a fire mage come to aid them? No. As the last remnants of the fireball died out on the sartious energy, Tarak saw his grandfather cast another fireball, only for it to end with the same result. He shot water next, flooding Xiffrik's feet and sinking him into a puddle. Xiffrik turned his sartious wall horizontal and climbed on top. He brought both hands in from his sides, and a stream of fire as large and powerful as a fierce river would've consumed Basael if he had not reflected it with a black sphere that still did not push him away from its other side, even though it was right in front of his face.

Xiffrik waved his hand, and Basael's spell collapsed on itself. There was a scent in the air, earthy and bitter. Tarak tried

to cast but couldn't. Xiffrik had performed the same feat when they had first met.

It did not seem to limit Xiffrik, however, as he encased Michael with sartious energy as he had done to Desil earlier. Xiffrik then turned and put a wall in front of Tarak. Tarak tried to run the other way, but he turned into a second wall. There were two more ways to turn, but two more walls rose up before he could escape. The ceiling was the last, pushing Tarak's reaching hand back down.

The sounds of the outside world faded. Tarak could make out shapes behind the thick barriers of green energy, but he couldn't discern what he was seeing. He had lost the sword he had taken from the krepp, probably during the spell of pain against him.

Tarak leaned back and began to kick. He kicked and kicked and kicked some more, eventually creating a crack. Soon he broke through the crack and leaned down for a look. He could see two other sartious cages, presumably with Michael and Caarda still entrapped, though Caarda slammed his own boot through a freshly made hole like Tarak had.

Xiffrik had Basael on his knees, a massive block of sartious energy threatening to crush him as Basael shook and held it up with all of his strength. Xiffrik pulled his hands down, and the sartious energy moved Basael into the earth but still failed to crush him.

Unfortunately, he appeared trapped and unable to defend himself as Xiffrik darted toward him ready to joust his sword between Basael's eyes. Tarak could not make gravity. He could not make an illusion. He could not grasp mana at all.

Basael had one choice to keep himself from being impaled, and he took it, dropping his arms and allowing the massive block of sartious energy to crush him into the ground. Xiffrik stopped short and waved his hand, and the block turned to dust. Basael managed to get to his knees and grab the swinging hand that held Xiffrik's sword. Blood stained Basael's shirt and arms. His body shook as he tried

unsuccessfully to keep Xiffrik from slowly guiding the tip of the sword into Basael's shoulder.

Tarak had finally shattered enough of the sartious cage to fit his leg through, but his hips got stuck. He cursed and drew his leg back to resume kicking, then saw his father sprinting toward Xiffrik as the Ancient took out his sword from Basael's shoulder and lifted his palm.

A jet of fire showered Basael, who screamed and tried to roll away, but Xiffrik casually walked after him and didn't let up. Tarak had no idea how the Ancient could cast with mana broken as it was. It seemed that neither Caarda nor Basael had any grasp on mana, either. Caarda opted to slam into Xiffrik, but he took Xiffrik's sword deep into his side in the process.

Caarda stumbled back, wheezing. He fell to his knees and pulled out the sword. Xiffrik ignored him, walking after the charred Basael, who was crawling away at the speed of a snail. Xiffrik produced a dagger.

Tarak finally broke out of his cage. He sprinted as fast as his long legs could carry him as Xiffrik knelt down and plunged his dagger into Basael's back, stopping Basael's slow crawl away. Xiffrik pulled out his dagger and rolled Basael over. He swept Basael's arms out of the way, putting his knees on top of them. Then he lifted the dagger as if to plunge it into Basael's head.

Tarak was about to jump and smash the soles of his boots against Xiffrik's head when another damn wall materialized between them. Tarak slammed his face against it and fell back in a daze.

He caught sight of Caarda stumbling in Xiffrik's direction, but blood poured from a massive wound in his side. He was too slow.

Tarak expected his grandfather to be dead already by the time he made it around the short wall, but he had to try anyway.

"I can't kill him." Xiffrik tossed his dagger away in frustration and got up. "I can't kill you, Basael. Bastial hell."

Tarak didn't bother attacking Xiffrik. There was no reason for it. He stopped short and walked the rest of the way. As the fight left his body, he noticed the pain thudding in his leg. Tarak limped the last few steps and helped up his grandfather, who seemed to have trouble standing, though he wanted to more than anything.

Basael was a burned, bloody mess. He barely looked human and wasn't recognizable in the dim light. The only remnants of his clothes were scraps of pants fused together with his tattered undershorts.

"I need you to understand that I can and will kill you if you do not leave," Xiffrik told Basael. "Do you understand?"

Basael did not nod. He did not speak.

"I showed you mercy. You were dead, twice. You need to understand that, or I'm not letting you leave alive. This is your *last* chance, Basael. Really it is. Do you understand?"

Still, Tarak's grandfather did not answer.

Caarda made it over, then Effie, Desil, and Michael. Effie must've broken the sartious shell around Michael. The krepps and even the dorrin watching all crept closer.

Caarda put his hand on Basael's shoulder, though he took it off when Basael winced. "Father," Caarda said. "You must acknowledge defeat. We lost. He was going to kill you."

"Loser!" shouted the krepp who spoke common tongue. He jabbed his clawed finger at Basael. "Loser! Admit loser!"

"I admit defeat," Basael muttered.

"And do you understand that I will kill you if you come back here?" Xiffrik asked.

"I understand." He hung his head in shame.

Xiffrik leaned close, then nodded as if satisfied.

"And I?" Caarda asked Xiffrik. "I support my father."

"Do you wish to gain control over mana here?"

"No," Caarda said.

“Then I have no reason to banish you.”

“But Basael does not wish to control mana here, either,” Caarda said. “He only wishes to control mana in Dorrinthal and stop you from being powerful enough to gain control of all mana.”

“That’s not true. He also wants control of all mana, like I do.”

“No, but—”

“*All* mana,” Xiffrik repeated, then asked Basael, “You have been telling people that you only want Dorrinthal? You are a liar.”

“Father, this is true?” Caarda asked shamefully.

Basael sucked in a breath, though he moaned in pain halfway through. “Mana must be curated! All mana! I have told you a hundred times—”

“And I have told you that even if I believed that, you are not the one to curate it! You are too disconnected from the people. We—” Caarda stopped himself as his voice was rising. He shook his head and took on a disappointed tone. “We have had this conversation a hundred times, yes, and you had me convinced you agreed with me. You would only control mana in Dorrinthal and *only* if every leader accepted you as the curator.”

“You are too naive to understand.”

“I am not!” Caarda yelled. “To think of all the trouble we went through. We took hundreds of your followers to the coast. Many of them nearly died from starvation. We had to abandon them. I still worry some never made it back! But I told myself it was all for the greater good. We had to stop Xiffrik and any Ancient who wanted domination over all mana and sorcerers, but all this time you had not changed.”

“Caarda, you did not see what the world was like when mana was free. I watched towns disappear!”

“Enough. I am ashamed of you.”

“Shame!” yelled the krepp who spoke common tongue. Other krepps copied him until all were shouting.

Caarda had not seen the damage that the rift in the forest had done, but he was right anyway. Basael deserved shame for lying, and he deserved even more shame to think he should control all mana.

“You are even more dangerous than Xiffrik,” Tarak muttered.

Xiffrik tossed his hands in Tarak’s direction. “Finally, some sense!”

“What do you plan to do now?” Tarak asked Basael.

“Answer your grandson,” Xiffrik added.

“I will return to Dorrinthal and assist King Nykal.”

“You’re leaving out something important.” Xiffrik lowered his eyebrows. “Do you still hope to change mana in Dorrinthal and take back control? Answer that.”

“Yes,” Basael muttered.

There was a collective groan. It appeared that many in the audience were finally catching on to what all of this was really about. Unstoppable power.

Caarda warned his father, “I will speak out against you.”

“None of you understand,” Basael told the crowd. “Mana cannot remain free. It is too dangerous.”

“Basael’s right.” Xiffrik looked at Michael. “Tell everyone what’s on your mind.”

“Michael,” Tarak hissed and shook his head.

“I can’t help it!” Michael groaned.

“Say it,” Xiffrik ordered. “What did you see?”

“Tarak saw it, too. He was almost killed by it. Unchecked mana in Dorrinthal made a rift explode. It destroyed hundreds of trees in the forest. There’s now a crater as deep as a mountain is tall. I have no doubt that if a city had been there, everyone would’ve been killed.”

“The headmaster also saw it, and we mentioned it to the queen,” Tarak said. “But scaring people into picking an Ancient to rule mana would be a big mistake. Beatrix knows this.” Tarak pointed at Xiffrik. “You let it explode. You could have done something to prevent it like you did to the one below Livea.”

“That’s true, because there was no one in that forest.”

“I was there with another sorcerer. We almost died!”

“Hey, I had no idea. I wasn’t in Dorrinthal during that time.”

“But did you know the rift would explode?”

“I figured it would eventually, but there was no telling when it would happen. It could’ve been years.”

Tarak studied Xiffrik before admitting, “I do not see how I can believe you. Even a psychic cannot confirm without a doubt that you are telling the truth.”

“Who are you going to trust more than me? Basael? *Monrra*?”

Tarak couldn’t help but remember the vile creatures that the summoner had brought into the forest to kill the king and everyone defending him. She had even supported the murder of Aliana, and they hadn’t even met. *Monrra* was probably the worst of all.

Xiffrik clearly could feel every thought. He gave a smug smile.

“Yes, *Monrra* is even worse than Basael. She tried to kill me recently, by the way. I agreed to meet with her, and she’d prepared a trap for me. You don’t have to believe me, but know this.” Xiffrik paused for a breath. “There must be someone who controls mana in Dorrinthal or rifts will continue to swallow sections of the earth no matter what lies on top. I met with the analytes, and I met with the elves. I know what’s going to happen. The elves are going to pick an elven woman named Eslenda to change mana to their liking, and the analytes are going to choose *Monrra*.”

“The analytes would not be so foolish,” Tarak said.

“They will. They just don’t know it yet. The elves don’t know they’re going to pick Eslenda, either, but they will feel forced. You will see, and the dorrin will have to pick someone then. It’s going to be me, your best option. It doesn’t matter whether you tell this to your king or not. He will have no choice, but everything will be easier for all of us if he accepts it sooner rather than later. Mana cannot be changed by more than one person on the same continent for long. When the changed mana extends far enough to clash with other changed mana, and it will soon after all this begins, the storms will form. Nothing can survive them or travel past them. There will be no hope to reach the Ancients responsible and put an end to their change of mana. The three races of Dorrinthal will be forever divided, unless an Ancient makes a grand error, like Basael did, and leaves for long enough to lose control of their mana system. I don’t see any of them being dumb enough to let that happen.”

Tarak expected his grandfather to say something, but it looked as if shame was a weight on the back of his head that he could not overcome.

“That’s it,” Xiffrik concluded. “That’s my grand plan. I couldn’t divulge it earlier because Basael was the unknown, but now that I’ve spoken with him and see just how deluded he is, I know the dorrin king must select me once Monrra and Eslenda initiate control over mana in their territories. I suggest you tell Nykal when you get back. Now how about that ale we spoke of so long ago?”

Tarak groaned. “Not now, not ever.”

The trip back to the tavern became awkward when Tarak found out from his father that Caarda and Basael would be staying with Tarak until a portal was made. Then they would return to the castle in Dorrinthal with him. Michael staggered along with a heavy limp, until Tarak offered to help. He nodded to show his thanks while Desil and Effie walked on Tarak’s other side at the front.

Basael did not speak. He dragged his feet in the back of their group and wouldn't look up at Tarak even when Tarak asked him a question.

"How did you make gravity such that it only repelled on one side?"

"Because I told it to do that."

"Yeah, but how!" Tarak practically growled. "There must be something more you are doing."

"I do not know, Tarak," Basael grumbled.

Tarak sighed. "What are you going to do back in Dorrinthal? Do not lie."

Basael finally lifted his head. "I will remain and defend the kingdom from Xiffrik, Monrra, and whoever else comes to change mana."

"Do not think we are so forgetful. You desire to take control of mana for yourself. Everyone is to know about this."

"That I accept. There will be others besides me who come to Dorrinthal and wish to change mana. At least I plan to work with King Nykal and his people. I will even work with the analytes and the elves."

Caarda said, "Xiffrik claims the same thing. I am certain Monrra will, too, as well as this elf, Eslenda, who I have not met."

"I have," Michael said. "She's no better than any of the other Ancients."

"Is she more powerful than, say, Leon?" Tarak asked.

"Very much so."

"That is just wonderful," Tarak grumbled sarcastically.

"All of you look at me like a liar, like a *traitor*," Basael commented with an edge to his tone. He came around to the front of the group and faced everyone, stopping them. "But I was questioned here in Kyrro by the psychic queen. I am not a danger to anyone. I will protect. Your criticism of me makes you fools! Yes, I lied. I want control of all mana, but so do

Xiffrik, Monrra, Eslenda, and many others who will soon show themselves, I am certain. I am your savior! I expect you not to speak so ill of me when we go back that your king will not hear reason—”

“Father,” Caarda interrupted.

“Yes?”

“Shut up.”

“Yes,” Tarak echoed, “shut up. And because you cannot teach me anything, and none of Nykal’s sorcerers seem to know much about the divination tree, I am now realizing that I am forced to teach myself...*everything*, and I have waited too damn long to start! I am tired of losing fights. I will not just figure out how to make gravity spells like both of you do, but I will go beyond. I am going to learn every possible spell for my range, and I will destroy the next Ancient who crosses my path. It is up to me now. I will protect this goddamn world even from you, Basael.”

Basael stopped and leaned back his head to laugh.

“Shut up, grandfather,” Tarak grumbled.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Leon and Jon had taken one of Basen Hiller's portals from the Academy to Curdith Forest. It was a relief to be back in Dorrinthal and out of Ovira, though Leon didn't feel great about bringing Kyrro's strongest psychic back with him. In the short time Leon had spoken with Reela while waiting for Basen, she had called him troubled, crude, and even suggested he not speak while she questioned Fatholl. All he'd done was ask whether her human mother had been seduced by an elf or whether it was the other way around.

"I damn well *will* speak whenever I please," he'd replied.

Reela shook her head. "And that is your issue. I am trying to help you."

"I don't need help."

"That's your other issue."

I fucking hate psychics.

Jon had taken Leon aside and warned him, "If I have to fetch the king in Rohaer, you're going to be alone with Reela. Are you sure you can behave?"

"I'll be fine."

"It's not you I'm worried about."

"She'll be fine!"

Leon hated the way everyone was talking to him recently. Yeah, he'd fucked up by opening his mouth a bit too much and then shooting Xiffrik in the nuggins, but he'd proven himself to these sorcerlings many times over. He always did what was best, and they'd better remember that soon.

He cursed himself at thinking that. This had happened before. His anger had gotten the better of him, which had led to people not showing him respect, and that had pissed him off more. He had to stop the cycle before it got worse.

He missed Gwen. Seeing her always reminded him of why he was doing this in the first place. Before meeting her, it

was to stay out of the dungeons, but she had shown him that there were good people in Dorrinthal worth protecting. Sometimes he just forgot.

They traveled from the forest to the castle. Reela went on Jon's back rather than Leon's. She was smiling by the time they landed in the courtyard. It must've been her first time flying, but soon she was looking up and frowning.

Leon glanced up to find Fatholl leaning out from the window of the keep, his eerily calm gaze on Reela.

"Are you going to make this difficult?" Reela asked him.

"You know nothing about how I have changed since my departure from Ovira. No, I'm not here to make anything difficult but to help. You can confirm so with psyche."

"We aren't confirming anything until the king is present," Leon told Fatholl. "We're having supper with Jon before he flies to Rohaer, and you're not to step foot anywhere close to Reela."

Fatholl, his indifferent expression unchanging, retracted his head back into the keep.

They had a late dinner. Reela had already eaten, but she could sit and do nothing for all Leon cared, except she did try some food and then went to compliment the chef. When she finished, she became inquisitive about the castle and the sorcerers and was surprisingly polite. She even went so far as to compliment Leon for doing an excellent job as their instructor after he described what they had learned.

"Are you using psyche to make me like you?" he asked.

She laughed. "No, I wouldn't do that."

Jon had finished his second helping and stood with a sigh. "I'd better fetch the king." He looked at Leon as if silently reminding him to treat Reela nicely.

"I am fine, Jon," Reela said. "But I appreciate your concern."

He gave a half smile with a nod, then headed out of the dining hall.

One question kept surfacing in Leon's mind. "Why would your queen trust you to have control over all mana? What have you done to make her insane enough to trust you with that much power?"

"I figured you'd ask. I'll tell you what I told her when she presented that idea to me. Beatrix cannot know that I would be trustworthy. I cannot even confirm how altering mana might change me over so many years, so there is no way she could know. However, she is not insane. I am simply her best option if she had to choose someone, and that I may agree with once I learn more about mana and Ancients. I have proven I can be impartial and put the needs of the many above all else, but so has Basen Hiller. I reminded her of this."

"But she doesn't trust the portal-maker as much as she trusts you?"

"Basen thinks differently than anyone else I have met, and he has the confidence and skill to back up his plans. Until now, that has benefited all of Kyrro in many ways, including saving us from decimation long ago. However, I'm not sure someone like Basen—someone so brazen, skilled, and with unique ideas—is someone we want controlling all mana. He can be stubborn, unlike me."

Leon scoffed. "You're *not* stubborn? I've met old mules more cooperative than you."

"You're one to talk. How many people have you hurt with your refusal to change? I've hurt no one."

"You just happen to have a personality that doesn't clash with as many people as mine does."

"You have no idea just how wrong you are." She put up her hand. "Anyway, Basen would make that old mule of yours look like a trained pet, and Basen knows this. We all spoke before I left with you. None of us can make a decision before we learn more about mana and Ancients, as I mentioned, but it's likely going to be either me or him, if it has to be someone."

“Are you saying you all are planning to challenge Xiffrik for control and then take over?”

“In time, perhaps. We’d rather let mana be free, as it is here, but we are beginning to plan for everything. We do not trust Xiffrik, and we aren’t about to let an outsider change mana after we force Xiffrik out. But there’s another problem, and that’s Greenedge. It’s a large continent west of us with far more people than we have in Ovira. Xiffrik must have control of mana there, too, because the same sorcery is used. He only needs to convince a portion of them to fight for him, and they could decimate us.”

“If you help us, we would help you.”

“But Fatholl is with you. We cannot trust you until we can trust him.”

“Well, it’s a damn good thing you’re about to find that out, isn’t it?” Leon asked rhetorically.

“Hopefully. Can we expect your king to return tonight?”

“It’s probably going to be the middle of the night before Jon comes back with him. Rohaer is far. It’s best we take care of this meeting in the morning.”

“Yes, it is later here than in Ovira, interestingly. I should probably retire. I would like to wash up first.”

“Let me fetch the princess and her helpers. She can see that you’re comfortable. Meanwhile, I’ll talk to the head guard to make sure you have quarters somewhere safe.”

“You are kind after all.”

“Why wouldn’t I be?” Leon wondered.

“Because you are troubled. Usually people as troubled as you are incapable of being kind.”

“Troubled. Why do you keep saying that? It seems like a shit word for meaning I speak my thoughts.” Leon stood and started off. Reela followed.

“You do more than speak. You act, and you have no control over yourself. People like you are usually in prison for

most of their lives, if not all.” She stopped as she must’ve sensed Leon’s thought.

Leon turned to face her so she could see she was overstepping.

“Forgive me,” she said. “I didn’t realize you were in prison before, and now I’ve hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I was simply trying to answer your question.”

“You psychics really irritate me, you know. Can’t you just think about yourself for a while instead of getting into other people’s heads? Fuck.”

It was a reminder, however, that Leon really ought to remember to control himself better. Xiffrik deserved to be shot in his nuggins, he certainly did, but why the hell did Leon go and do it? All it accomplished was for the people of Ovira and Dorrinthal to trust Leon less to deal with these difficult situations, and he wanted to be there every time something was to be decided.

That wasn’t even the worst part about his stupid decision. Leon noticed his hand moving over his own nuggins protectively as he thought about Xiffrik’s promise for retaliation.

Fuck.

Leon had never been more relieved to see the king. Leon had pretty much been in charge until now. He had always figured he would be a better ruler than Nykal, but that was only during wartime—battle planning and army logistics. There was much more to leading than that. Dealing with people was much more important than Leon had realized, and Nykal was the best.

It was over breakfast that Leon divulged everything to Nykal that had happened in his absence. Leon wondered if he had messed up on an even greater scale than he felt, but Nykal was surprisingly compassionate.

“You had a number of difficult decisions to make,” Nykal said. “And although I might’ve chosen to go about these decisions *very* differently, you ultimately produced the result I

would've aimed for had I been there instead. Just make sure Xiffrik's act of revenge does not affect anyone but you, Leon. Now initiate the questioning between Reela and Fatholl while I catch up with my advisors and sorcerers."

"I'll have them ready in the council chambers," Leon replied.

"You aren't going to be harming anyone else during discussions, right?"

"I won't."

It was not long after that just about every politically important person in the castle was seated in the council chambers. By design, all seats faced the oval table at the center. Reela and Fatholl sat across from each other. Leon took his seat against the back wall, on the left side of the king. The queen sat on his right, with Lord Langston beside her. Rick and Randy stood at the other end, near the door. Almost all the sorcerers were here, even the princess, taking seats a few steps away from the table but still facing it. Tarak and Michael were absent, still in Ovira, though Leon could hear their name buzzing about in conversation between the sorcerlings.

Leon had heard this morning that Callie had spoken to Desil, and the excitement was not lost on him. This meant communication was possible between the distant continents. If Nykal didn't see how valuable Callie was in other ways besides as a pawn for marriage, then he was even more dense when it came to his daughter than Leon had figured.

The seat to Leon's other side was empty, and that's when he realized who should be sitting there. He leaned over and asked the king, "Where's the analyte?"

"He cannot be located. We're worried. Lord Langston has men searching for him, but we can't delay this."

"I hope you have more than Lord Langston sending people out for Zarin. You know he hates him."

"Yes, of course I do." Nykal stood up, and everyone grew quiet. "Welcome back Hadley. Please stand."

Hadley stood among the seated sorcerers with a shy grin. Leon hadn't seen her since she and Jon had left to put Rohaer back together—her birthplace. She'd been born a noble but had given that up when she was sixteen to flee from the advances of a disgusting pig of a king and a family that showed no interest in protecting her. She was probably twenty now, like Jon. The war had aged her like the rest of the sorcerlings. Her round face and dark eyes didn't hold the same look of excitement Leon had gotten used to seeing, though she was still young. She'd be fine. She was smart too, much smarter than Jon, though not a tenth of the sorcerer. That was fine, too. Just about none of the sorcerers had a tenth of Jon's power with sorcery, except maybe the fool, Tarak, but that was only if he took the time needed to train, as Jon had.

Hadley had specialized in curses back when dteria was prevalent. She'd used plants and animal parts in ways Leon didn't know were possible before meeting her. It would make sense that she'd taken on learning to be a chemist in Kyrro. From what Leon understood, the chemists there used plants to make potions, though they required something called bastial energy to do it. She'd probably figured that out, too, knowing her.

“We are glad to have you back,” Nykal continued. “Leon looks forward to learning more about what you learned from the chemists in Kyrro.” Nykal glanced at Leon, who stood.

“That's actually true, I do, and if I fail to understand any of it, we'll drag Jennava here.”

“Thank you. I am glad to be back.” Hadley sat and seemed relieved to no longer be everyone's focus.

Nykal, still standing in front of his throne, faced the half-elf at the center table. “Reela, I apologize for us meeting for the first time in this way, but there is too much on hold until your questioning is done for us to take any more time. Leon has informed me of his conversations with you, and with your queen, but I do hope to have conversations of my own with you when you are done.”

She gave a nod. “Yes, of course, but that is dependent on Fatholl’s answers to my questions.”

“It’s my understanding,” Nykal continued, “that you have never questioned him before?”

“Never like this.” She eyed Fatholl. “Never when he has so much at stake, at least.”

“Before you start,” Nykal said, “let me tell you the same thing I told Fatholl. He knows we will not hesitate to banish him if he is the reason that Kyrro cannot accept an alliance with us. We would prefer to keep him because of reasons you should know about: He risked his life to fight with us against the Ancient, Monrra. He might’ve even saved the life of my daughter during that fight. He is also the only one who came to us from the other continents, and his knowledge of sorcery has been beneficial to keeping people safe. He is also the only psychic who we have been able to trust. We strive to learn how to perform psyche, but more importantly, we need to know how to resist it. Without him or one of your psychics here to aid us, we might never be able to face Xiffrik.”

“I see,” Reela replied. “I didn’t know any of that. I appreciate you letting me know. Sire, would you mind if I asked you a few questions about Fatholl and use psyche to determine the truth?”

He appeared surprised for a moment, but he brought his palm down in a gentle wave. “Go ahead, you may approach.”

“I can determine from here.” She stood and faced him. “Did you know that Fatholl has ordered the assassination of kings he never met and was not at war with?”

“I heard that, yes.”

“And do you believe it?”

“I do believe he did that.”

“I see.” Reela appeared somewhat worried as her eyebrows lowered, but she had a breath and went on. “Did you know that he has proven that he would do anything to protect his elves, even from a threat that does not yet exist? For example, did you know that when we discovered the potential

damage akorell metal could inflict if used as a weapon, he brought an army of elves onto human land, attacked us, and would have taken it if Basen Hiller hadn't sent the akorell off in a portal?"

"No, I did not know that." Nykal glanced at Fatholl, who showed no emotion as he looked back and forth between Reela and the king.

"So I suppose you also didn't know that he captured the headmaster and his daughter, Leida, and he tortured Leida in front of Basen until Basen told him where the akorell was?"

A few of the sorcerers gasped.

"Good lord," Langston uttered, and shook his head.

Nykal glared at Fatholl. "No, I didn't know that, either."

Fatholl appeared irritated as he folded his arms. "There is more to that, but I will await my time to speak. Are you finished, Reela?"

"I am not," she snapped at him. "I wonder, sire," she told the king with a hint of derision, "do you even need to hear more, or are you ready to banish him?"

Nykal grimaced at the half-elf. "We are here already. Whether Fatholl stays or goes, I think it's best you question him for all the answers you can obtain."

"I agree," Reela said, "though I am still curious about your answer to my earlier question."

"That is a difficult question to answer, Miss Worender. We are in desperate times right now, and I have to determine if Fatholl's despicable acts of the past mean we should not enlist his help in the future. If we had no Ancients intent on coming here and changing mana to their liking, or if we had one of your psychics here to aid us, then the answer is easy. He would be banished from the kingdom—"

"I am glad to hear that."

"But," the king continued, "because you can confirm with psyche not only his future intentions but his past regrets, I cannot say with certainty that he is to be banished."

There was a heavy silence as the king and Reela shared a long look.

“I presume you can feel my desperation,” Nykal said.

“I can.”

“And you are proficient enough with psyche to tell that it is my people I am desperate to protect.”

“I can, yes.”

“And you can also tell that the best way I can defend my people is with access to the right spells for my sorcerers. I must not limit them by changing mana in ways that are detrimental to their power.”

“I am confirming your words are true, yes.”

“And you shouldn’t even need psyche to know that I want no Ancients in Lycast. I want none in Dorrinthal. I don’t even like the idea of Ancients controlling mana in any of the far continents from here. The power they hold, once mana is theirs, is too dangerous. Xiffrik is a prime example.”

“We are in agreement about that, as is my queen.”

“So considering everything I have just said, I hope it won’t be such a surprise or disappointment to learn that if Fatholl is crucial to our goals of keeping power out of the hands of Ancients, and his heinous acts are far behind him, I may need to enlist his support and thus support him in exchange.”

Reela did appear disappointed. She gave a long sigh. “So you would choose safety for your kingdom over inarguable morality, in this example.”

“I have before, and I would again.”

Leon felt as though the king was referring to taking him out of prison, but at least Nykal was polite enough not to look his way.

“I appreciate you answering my questions,” Reela said.

The king let his head down in a slow nod, then sat back on his throne.

Reela sat down and faced Fatholl across the short end of the table, but it was Fatholl who spoke first.

“Are you going to tell them what you’re doing?”

“You can.” Reela gave a calm wave of her palm.

Fatholl turned his head to face the king. “I can now tell that she is not just here to question me to see if I can be trusted. She is trying to convince all of you that I must be exiled. She has come with an idea of who I am and will not listen to anything I say if it goes against that idea. I know this type of close-mindedness, and I’m disappointed in her. It is usually more of a human trait than an elvish one, and it was this type of closed-mindedness that led to so many of my difficult decisions in the past.”

“Is all of this true?” Nykal asked Reela.

“It is, and I will be brief in my proof that he should be banished. I only have three questions for him. They will determine everything you need to know. Do you wish to stop me from continuing?”

“No. Go on.”

The fold of Fatholl’s arms grew tighter as he faced Reela squarely. “What is your first question?”

“What are your regrets?”

“I regret using psyche to manipulate the elves of Ovira because in doing so, I lost their trust and can never return no matter how badly I want to. I vowed after that to only use psyche as a demonstration or under direct orders from a leader I trust, such as to determine all the people responsible for an assassination attempt, like I have successfully done in Rohaer. You may not know this, Reela, but there was an attempt on a good king’s life, a friend of Nykal’s. I went there recently and used psyche to question people until we had a list of everyone responsible. The other recent time I used psyche without orders was to demonstrate to Nykal and his advisers how easily they could be manipulated by a psychic, which was important because it turned out that they had been manipulated earlier by a psychic named Orvyn Nyvro.”

She gave a shrug and showed him a look imploring him to go on.

“I do not regret assassinating any of the kings in Greenedge.” Fatholl turned to Nykal. “The reason it’s called Greenedge is because monstrous creatures named desmarls took over the continent from the edges toward the center. You know of them because Xiffrik used a portal to send one into Livea, and just one of them nearly slayed a group of your sorcerers.”

Nykal gave a brief nod before Fatholl continued.

“In Greenedge, the desmarls had pushed all of humanity together. Rather than the kings allying and slaying the beasts together, they fought each other over the remaining land. They had their chance yet proved to be greedy. I took matters into my own hands. I forced the kingdoms to come together and fight the desmarls, and it worked. Yes, a few people died, but these were not kings like you, Nykal. They were not good rulers. Now Greenedge is safe from desmarls, and there hasn’t been war there of any kind since I left.”

Nykal had no reply Leon could determine, just a strong gaze devoid of emotion.

“Your *regrets*,” Reela reiterated with an impatient tone.

“I do regret involving myself and the elves in the affairs of Basen and the akorell metal. I see now that I was wrong not only to manipulate the elves but also about the dangers I thought the humans posed with that kind of power. To be fair, there was a different king at the time when I began. The father of Beatrix was not someone I trusted in longevity, and I never had a chance to get to know Beatrix very well. I can see now that she is not someone who would allow the dorrin of Kyrro to pose a threat to the elves, therefore I was wrong. I tried to protect my elves by taking the power for myself, and I did irreparable damage to everyone in Ovira.” Fatholl appeared pained as he looked away.

“Other regrets?” Reela asked.

“I should not have used or threatened Basen at all. I did many years ago, when he was just a stubborn teenager trying to manipulate me, and I did later on when he refused to hand over the akorell metal in his possession. I actually like Basen. We could have been powerful allies had I taken my pride out of the equation.”

Reela’s whole mouth lowered an inch as if she was shocked. Then she shook her head as if coming out of a daze. “Onto my second question: What are your intentions here with Nykal’s people?”

“I wish to help the dorrin, the analytes, and the elves to stop Ancients from gaining control of mana in Dorrinthal. I believe I am the best person in the world right now at facilitating an alliance between the three kingdoms. The elves trust me because I am one of them, and I hope to gain the trust of the dorrin, despite my past. That leaves just the analytes, who I have already met with. I am in good favor with the royal family, and I swear I did not use psyche to manipulate them. I only provided a demonstration. The three kingdoms need to be allied, or they are bound to be enemies.”

Nykal stated, “Fatholl has told me the same thing, and I have believed him. He seems like the best diplomat we could ask for in these times, especially considering the elves refuse to speak to us about anything more than simple trades.”

Reela gave a breath and spoke as if frustrated. “Yes, he is telling the truth, but your opinion of him may change soon. Fatholl, are you ready for the last question?”

“Yes.”

“Do you wish to become an Ancient?”

Fatholl’s mouth moved around as if the difficult question lay within and he was trying to find the best way to swallow it. “Wish is a strange word to use. Do you really care so much about what I wish?”

“I do. I want to know.”

“What about what I plan? Or what I see myself accomplishing? Aren’t these more important than wishes?”

“In your case, no, because I have seen what kind of damage you are prepared to inflict to turn your wishes into reality. For you, there is no difference between a wish and a plan. So I ask again. Do you wish to be an Ancient? Clearly the answer is yes, so let me specify the question. Do you wish to be the *only* Ancient? Do you wish to control all mana across the entire world and ensure that no other being can ever take it away from you? Take a moment to think hard and be honest with yourself.”

“I am honest with myself. You can tell.”

“No, you are not. Think harder.” She paused as Fatholl looked perturbed. “Come on,” she pushed. “I know you are smarter than this, but you have somehow shut off your true wish.”

Fatholl answered, “I am being honest.”

“Then answer the question. Do you wish to control all mana across the entire world?”

Fatholl stood up as anger burst out in the form of a shout. “Ask me what I plan to do with this power if I have it! Ask me!”

“You can answer your own question.” Reela shook her head as if disappointed.

“I would ensure mana is as useful and as accessible as possible. There needs to be an Ancient. There has to be, Reela. Have you seen the damage to the forest caused by the rift exploding?”

“I have. Jon and Leon took me there yesterday before we came to the castle.”

“Then you must agree that mana needs to be curated!”

“I would never empower anyone who wishes to hold *all* power. Never. You shouldn’t either, even if that person is yourself, and if you would, you are clearly not the right person for the task. But.”

Fatholl looked as if he was about to scream, his face red, but he halted.

“But,” Reela continued. “I have confirmed that you may be needed in Lycast right now because you do have a lot to offer these people and are certainly less of a danger than someone who already has so much power, such as Xiffrik. If he gains control of the mana in Dorrinthal and finds enough support, he is bound to eventually have enough power to slay the Ancients elsewhere and control mana everywhere. The world as we know it would cease to be. But you, Fatholl, are more dangerous to all of us if you are banished. I envision you traveling off to live with the elves on this continent and adopting their mindset of exclusion, as you have in the past. That is why my preferred solution would be to imprison you for your past crimes, but I would never ask that. Even if Nykal agrees with me, you would flee and escape, and then I would have made you an enemy of the king. That is not what I want.”

She sighed sharply, then continued. “I despise you, Fatholl, because you are brilliant and could’ve been the ambassador you described, but you have ruined the chance at that with your need to be empowered. I recommend you stay and change. Work on yourself as you have worked on other people so vigorously in the past. Maybe then the people in Kyrro might actually work with you, but until you give up your wish to become an Ancient, you are like a drunkard with a weapon. You might not have committed a crime yet, but we are all watching and waiting for the inevitable.”

She stared at Fatholl for a long time as he lowered his head and watched her through the tops of his eyes. Finally, he blinked slowly and gave a nod. “I will work on giving up my wish to become an Ancient, if that’s what it takes to be trusted.”

“It is,” Reela said, then faced the king. “At least from our side.”

“From ours as well,” Nykal replied. “Now what would you like to propose, Miss Worender?”

“I am too needed in Kyrro, or I would stay and see to the training of your people and watch over Fatholl myself.” She tapped her lips as her eyes drifted off. “Actually, I know of someone who might be an even better fit in this situation

because of her unique skillset. The biggest issue is her...rough personality, but seeing as how you already have Leon here instructing your sorcerers, I would assume an instructor's personality has little importance so long as they have the capability to teach.”

Leon had expected a sarcastic remark from Michael or Tarak, but at remembering both of them absent, he'd realized this meeting had just about concluded without a hitch. He was right to leave them behind for a day. *Got to get that drinking out of their system or they'll always be pouting about it.* Leon knew well because the same thing often happened to him.

Leon was not surprised about Fatholl's desire to be an Ancient. He was more surprised that someone like Reela had little interest in doing the same. Didn't she feel a responsibility to protect everyone, and wasn't the best way to do that by empowering herself as much as possible? That was how Leon had begun to feel, but he could never trust himself to behave with all of that power. If he was more in control of his emotions, however, like Fatholl, he had no doubt he would also wish to become an Ancient.

It's fine. He can want to be one, and we can still use him. I doubt the elf bastard even knows how to go about changing mana. He's only a psychic, after all. I'm pretty sure he'd have to know how to use mana in other ways first. Though he can enter the plane of mana...hmmm.

Perhaps Fatholl was more dangerous than Leon had first thought.

“So what now?” Leon asked impatiently. “Are we voting on Fatholl. If so, I say we keep him for now so long as a psychic we trust is nearby to keep tabs on him.” Leon raised his hand, but then pointed at Fatholl with the other. “But if you ever start to thirst for power like some of these other fuckerssss—I mean, other...what's a more appropriate word for what I'm looking for?” Of course, Michael was gone when he was actually needed.

“We understand your point,” Fatholl replied snidely. “I'm your ally unless I become your enemy.”

The king looked at his wife inquisitively. She raised her eyebrows and turned her palm. "I vote to keep him as well."

Nykal nodded, then called out to his head guard across the room, "Rick, is there any word on Zarin yet?"

"None. We will be informed as soon as he's found."

"Then let's continue the vote without him for now. If it is close to a tie, we will wait for his return." He glanced at Lord Langston expectantly.

"Send him away. We are safer without him, especially if we'll have a psychic from Kyrro."

Leon scoffed. "We have eleven sorcerers! Two people teaching them how to resist psyche is twice as good as one. And Kyrro's psychic can keep Fatholl honest. There's no reason to send him away and turn him into an enemy, which your vote is doing already, even if it does not pass. Put your hand down."

Reuben Langston looked over at the king, who nodded subtly to show he agreed with Leon. The Lord Ass slowly put his hand down.

Nykal said, "The vote is concluded then. It's clear what's in our best interest. Fatholl, what do you say to this?"

"I am glad to stay, but I also feel the need to speak the obvious truth. I am far from the only one, even in this room, who would choose to be an Ancient given the chance. Reela is more of an oddity for not wanting that power. Wanting is not grounds to banish anyone. What matters is what we plan to do with the power after we obtain it."

"No," Reela said, "because intentions change when opportunity arises. That is why there are so many people who would not seek out something to steal but would still take something when it is right in front of them and they are confident they could get away with it. You cannot use current intentions to justify any grab for power, or all of us would've begun working with Xiffrik already. Work on yourself Fatholl, or you may make yourself an enemy of Kyrro again, and this time, I will see to it that you do not survive."

A cold tension filled the room. Fatholl glared at Reela as if wishing to inflict pain with his glance. She narrowed her eyes in return. Leon had no doubt there was something exchanged between them with psyche, each tilting their head this way and that as if in silent conversation.

It went on for a long while, Fatholl's heavy breaths the only sound. Eventually he bolted up. "I cannot function with psychics of Kyrro manipulating situations for my exile. Nykal, I appreciate your support so far, but this will not work for me. I will gather my people and leave."

"Hold on, Fatholl. What was just communicated between you and Reela?"

"Let him go, your majesty," Reela advised. "He is a lost cause after all."

Fatholl told Reela, "You think yourself to be so righteous that you fail to even *fathom* that you could be wrong, and now you have cost these people a valuable instructor and ambassador." He stormed out, leaving the door open behind him as the guards watched him go with confusion. "Do not follow me!" he yelled from out of view.

Reela sighed and stood up.

"What the hell was said!" Leon shouted.

"Miss Worender," Nykal asked. "Please explain what happened."

She stared absently at the door. "Fatholl becomes angry when he feels threatened or manipulated, and I did both with my words and my psyche. He was all too calm throughout this meeting. I had not seen him this way before. He always had emotional reactions in the past. I thought he might be hiding his true self with a facade—an act." She finally turned to the king. "Sometimes people are so good at it and do it for so long that they can even convince themselves they have changed. I had a feeling this might be the case with Fatholl in the years since his exile from Merejic in Ovira. I delved deep into his mind after stirring his anger, and he felt me there. He knew what I was doing, and he did not appreciate it. The old Fatholl

came out, but now I can't be sure it's because I forced him, or if it would've come out anyway. He wants to punish me, but he knows he cannot, so he's trying to guilt me by punishing all of you instead. I believe he's going to go to the elves, like I mentioned before."

"So when you said he was a lost cause?" Nykal questioned.

"I was further manipulating him to see what kind of reaction I would get."

"But couldn't he tell that you were just trying to manipulate him?" Nykal asked.

"No, I also meant my words," she stated. "I do not trust him. I never will. He is still the same prideful person I've known him to be. He confirmed it for me just now. Eventually he is going to have an opportunity to take power, and he will take that opportunity. He may believe that he won't, but he will change just like a man who claims not to be a thief but then sees a gold coin in the cup of a sleeping beggar. It's best he is far away but still regards you highly, sire. I think this is the best outcome we can ask for, and yes, he knows this was my intention, but think of his options after he showed his anger. He has only one. He will leave and help you from afar as best he can, while waiting for an opportunity for power. It is best you keep him as an ally. I think he will be very powerful again soon, though I can't say how. Kyrro will accept this relationship between him and you, though we expect you to deem him or anyone else an enemy as soon as we do. That is the only way an alliance will work." She marched over to the king and offered her hand. "With the power bestowed upon me by Queen Beatrix Estlander, I propose an alliance between Kyrro and Lycast."

The king shook, though his face showed none of the same enthusiasm as Reela's.

"This is messy, convoluted, and downright confusing, but I am going to trust you here. You have our support if we have yours because Xiffrik is only one of many Ancients who will need to be stopped."

“You do. We are in agreement.”

“We’re going to need that psychic trainer of yours to come here as soon as possible,” the king stated.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The morning after the battle against Xiffrik, Tarak was forced to wear his same tattered shirt from last night and eat at the same table as his grandfather. Basael acted as if nothing had changed, boasting about how he would protect them from Xiffrik and prove he was the best Ancient, once they got back to Lycast.

They were still within Effie's tavern, but Desil had received word from Callie that the meeting with Fatholl was over, and Reela expected a portal in an hour. Tarak didn't want to admit to anyone that he didn't know exactly how long an hour was, but at least he'd have a better sense when that time was up and they would travel to the Academy for a portal back to Dorrinthal.

Callie also said that Fatholl had exploded in anger after Reela's interrogation. He'd chosen to leave. This was Reela's intention all along. She'd admitted this. Tarak and Michael had many questions, but Desil said that he lost Callie and couldn't seem to reach her again.

"I'm sure she has a lot of difficulty reaching out to me," Desil explained. "Until she becomes more accustomed to entering the plane of mana, she's probably only going to be able to find me for a short time after trying for a long while."

Tarak felt bad for Fatholl, considering how much he had assisted them with knowledge of outside continents and how he had fought in the battle against Monrra. But Tarak had to trust the people of Kyrro, represented by Reela. Dorrinthal needed them.

Michael's knee was badly injured, but he would be fine as soon as he was in front of Jon. Caarda had healed, and so had Basael. At least Basael looked as though he'd gone through a fight and come out the loser, with all of his hair and eyebrows burned off. Tarak did not know what Basael or even Caarda would be doing back in Dorrinthal, but Tarak wanted nothing to do with his grandfather, so he didn't bother asking.

Tarak was no longer bothered by the company of his father, but only because Caarda was not trying to instruct him anymore. During breakfast, Tarak had expressed interest in hearing more about the spell from his father in which Caarda had set a trap, but Caarda couldn't seem to describe what he had done. He said he cast everything based on feeling, communicating with his mana as he did his body. He did not know how to teach someone else to do that using a method other than the one he'd spent years trying with Tarak without success.

After a period of frustration, Tarak reminded himself that he didn't need Caarda's instruction. He had found out that his ability to change mana between notes was a blessing. With enough trials, and the help of Leon and Charlie, Tarak eventually would learn every spell available. He did not care what distraction came in front of him, whether it be food, ale, or even Callie...*though, I may have a lot of trouble with that one...*no, he would not be distracted until he was powerful enough to stop any Ancient who stepped foot in Dorrinthal. Then one day, Tarak might be able to strike them down in their home kingdom.

After Tarak had a bath, he was more than ready to return home. He wondered something. If he had gone back with Leon, would Basael be dead? No, it seemed that Xiffrik could not have finished off Tarak's grandfather no matter the circumstance. He probably was a better person to rule over mana than Basael, but both of them were terrible choices.

Monrra, however, was even worse.

Eventually they all traveled back to the Academy to meet with the headmaster. Desil had been trying to reach Callie again to see if she or Reela needed anything else, but he eventually gave up. Tarak and Michael would soon be reunited with her.

Desil spoke to the guards at the entrance gate of the school, who rode ahead on horseback to fetch the headmaster and bring him to "the first portal spot" as Desil had described it.

Desil then led them casually through the school.

“Tell me more about this school,” Tarak requested. “I was not provided a chance to look around much earlier.”

“What would you like to know?”

“Why does it look like a city here?” Tarak gestured around them. They seemed to be taking the middle road west from the entrance gate. What looked like houses, not classrooms, stood identical to each other in neat rows. Each one appeared like a fine place to live, with clean white walls and well-maintained thatch roofs.

“The students don’t stay in these houses,” Desil explained. “Men and women do, and they work for the Academy, therefore for the queen. They are officially part of the school, but life for most of them is similar to those living in our cities.”

“How far do these houses go on for?” Tarak could see the end far ahead, where there was a space and then brick walls, it seemed. It would take a while to walk there without flying.

“A mile,” Desil said. Tarak noticed him studying Tarak’s face. “Do you not use miles in your land?”

“We do,” Michael answered. “Tarak is just a little behind...well, four hundred years behind.”

“I am trying to learn. So this is a mile.” He tried to memorize the distance.

Desil went on to talk about the different sections for each class of students. The chemists studied and trained in classrooms. “We won’t be passing them,” Desil added. “We also won’t see the classrooms for psychics. There are fewer psychics than any other class, and many of the psychics don’t ever progress to the point of detecting lies. It’s one of the few skills that seems to come more naturally rather than from training. We think it’s because each psychic may use their skill a little differently than another, so it’s hard to teach.”

“One swordsman uses his sword differently than another,” Michael commented. “And I saw a whole lot of them on that giant grass field.” He pointed off in the distance.

“The sword is a lot simpler. That’s teaching someone to use a tool. Psyche is the manipulation of someone’s personal bastial energy. It’s something only psychics can feel, and the way they feel it is different from psychic to psychic. They learn by memorizing the signals bastial energy gives them when a person feels a specific emotion, and then figuring out how to repeat the signal by forcing bastial energy to move to their will. Because it’s all done by feeling, it makes it very hard to teach. That’s pretty much it, in fact. The rest is up to the psychic to practice.”

Tarak asked, “So if bastial energy signals what a person is feeling, not thinking, how can Xiffrik read specific thoughts?”

“A true master psychic can sense bastial energy in ways that others cannot. I can’t explain it any better because I don’t understand it myself. You’d have to ask Xiffrik.”

Tarak realized he had been at peace with his grandfather and father walking silently behind him, until Basael made a remark.

“Psyche.” Basael blew out air. “It is a coward’s way of dealing with problems. All of you need to learn to enter the plane of mana, and then psyche is no longer a problem.”

Tarak stopped and spun around. “All right, how? How do I enter the plane of mana. Can *you* explain it?”

“You first have to connect to mana. Right now, you only use it like a tool, but you are not connected. Once you connect, you let mana guide you there. It pulls you from that obnoxious arrogant mind of yours.” He tapped Tarak’s head, but Tarak pushed Basael’s hand away.

“How do I connect better with mana?”

“Stop speaking to it and let it speak to you.”

Caarda was nodding. “That is correct, my son.”

“I do that with—” But Tarak didn’t want Basael to know that he could perform illusions. The less his grandfather knew the better, considering he might one day be an enemy. “I will heed your advice,” he grumbled, hoping to be done with the conversation.

It might actually be good advice, he was starting to realize. These were lessons his father had given him long ago, before he could cast a spell. Letting mana speak to him had been impossible because he could not communicate with it at all, but that had changed.

After a long silence, Desil said, “The way I learned to enter the plane of mana was similar to the way I use bastial energy to watch memories. It was by letting mana speak to me. The hardest part was opening my mind to it. Once that happened, I was able to start training.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Michael asked. “Watch memories?”

“Yes, and leave them for others to watch who know the skill. No one has mentioned that to you?”

“No, no one has mentioned that!” Michael looked around as if annoyed no one had the same reaction as him. His gaze rested on Tarak. “You’re hearing this, right?”

“I am.”

Desil muttered, “It’s not that useful of a skill. I haven’t needed to use it in a while. I used to leave memories for the headmaster’s daughter before I met her. The headmaster can do it as well.”

“God I wish we’d kept Leon’s vibmtaer to at least see what note you’re using.”

“In time,” Desil said with a grin. “And I’d wager it’s more than one note. It’s not an easy spell.”

Soon they saw the headmaster waiting ahead of them with a few guards around him.

“Stay back and let us speak with him, Basael,” Tarak told his grandfather as he noticed the headmaster ahead.

“Why would you request that?”

“Because I want Desil to tell them what happened with you and Xiffrik, and it should be without you there.”

Basael looked as if he would object, but Caarda faced him. “It is for the best, Basael. You have admitted you wish to

control all mana. You should be lucky to be assisted by them or by us in transporting you back. Take direction from Tarak, for everyone's sake.

"Fine."

They left Basael back a bit and approached the headmaster, who seemed to be waiting on a training ground for fire mages. Walls of red brick were blackened all around, especially closer to the man-shaped metal figure across the short field of sand. Basen Hiller rested his arm on it.

Desil informed Basen about the events of last night.

"So that explains Tarak's ripped and bloody shirt," Basen commented.

"Another thing ruined because of my grandfather," Tarak replied.

Desil went on to describe the message he'd received from Callie this morning. Basen then informed them of something even more shocking.

"I met with Reela and Beatrix yesterday before I sent Reela to Curdith Forest. We made a decision that we are going to stand against Xiffrik. He's less likely to give up his control of mana than a hungry dog with a scrap of meat, so it looks like we're going to be fighting him."

Michael uttered, "So it's beginning, then? An alliance? Us against the Ancients? The mortals against the gods?"

"With Desil now confirming the human centipede is leaving your kingdom, yes. I have no doubt about the alliance."

"You must realize that Xiffrik will come poking around our parts again," Tarak said. "Can we rely on aid if he attempts to change mana?"

"Yes, try to delay him as much as possible. We need time to speak with your king and come up with a course of action. We have many who can resist psyche decently, but I'm not sure they could stand up to Xiffrik. Reela can take pretty much all of them down except Desil, and I imagine Xiffrik is

stronger. Anyway.” He motioned for Tarak and Michael to make room. “You all won’t have to worry about this much. We’ll speak with your king once we figure out some logistics. Best you and the other sorcerers focus on training. This is serious now. I hope you enjoyed your drinking because bingeing is only for one thing during times of crisis, and that’s celebration. When that time comes, I’ll have a toast with you.”

“It had better be a lot more than a toast,” Michael said.

“It will be.”

The headmaster said, “Keep Tarak’s grandfather busy as well and *not* changing mana.”

“That involves being in his company,” Tarak replied with a sour tone.

“It must be done.”

Well, someone has to, but it does not have to be me.

It was a good thing for Caarda. Tarak looked back and gestured for them to come. Basael plodded over with his chin up as if slighted. “I will create a portal back myself and save you the trouble. Allow me to use your akorell.”

“No, you’re going to take my portal so I can know exactly where you’re going.” Basen flicked his wrist. The light from the akorell metal on his bracelet flashed, then disappeared as a portal opened between them. It roared to life, pulling at Tarak’s hair until he took another step back. He could see Curdith Forest within. Reela leaned close from the other side of the portal, peering in as if looking to make sure her way was clear. Leon and Jon stood behind her.

Reela moved around to the side until Tarak could not see her any longer, though he figured Basen could. Basen gestured for her to come.

“What happens if two people go through at the same time from opposite ways?” Michael asked.

“I have never hated two people enough to test it,” Basen replied. “Only Fatholl. We’d need another.”

Reela tumbled through, rolling over until she stopped in a sitting position. She held her head for a moment, then stood up. “That wasn’t so bad.”

“I’ve been working on making the portal steadier. You’re up, Tarak and Michael.”

“Wait,” Tarak said as he realized something. He told Reela, “With Fatholl leaving, we have no psychic to train us in defense of that absurdly powerful spell of pain.”

“I am not going to return for a while. There is too much for me to discuss here with our queen and with the headmaster, but—”

“Take your time. This is no problem at all!” Basen interrupted with a strained voice.

“But I am going to send someone there soon,” Reela finished.

“Really, who?” the headmaster asked, suddenly sounding much less strained.

“Grayhart.”

“She’s somewhere in Greenedge.”

“So she’ll have to be found.”

“Yeah, and who do you think will have to find her? I imagine it has to be someone who can take a portal back afterward.”

“Yes. *He* will.”

Basen groaned loudly. “It could take weeks to find her!”

“Best to start early, then.”

“God’s mercy. Are you all going or not?” Basen growled at Michael and the others.

“We thought—” Michael interrupted himself: “Never mind. You go first, Basael.”

Basael scowled for a moment, though at least he did jump in.

“I will follow,” Caarda said with an even more irritated look.

Tarak understood his father’s frustration with having to babysit Basael, but that didn’t mean Tarak was any more likely to step in and take over. He had training to do.

“I will go next,” Tarak said, then jumped in.

Tarak was hoping to shed his grandfather like a wet cloak. After a disorienting landing in Curdith Forest, Jon and Leon greeted them there. Jon healed Michael’s knee. They would catch each other up on the events that progressed, leaving Tarak to escort his father and grandfather back to the castle for Caarda to speak with the king.

Within the courtyard, Caarda walked with Basael toward the keep. Tarak’s responsibility was done. He had made a promise to himself to train, and train he would, right after he changed. He hurried up to his room and put on some fresh clothing, leaving his tattered garments on the floor of the hall outside his door. The castle workers had put back together a lot of Tarak’s torn clothing, but not all. It wasn’t magic, after all, but he did appreciate their efforts.

Back in the courtyard, Tarak first wanted to learn how to make a gravity spell that only repelled or sucked on one of its sides. There were many times that such a spell could be useful. He had never thought it possible, but he had seen his grandfather make it.

Tarak made many spheres of gravity that pulled and pushed at him. He tried to mold his mana in such a way as to block out half of the spell as it formed, but it felt like he was going about this all wrong. He sat down and closed his eyes.

Speak to me, mana.

Like speaking to a certain part of his body, he specified that he wanted the mana to tell him something specific.

Gravity. How can I form a spell with a pull or push from only one side?

All he felt was confusion. It wasn't like his illusion spells. His mana did not seem to understand gravity any better than Tarak did, except of course how to turn into it. Tarak wouldn't even try to understand that.

He remembered some of his old lessons. Notes gave mana direction when it could not produce the result without them. It was probably notes that would tell the mana to create this spell, not a tweak to the spell he'd become accustomed to casting. But what notes?

Tarak opened his eyes and muttered a curse. He needed Leon or Charlie, or at least the scroll Charlie made that had so much information about the divination tree.

He noticed Zarin coming in through the portcullis. Strangely, the analyte seemed as if he was being detained by Rick.

Tarak approached. "Why does it look like you are about to throw him in the dungeons, Rick?"

"This doesn't concern you, Tarak," the guard said.

Zarin seemed to only notice Tarak just now, putting on a drunken smile and sputtering out a slur of words. "Tarak! We had fun at the tavern! Want to visit again? We can this afternoon."

"Hold, Rick." Tarak put himself in front of the guard. "Explain what I am seeing."

Rick gave Tarak a look to indicate that he was crossing a line.

"Please," Tarak added. "Whatever Zarin has done, he does not deserve to be put in the dungeon. He is a prince, after all."

"He's not going to the dungeon, Tarak. Relax."

"Dungeon?" Zarin laughed. "No, they're just dragging me back for a little rest. I've been out since you went with me to the tavern, that...what was the name of it?"

"You are *just now* arriving back?" Tarak was incredulous.

Zarin gasped as if realizing something. “Eden! You went off because she signaled you with the calling. Is she all right?”

“That was ages ago!”

“It’s only been a day.”

“No it has been—I may have lost track as well, but I know it has been a lot longer than a day! So much has happened since then. My friend, I know you can walk now, but you must pace yourself.”

“Tarak’s right. A plethora of events have passed,” Rick said. “You must speak with the king as soon as Jon heals your drunkenness.”

“It has really been more than a day?” Zarin asked, sounding a little worried.

“Yes! Lord and bane, Zarin! Yes!” Tarak complained. “And to think I was last seen with you. I could have been to blame! You really never came back? Your clothes look different.”

“I bought new ones because my old ones have spill stains on them.”

“Where are they?”

“I can’t recall.”

“That sounds like a lie that is less embarrassing than the truth.”

“Perhaps you should be a gentleman and let the lie pass, then.”

Rick said, “All right, this has gone on long enough. The king was worried you’d been abducted, Zarin.”

He spoke in analyse and gestured for them to calm. “Dolikima, dolikima. I’ll do better next time.”

Tarak didn’t know exactly what “do better” meant. The old Tarak might’ve wanted to find out if it meant a night of fun, but he had more important things to do, for once in his life.

“Slow down, my friend,” Tarak advised him again as Rick took Zarin off. “You are too important to be acting this foolish.”

Zarin turned and rolled his eyes as if listening to a reminder he’d already heard.

Wind blew Tarak’s fine clothing nearly off his body. He turned to see Leon landing behind him. His instructor moved the strands of blond hair out of his face and glared at Tarak.

“Is it *actually* true what you have promised to accomplish now that you’re done thinking with your tongue?”

“You are disgusting,” Tarak snapped. “What do you think I’ve been doing with my tongue?”

“Drinking, you idiot!”

“Oh. Yes. In fact, I was training right now, but I actually need your help.”

“If it’s quick. I have to speak with the king.”

“I need a copy of the scroll listing out the different spells for divination.”

“All right, we made copies. They’re in the library. *You* stay here.”

Leon took just enough time before coming back for Tarak to realize he was offended. Upon Leon’s return, Tarak asked him, “Why did it sound like I am not allowed in the library?”

“Don’t go in the library, Tarak, seriously.”

“Why not?”

“Because there are too many valuable scrolls and books in there, and I’ve seen you break more things than fix.”

“Just give me the damn scroll.” Tarak held out his hand.

Leon passed the scroll to him, then turned and strode toward the keep.

“I have not had the chance to fix anything,” Tarak called after him.

“Sure you have,” Leon responded without turning or stopping. “I’m talking about situations as well, and you’ve ruined those, too.”

“Some instructor you are! Are you not supposed to instill hope?”

Leon turned this time, though he kept walking backward and away from Tarak. “I’ll check back with you plenty of times. But a new spell takes weeks even for someone as luckily gifted as you. Be patient and go slowly, or you might kill yourself before you learn anything, especially with your power.” He turned back. “And your lack of wit.”

“I will have a new spell ready before I see your ugly face again!”

Callie came out of the keep, crossing by Leon. Tarak could hear Leon mutter to her, “Don’t distract him. He finally might learn something.”

“I will be quick.”

“Princess.” Tarak gave her his best smile.

She beamed back with a smile that made Tarak want to forget there were such things as problems. He realized how plainly obvious their feelings were to anyone seeing them and decided to clear his throat and offer a stiff bow.

“Princess,” he repeated.

She seemed to realize the same mistake as she fixed her smile and gave a curtsy.

Tarak knew he looked good in his fine quality robes, with a sleeveless tunic showing off his arms and a pair of breeches worth more than he’d made during his old life.

However, comparing himself to Callie was like comparing the moon to the sun. His tunic was gray, and his pants were black. Meanwhile, her intricate dress was some sort of complicated maze of orange, red, and black. Laces came together around her midsection, holding together...was that a wide belt of the same red silken material? No, it was part of the dress, disappearing around behind her and coming back

down her hips and legs. The dress was open at the top, showing off her bust and shoulders in opposite nature as Tarak's arms, with grace and subtle delicacy. The sleeves also ended short, above her elbows, leaving her smooth and soft arms bare and leading to hands that Tarak had learned were much more skilled and naughty than one might guess by her modest and elegant exterior.

"Were you going to at least tell me you had returned?" she teased with a half-smile.

"I wanted to see you first thing, but I knew your wit and charm would distract me. I made a promise to myself to improve. I thought I could surprise you with some good news as well, like a new spell I will use to destroy these Ancients."

"Did something happen? Desil couldn't tell me anything before we lost connection."

"Yes, Basael was a fool. Xiffrik demanded that Basael leave his kingdom, and Basael refused. They fought. Basael lost. My father and I fought beside him, but we were defeated as well. Xiffrik had the obvious chance to kill Basael, but he threw away his dagger and gave my grandfather one last warning."

"Oh gosh. Does Leon know?"

"Yes, we told him and Jon in the forest just recently. Leon is on his way to tell your father. We also told him what Basael admitted to us. He lied to us. He is no different from Xiffrik. He wants to control all mana. I want little to do with him anymore."

"You already wanted little to do with him."

"Even less now. I will grow strong and fight him, Xiffrik, and anyone else who wants to change mana or threaten people."

She smiled wide. "I like this side of you. You're a really strong sorcerer, Tarak. You should be training as much as possible, maybe spending less time flirting with the princess." She winked.

“You are just as strong, Callie. Maybe you should spend more time training your skills and less time flirting with the handsome Deviant.” Tarak winked back.

“I will.”

“But I cannot train much during the night.”

She showed a sly smile. “I will leave my window unlocked.”

“Mmm.” He raised his eyebrows, and she mimicked him.

Aliana had come out of great hall and approached them. “Oy,” she said. “Could you two be any less subtle?”

“She knows?” Tarak complained to Callie.

“She figured it out pretty easily.”

“You’re always grinning at each other or winking or raising eyebrows.” She gestured at Tarak’s head. “Best just to come out with it than to have Trevor find out you were hiding it.”

“My father is against that,” Callie said. “As much as I would like it.”

“I would as well,” Tarak agreed.

Aliana asked, “Does your father know that everyone else seems to know?”

“Not *everyone* knows,” Callie corrected. Tarak’s shock from Aliana’s question must’ve come out through his expression, because Callie seemed to attempt to calm him with a lowering of her hands. “Most people still do not know,” she murmured. “And my parents would like to keep it that way for as long as possible.”

“Fine job you two are doing of appeasing their wish,” Aliana remarked.

“Come on,” Callie said as she took Aliana’s arm. “We have to let Tarak train. I’ll tell you what happened last night in Kyrro. They were attacked by Xiffrik.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose I always thought he would just threaten us.”

Tarak let them go and took a look at the scroll. Immediately he was disappointed. It had been greatly simplified.

“Divination (Mastery of Radiance):

Basic notes:

G—Grab

D—Energy

B—Gravity

Gravity Spells:

Earth: 11B

Gravity Bubble: 1B, C, E, G!—2B, 3G

Gravity Sphere: C, E, G

1C, 1E, 1G: ?

uC, uE, uG: ?

Light Spells

Illusion: 1C, C, uC

Light: C

1C: ?

uC: ?

Time Spells

Time A, C, E

Slow: 1A, A

Time Bubble: 1B, A, C, E! —2B, 3G

Read Energy: A, C, E, D

Read Gravity: A, C, E, B

Read multiple paths of time and energy: A, C, E, D, uA, uD

Read multiple paths of time and gravity A, C, E, B, uA, uB

Read Continuum (Read all): A, B, C, D, E.

Read Multiple Paths of Continuum: A, B, C, D, E, uA, uB, uC, uD, uE”

Tarak noticed Leon coming out of the keep. Tarak walked up to him and offered back the scroll.

“You’re done looking at it already?” Leon asked as he took it.

“I want the one with Charlie’s notes.”

“What are you talking about? This has everything you could possibly need and written out in a version that even you can understand.”

“Charlie’s notes have a plethora of information that is absent from this scroll.”

Leon put his fingers to his forehead as if a headache was coming. “What spell are you trying to learn?”

“All of them! I want to know everything about the divination tree so I can learn every spell.”

“Start with one, Tarak,” Leon muttered. “Which one do you want to learn first? They’re all right here.” He smacked the back of his hand into the scroll.

“The spell I want is not there. I would assume that I could figure it out through Charlie’s notes.”

“Everything we know is right here.” Leon shook the scroll. “You just have to read into it a little more. What spell do you want to learn? Just shut up with all of your comments and answer this question.”

“Basael made a sphere of gravity that repelled only from one side. He used it as a shield to keep Xiffrik from getting to him, but it did not repel him standing on the other side of it.”

Leon’s bulbous forehead creased. “Hmm, that is actually fascinating. And you asked your insufferable grandfather about this, I presume?”

“I did, and you could also presume that he told me nothing because he does not understand any of it.”

“I see.” Leon opened up the scroll and had a look. He smacked it again. “It’s obvious, Tarak. Look.” He pointed toward the top of the scroll:

“Basic notes:

G—Grab

D—Energy

B—Gravity”

“What about that?” Tarak asked.

“The note you want is B, for gravity.” He pointed at it specifically. “B tells your mana to form gravity in a different way. That’s your answer. Just add that to your spell, and you should be able to make changes to the way the spell normally works.”

“Ah!” Tarak smiled and lifted a finger. “That is actually wise.”

“I’ve been doing this a long time. So are you done with this?” He gestured with the scroll.

“Yes, but now I need the vibmtaer so I can memorize the note B.”

“I told you a long time ago you’re going to want to learn that note!”

“I have been busy! I really actually have!”

“Yeah fine, but you’d better be as serious about this as you seem. And don’t fucking damage the vibmtaer. I’m serious, Tarak. Those things are damn expensive and hard to make.”

“I will take as good care of it as if it was my own.”

Leon had turned around to walk off, but he turned back to stare at him.

“It will remain undamaged!” Tarak specified.

CHAPTER FORTY

A week passed before Tarak felt comfortable enough with his new spell to move on to the next spell he wanted to learn. Leon had been right about more than one thing, to Tarak's surprise. The power of gravity could be nullified on one side with the use of the note B. Now with four notes—C, E, G, B—the spell was more difficult, and it was also an uncomfortable strain on Tarak's mind. The fourth note acted as a counter to the power of the rest of the spell. So if Tarak used the three notes to make a gravity sphere that pulled everything toward it, the B note would repel Tarak on the other side of the sphere with equal force. If Tarak changed the spell to C, Em, G, B, which made the spell repel instead of pull, the note of B pulled Tarak with equal force on its other side, to keep him still.

Tarak had at first thought he might prove Leon's prediction wrong about taking a week to learn a new spell, because Tarak had cast the new spell in less than an hour. He had also figured out how long an hour was, generally, which was a good thing because he didn't want Callie to know he'd had little idea before now. But Tarak's first spell had almost no power to it. Then the next one had so much power that sand erupted across the courtyard. Leon was right after all, because it did take Tarak a week for the spell to become consistent and comfortable enough while casting for him now to be certain he could use it in a battle without risk of detriment to him or his allies.

Today, Tarak would learn not only another new spell, but he also would help discover a spell no one had documented before. There were a number of question marks on the scroll outlining the spells for the divination tree. Tarak found out that they not only bothered Charlie as much as they did Tarak, but Charlie somewhat blamed Tarak for the existence of at least one of them.

In the "Gravity Spells" section, there were two spells listed with question marks:

"IC, IE, IG: ?

uC, uE, uG: ?”

Charlie knew Tarak’s range was Lower C to Upper C, or in other words, IC to uC. That meant Charlie also knew that one of those spells was within Tarak’s range. Charlie also knew that Tarak had become very accustomed to his gravity spell of Middle C, Middle E, and Middle G, or in other words, C, E, G. Because of this knowledge, Charlie had come to the conclusion that Tarak was a lazy bastard who didn’t care to discover more spells given the simple fact that Tarak had not yet discovered what spell comes from casting Lower C, Lower E, and Lower G.

“They are just one octave lower than the spell you have cast a thousand times!” Charlie had complained to Tarak over supper one evening. “That spell should be easy!”

“I will try it once I have this new spell with D down to a simple feat,” Tarak replied. “I do not want to lose track of the feeling by experimenting with other notes.”

That was days ago, and Charlie had pestered Tarak about the new spell every time they saw each other, which was at every meal.

Times had changed recently. Every sorcerer was at the castle, many training in the courtyard. There was even a new one about, though Tarak didn’t see her very much. Hadley, the witch, apparently spent most of her time in the forest collecting various plants and animal parts and experimenting with potions, just like a burgeoning witch might, Tarak realized, the more he thought about it.

She did not look scary. In fact, she was quite beautiful. Tarak was glad for Callie’s ability to detect lies when Callie had asked him one night what he thought of Hadley. It didn’t take much convincing for Tarak to explain that although he saw that she was beautiful, he had no feelings for her or anyone else besides Callie.

“You used to be scared of witches when you thought Illia was one,” Callie had countered. “Are you scared of Hadley?”

“The only thing I am afraid of these days is an Ancient changing mana and someone catching me in your room.”

It was where they were during this conversation—during most of their conversations, these days. Both of them were quite tired of the sneaking, especially Tarak, who had to navigate his big self in and out of her not-so-big window every night, leaving when he was often exhausted after a wonderful night.

He had presented her with his gift from Desil, the rujin gem, during the first night he had alone with her after his return. Although she wouldn't be using it for a while, to ensure that Desil could reach her, she showed Tarak how much she appreciated the gift with a lot more than just her words.

That was the first night of many that left Tarak dozing off in Callie's room with a smile on his face. The castle walls were thick, to prevent noise from disturbing others. Her room was sometimes cold when they inadvertently let the fire go out, but steam still fogged the window on those nights. A fire mage as skilled as Callie could reignite the fire as easily as she could reach down and wake the gentleman again.

She hated that word for it, but all the other words that Tarak knew for it she hated even more, so “the gentleman” it was.

Her father would absolutely murder Tarak if he knew what was happening in Callie's room late into the night. The thought sometimes kept him awake when he was alone in his bed, but pleasant memories fresh in his mind usually did well to beat back that fear.

It was because of Callie that Tarak didn't mind giving up his room to Jon after some discussion. There was another room nearly identical that Tarak had gotten used to. It was just a little farther down the hall, and Jon had earned his room twice over. The poor lad was still busy every day, flying about, healing, delivering messages like a pigeon with no life of its own.

Apparently Jon and Hadley used to be a couple. It was the used-to-be part that confused Tarak. The way they looked

at each other, with a graze of an arm or a touch to the shoulder, didn't seem to indicate that there was distance between them at all. Apparently Tarak wasn't the only one curious, because he heard Michael asking Jon about it during one supper.

Jon stated that the attraction was still there, but they don't work as a couple. Hadley had told him she'd had a brief relationship with someone in Kyrro that ended when she left. Meanwhile, Jon knew he was open to see whoever he wanted and seemed to be hinting at Kataleya, but he wouldn't actually admit it to Michael or Tarak. The fact that he and Hadley kept ending up in the same bed was what Jon described as a "problem we're both trying to overcome but can't seem to figure out."

"You could try, um, not?" Michael had suggested. "Clothes don't take themselves off."

"They pretty much do."

Aliana had confided in Callie about what she'd heard sleeping next door to Jon's room.

"I've never heard of a problem with so many affirmations attached to it," she'd told the princess.

It was from conversations like this that Tarak realized that there really would be no hiding his relationship with Callie for much longer. People heard things, and they liked to share those things. Tarak couldn't blame them. He was just as interested in the affairs of his peers as the rest of them.

One thing Tarak was glad he'd heard little about was Basael. It took him a while of feeling serenity in his days before he realized that he hadn't thought of his grandfather in a while. Tarak was a little nervous about his father having to follow Basael wherever he went, but Tarak trusted his father to remain safe.

Tarak had also heard very little about their new allies in Kyrro except for one thing. Desil had informed Callie that the headmaster was still in Greenedge looking for the psychic they were going to send to Nykal's castle as an instructor. Apparently this Grayhart person was as elusive as she was a

grouch, from what Desil had told Callie. The two of them had only spoken a few times since Tarak had returned, even though Callie spent a lot of time in her room exploring the other plane.

Tarak wanted her to train her psyche more. She still hadn't told anyone that she could detect lies. However, her father wanted her to hone her communication skill more than anything, and she agreed that it was the most important thing right now.

“At least use your lie-detecting skill somehow before it becomes known,” Tarak had advised her one night as they spooned in her bed. “It probably will once the psychic instructor arrives and we all start training.”

“I still haven't figured out how I want to use it, or even if I do.”

Callie had told Tarak that her father had an affair ages ago, but whenever Tarak brought it up with questions, Callie didn't seem to want to speak about it. Considering what little time they had together, and what they both liked to do with that time, Tarak tended to avoid topics that were likely to keep her nightgown on her body.

But lord and bane, how he craved spending time with her that wasn't at the end of a tiring day with the idea looming over him that he had to fly out of her room and maneuver back through his own window without anyone seeing him.

Tarak used to find time to locate Callie in the keep. They'd sneak into closets for brief explosions of passion, or they'd chat here and there in desolate hallways or dark corners of twisted stairways, but apparently it was Tarak's many visits to the keep that had made their relationship so obvious to everyone. He had been trying to refrain these days.

Callie had mentioned that she'd been learning to detect emotions with psyche. It wasn't too difficult because most of the time someone's mood was plainly obvious. Then all she had to do was associate Aliana's obvious frustration, for example, with what she felt from Aliana's energy with psyche. After enough times, Callie became used to sensing frustration.

The same was true for comfort and discomfort, joy and sadness, a general sour mood or a good-humored person. She was learning a lot very quickly, but every time she was around Tienna, she felt something from Tienna's energy that she felt from no one else's. She hadn't been able to tell what it was, but it seemed unrelated to Tienna's mood because Callie could feel it in addition to Tienna being happy or uncomfortable, two things she often felt at once from Tienna—which was also strange.

"Psyche sounds incredibly difficult to learn," Tarak commented. They spoke as they often did, with Tarak on his back, Callie resting her head on his shoulder and draping her arm over his chest.

"It is, but I'm enjoying it. I'm looking forward to learning how to change someone's mood."

"I cannot say that I am looking forward to that."

"Why not?"

"Let me ask you, am I going to be the person you test it on?"

"I suppose it would have to be you until I can let people know about what I can do."

"That is why," Tarak replied.

She laughed. "I could always let people know."

"Why have you not?"

"Because I think I agree with what you said the other night. I should use it in secret while I still can. As soon as people know, everything will change."

"You are enjoying the ability to detect lies."

"I am!"

Tarak chuckled.

"But about Tienna, I still feel something strange every time she's near me. Have you seen how she likes to sit next to me in the dining hall whenever she sees an empty seat?"

“I noticed. I thought you two were friends.”

“I suppose we are now, but I always thought until recently that she was trying too hard. I didn’t have psyche before. These days it tells me that she’s genuine when she speaks to me. It doesn’t feel like she’s only becoming my friend to use me in some way, but I could be wrong.”

“Maybe she has a secret, and that is what you feel with psyche.” Tarak had begun to drift off, but he tried to force himself awake. It was not that the conversation was uninteresting. He was just so tired and comfortable.

“I’ve been wondering the same thing, but what could it be?”

Mostly in the dream world, Tarak blurted, “Maybe she is your sister from your father’s affair.”

“Tarak...”

His heart trilled as he realized what he’d uttered. Jolted awake, he said, “I apologize, it was a jest in bad taste. I am half-asleep.”

She didn’t speak for a time. He worried he had upset her.

Suddenly she sat up with a gasp. “My god! Do you think it really might be true?”

Tarak sat up. “I was not thinking at all when I made that comment, Callie.”

“Well, think about it now! The affair was a long, long time ago, but my mother just found out! And Tienna showed up just before that! My god, how did I not realize it sooner? Because I didn’t *want* to think about it, but I should’ve. It’s so obvious!” She gasped. “My god, she’s my sister? My *sister*?”

“Hold on, Callie.”

“That’s why I’ve sometimes felt like there’s something familiar about her.” She’d glared at Tarak. “How long did you suspect this? You’re always asking about my father’s affair. If you had this inkling, you should’ve told me!”

“I swear—and I am so glad you can detect lies—that I had no idea, can you see? I cannot even say why I blurted it out half-asleep.”

She nodded. “I should’ve let you ask about the affair. I just don’t like thinking about my father that way. I hate him whenever it comes up, but I don’t know if he deserves my hate right now. He’s one of the most important people in the world, and he’s trying his best. But my god, my sister?”

“We do not know that for certain yet.”

“I think I am almost certain from psyche and how I always thought she looked familiar in some way, but I’m going to make sure tomorrow.”

“How?”

“I will ask Tienna to speak in private and I will be able to tell if she’s lying. Better yet, I will organize a meeting with my family and invite her. I will question all of them and get to the bottom of this.”

“And if it is true?”

“Then I will...” She stopped. “I suppose it depends on what they tell me afterward.”

The conversation went on for a while, with Tarak asking many questions about what this would mean for Callie’s family, for who would be next in line to rule, and other things. Callie didn’t know the answers and could only speculate. She would have to speak with Tienna about what she wanted, and then see what her father planned to do. He was the ruler, after all. He was the one with the most power, though Tienna, with the right people behind her, could put a lot of pressure on Nykal to recognize her as the eldest princess.

They spoke well into the night. Callie didn’t care to lead the kingdom, but she didn’t like the idea of giving up power she thought she had to someone else unless she knew she could trust them for the rest of their lives. That was not something she could claim right now with Tienna.

By the end of the conversation, Callie hated her father even more, but at the same time, she’d always wanted a sister.

Tarak had felt bad about leaving her after that, but they both needed sleep and he could not stay the entire night in her room. Escaping the next morning would be impossible.

Callie had already asked Tarak before if he was at all interested in her because marrying her would bring him great political power. He had told her with absolute honesty that he wasn't with her because of her family and her title, but in spite of it. She'd laughed, and that was that.

The next day, Tarak tried to clear his mind of all these thoughts as he stood in the courtyard preparing to cast a spell no one had cast before. However, he did realize that Callie could be speaking with Tienna and learning the truth right at this moment. What would happen after today if Tienna really was her sister?

Never mind, never mind. The spell.

Michael's really going to kick himself for choosing Eden.

Focus!

Tarak knew that Michael wouldn't really care about his lady's political power. Tarak was just more fond of Tienna than Eden for Michael because Tarak had heard the way his friend had spoken about both young women. It seemed quite clear to Tarak that Michael wanted Tienna, but he couldn't seem to let go of Eden. Why not?

Maybe I should speak with him again. He seemed confused last time.

Lord and bane, will you focus?

All right, so what he had to do was cast the same gravity spell but with the three notes an octave lower. He was already used to casting Lower C because it was needed for his illusion spell: lC, C, uC. He just had to learn lE and lG, and he'd be set to make history.

Theoretically, the spell should come easily because it was comprised of the same notes he had cast so many times, just an octave lower. He'd learned from using Middle C and Lower C that the octaves felt very similar. There was a resonating harmony when casting both notes of C at the same time, like

singing the same song at the same pitch as a woman whose voice was an octave higher.

It was almost like there was a placeholder in his mind for these notes. He could feel when he had his mana at their frequency, even an octave lower. The most difficult part about this was that he had little idea what kind of spell it would make. Unable to communicate with his mana, he could only throw the spell out there and see what his mana did. There was no way to have control or much power in this regard. It was for this reason that he had taken so long to become comfortable with the previous spell he'd learned.

He had the notes ready. He could feel the familiar click to his mind, his mana telling him these notes worked. It had taken him only an hour. Perhaps he should go in search of Charlie to share in this excitement.

But Tarak was feeling lazy.

“Charlie!” Tarak yelled toward the great hall and keep, not sure where the lad was. “Charlie! I have the spell ready! Want to see?” The courtyard was empty of other sorcerers this early in the day, but some castle workers looked over as if bothered by his noise.

Tarak waited. He was about to yell again when he heard Charlie's footsteps beating down in great haste echoing through the keep. A server with a plate of fruit about to enter from the courtyard had to stop and move out of the way. Charlie didn't even notice her as he charged past.

“Show me what it does!”

“Come this way, my friend, in case it is strong enough to pull the castle walls down.” Tarak led them to the center of the courtyard.

“Wow, you think it'll be that powerful?”

“It just might. Is Jon around?”

“He's off with Hadley in the forest, but he should be back soon. Are you asking in case I get hurt?”

“That is precisely why I am asking. Perhaps you should stand far back.”

Charlie nodded enthusiastically as he sprinted away. Then he turned around. “Is this good, you think?”

“A little farther.”

Charlie ran back until he was at the entrance of the keep. “Here?” he called.

“That should be fine.”

A castle worker was coming out of the keep, but Charlie warned her about Tarak as he pointed. “He’s about to try a new spell. Stay back.”

She stayed inside.

Tarak mumbled to himself, “Better put on a show after all that.”

He made the spell and pushed all he could into it. The familiar sensation of a correct cast clicked in his mind. He winced as he turned his head, keeping one eye open as he prepared for something to pull him off the ground.

Nothing happened.

Not a problem. He still had the spell under control. He just hadn’t put enough power behind it. He had accidentally restrained himself after all. It was fine. He wasn’t a coward. He had almost killed himself right here in the courtyard a while back when he had put too much strength into a new spell. It was wise to hold back at first.

He pushed power into the spell. His mana obeyed and... nothing? Tarak put down his hands. His heavy breathing indicated that he had been successful after all, but what had just happened? He felt nothing and he saw nothing. It couldn’t be nothing. It just couldn’t.

“Charlie!” Tarak called in frustration.

“What’s wrong?”

“I cast it. Nothing happened!”

“You must’ve done it wrong.” Charlie ran over to join Tarak in the middle of the courtyard as a short queue of people behind him got back to work by using the courtyard as a gateway between buildings. Charlie stopped in front of Tarak. “Let me feel each note and check the vibmtaer.”

“Charlie, I cast the spell. I am fatigued.”

“Cast it again. Let me see.” Charlie stood beside Tarak.

Tarak lifted his arm and cast with most of his strength, hoping to at least see something.

He grunted. “I feel it happening right in front of us!”

Charlie nervously extended his arm. “Whoa!”

“What?” Tarak asked. “I can barely keep the spell up! Lord and bane, it feels as heavy as an ox on my head!”

Charlie took one cautious step in front of Tarak. He turned around, his eyes as wide as saucers. “I feel lightweight!”

“You have about a single moment to do something before I give in!” Tarak warned.

Charlie jumped. Glee painted his face as he rose up, then shock, then terror as he kept going, but just before he screamed, he slowed and fluttered back down like a feather.

Tarak dropped his arm and nearly collapsed.

“Is it an invisible sphere of gravity?” Charlie asked.

“I do not believe so,” Tarak panted. “The spell feels different than a sphere.”

“How?”

But Tarak could barely think. He felt as if he’d suspended a boulder on his shoulders, though all the burn was on his mind. He put up a finger to ask Charlie to wait.

“Come on, I want to know!”

“Keep your shirt on and let me think.”

He took a few breaths, ignoring Charlie circling his hands through the air and tapping his foot impatiently.

“You really have terrible stamina,” Charlie commented eventually.

“I can fly for miles without a break. My stamina is just fine.”

“Apparently not.”

Tarak ignored the comment. “It felt like I was affecting the whole area in front of us for many yards.”

“In which direction?”

Tarak pushed his hands out and spread them apart. “Every direction. This has to be the most mana intensive spell ever cast.”

“No, that’s healing.”

Tarak scoffed.

Charlie said, “Cast it again. I want to feel it.”

As Tarak prepared the three notes, IC, IE, and IG, he felt his mana ask him something. He closed his eyes to listen. It was akin to preparing to throw a ball. The question was how far.

So he could control the area affected by this spell as well as the power. He opened his eyes and nodded. “I am certain now. It is affecting a whole area.”

“Did you do it already?” Charlie complained. “I wasn’t ready.”

“Keep your shirt on. I am about to.”

“Why do you keep saying that?” Charlie squeezed his shirt and gestured with it. “Are you blind?”

“It is an expression.” Tarak focused his mind, decreasing the area affected by the spell to a couple steps in front of him. “Stand there.” He pointed.

Charlie positioned himself to face Tarak a couple of yards away.

“Closer.” Tarak gestured for Charlie to come. “It is easier to cast closer to my body.”

“Can you cast it on yourself as well?”

Tarak thought for a moment. “I should be able to. In that case, stand here.” He pointed to his right side.

Charlie practically hopped over. “Do you think the spell is more difficult the more people it affects, like your other gravity spells?”

“Certainly. I am about to cast. Are you ready?”

Tarak started off slow this time. The spell was much lighter on his mind now that he’d narrowed the area down to just where he and Charlie stood. He felt the same thing Charlie had described, his body lighter. The spell was still difficult to maintain, but Tarak could imagine moving around through this moderate effort, perhaps even fighting.

Charlie said, “Is this the same feeling as when you have a sphere of gravity over your head?”

“No. In that case, the pull is pointed. This feels more like there is a large number of tiny spheres all around, pulling up gently.”

“Maybe that’s it! They are probably too small for us to see, but it feels like that to me as well.” Charlie laughed with excitement, hopping and floating. “At first I thought you might have found a way to turn your spells invisible given your mastery of light, but this is even better!”

Tarak let his spell come to an end. “Why would this be any more useful than my powerful sphere of gravity?”

Charlie’s face scrunched up. “I’m not sure yet.”

“Then how can you say it is better?”

“Don’t you ever have a feeling about something that you know to be right, but you need time to work on why?”

“No.”

“I do! I trust myself. But let me think.”

“Shit!” Tarak yelled as he smacked Charlie’s chest in excitement, though he realized it was too hard. “I apolo—”

“Why’d you do that!” Charlie cried out like a little boy as he held his chest.

“I just figured out something absolutely marvelous! It is going to change everything! I apologize. Are you all right?”

Charlie made a face of agony.

“Stay there. This will cheer you up!” Tarak darted toward the apartments, lifting himself with gravity to make it into his room through his window that he left unlatched these days. From his room, he fetched his huge sword from his chest of weapons and armor. Then he ran back to the window and jumped out, using Gravity Sphere to glide back down to Charlie.

The nervous lad backed away when he noticed Tarak’s sword.

“It is fine, Charlie.”

Charlie stopped backing away.

“Actually, perhaps it would be good for you to stay back,” Tarak realized. “Better yet, go get the other sorcerers who are here.”

“All right!” Charlie darted toward the great hall, where some trained, others conducted business, and everyone took breaks from time to time.

“And Leon!” Tarak added.

With no one watching, Tarak practiced what he was going to show off.

It worked perfectly. He became so excited that he could barely hold in his reaction, but he did to test it one more time.

Afterward, he could no longer control his glee. He hopped around the courtyard, pumping his fist and hooting.

Callie was the first one out of the great hall. She smiled as she met eyes with Tarak celebrating, then hurried over with a look as if she was holding in a laugh. Meanwhile, Charlie ran out from the great hall and headed into the keep. Other sorcerers started slowly filing into the courtyard.

“What have you done now?” Callie asked.

“You will see soon. The others are coming behind you, but I must know. Did you have the meeting with Tienna?”

“It is scheduled to happen soon.”

He nodded then spread his arms and announced, “Be prepared to witness the greatest swordsman you have ever and will ever see!”

Michael jested, “Is Jon here?”

Just then, Jon did in fact land in the courtyard with Hadley on his back.

“Even Jon is no match for Tarak, the new greatest swordsman in the world!” he bragged.

“What is this?” Jon asked as he and Hadley detached themselves from the harness.

Leon came out of the keep with Charlie. “This had better be good, Tarak. I have things to do.”

Tarak picked up his sword and approached Jon. “Feel it.”

Jon seemed confused, but he did take it.

“Give it a few hard swings!” Tarak announced for the audience. “In fact, swing it around as fast as you can.”

“Why?”

Tarak leaned in and grumbled, “Just do it, all right?”

Jon shrugged and waited for Tarak and Hadley to clear some space. He looked at the weapon he’d been given a little more closely as if expecting a trap. Tarak’s sword was longer than those issued to any other sorcerer. Jon could lift it and swing it, no problem, but its weight did seem to give him some trouble as he sliced it around somewhat casually.

“No no, pretend you are fighting someone!” Tarak instructed.

Jon, instead, tried to hand the weapon back to Tarak. “Just do whatever it is you’re planning.”

“Yeah, hurry up!” Leon yelled.

“Fine.” Tarak took the weapon. “It is a real sword, Jon? Yes?” Tarak asked.

“Yes.”

“Heavy, yes?”

“Somewhat,” Jon muttered.

“Get on with it, Tarak!” Leon yelled again.

“Step back!” Tarak announced. “And watch.”

He waited until he had enough room, then he waited a little more, for he knew suspense was as important as the prize.

He started with slow swings unmodified by any spell. He let people see his strength and speed. He let them hear the sound of the heavy sword cutting through the air. All the while, he prepared his mind and then cast the low notes.

They took effect immediately, taking off the weight of the sword as if it were no heavier than a thin stick. He swung with as much speed as he could handle, his arm nearly coming out of his shoulder as his weapon blurred, almost too fast to see.

The sorcerers all blurted exclamations of surprise, but Leon’s “What the fuck?” was the loudest and most easily recognizable.

Tarak thought about jumping and spinning, but floating back down would be a giveaway to his trick. So instead he stayed on the ground and turned like a dancer, only faster, and faster. It felt as though he could take off into flight, his arms and longsword somehow acting like wings. Why not?

He gave a little jump and rose up off the ground as if nearly weightless. He was spinning too fast to gauge much. He could only just barely tell that he was still rising, perhaps a meter, perhaps another.

He seemed to rise up over the area affected by the spell, the normal weight of his head and torso pushing down on his light legs. His spinning slowed. His weapon became heavy.

He let his spell come to an end and landed, but dizziness overcame him. He dropped his sword and stumbled this way, then that. There were chuckles and even some applause. Just as he was about to fall, he felt hands steady him and Jon's voice near his ear.

“What the hell was that?”

The dizziness slowly abated, and Leon approached with a grin. “All right, you got me. That was something. Are you going to explain what the fuck I just saw, or are you going to be an ass?”

“It is my new spell, which still needs a name.”

“How can a spell make you swing that gigantic pole like it's as light as a twig?” Leon took the weapon and held it with both hands. “Even if you've lucked into my tree and figured out how to use my strength spell, you would not be able to do what you just did.” Leon lifted up the sword and stepped back to hold it out and test its weight. “Fucking hell, this is a ridiculous weapon, Tarak.”

He told Leon and the others circling around, “It is a gravity spell that affects an area of my choosing, pulling up to take away weight from anyone or anything within its dimensions.”

“Are you saying you could make all of us able to do what you just did?” Leon asked with heavy skepticism.

“I shall try. Form ranks.”

“Do it,” Leon echoed.

All the sorcerers clustered together. Tarak made fists and pushed them out as the spell came to fruition.

“Now you are weightless!” he announced.

Most people just moved their arms, but some jumped and looked to enjoy the feeling.

Tarak held the spell for three quick breaths. A few people crashed down, knocking over others, who bumped into more. It was a catastrophe, half the people on the ground.

“Dammit, Tarak!” Leon yelled. Michael had come down on the back of his legs, sending him to his knees.

“A little warning next time, Tarak!” Michael scolded.

“I cannot affect so many people for long,” Tarak explained as he tried to catch his breath. “Give me time to practice.”

Charlie approached with an excited look on his face, stepping around people who were slow to rise. “You should be able to do the opposite with Lower E min. Think about how effective that could be at slowing a whole group of enemies! Try it.”

“You are absolutely right.” Tarak could not resist this opportunity with everyone still clustered together and helping each other up. It was easy to change Lower E to Lower E min. He just had to decrease the frequency of the note as little as he could, which he always thought of similar to slowing his breath against fatigue. It was not the most comfortable feeling at first, but he did have control.

He cast the spell over his comrades and put a good amount of power into it. He saw the effects immediately as Aliana fell on top of Eden while trying to pull her up by her arm. Jon also fell flat on his face after kneeling down to dust off his pants. Leon fell to a sitting position and cursed up a storm as he seemed incapable of standing up.

Tarak made sure to avoid Callie, who smartly stood on the outskirts. Arthur and Reuben, nearby, seemed to realize they could escape by crawling toward Callie. She bent down as if to help pull them. Tarak almost yelled for her not to, but it was too late, she fell forward onto the dirt. At least she was quick enough to put her hands out.

As much as Tarak wanted to see if he could flatten everyone, he had no strength left. All he could do was try to get a head start as he staggered away from Leon.

“You gigantic shit!” Leon yelled as he chased after Tarak. “You don’t injure a bunch of your comrades for your own amusement!”

Tarak wheezed for breath as he ran in a circle to escape Leon. “A necessary experiment! Jon can heal everyone!”

The instructor caught up and tackled him.

Tarak recovered quickly, gathering enough stamina to get his hands between Leon’s knee as Leon seemed intent on crushing his chest. He started to push Leon off, but Leon grabbed his hair. They rolled over each other. Tarak didn’t mean to knee Leon in the groin, but he felt no remorse as Leon heaved out a moan and coiled up.

“An accident, but you should probably be ready for worse when Xiffrik reappears.”

“Don’t remind me of that,” Leon wheezed as he slowly got up. Tarak helped him.

“That went surprisingly well,” Tarak commented as he noticed everyone glaring at him. “You all think so, too?”

Leon grabbed Tarak by his hair and pulled him around a bit, though he did let go with a shove. “You are going to be training that shit until you can’t stand up.”

“A good spell, you would say?”

Leon chuckled without humor. “Good? Fucking incredible.”

Tarak found Charlie, but he looked strangely disappointed. “What is wrong?” Tarak asked.

“I want to know what the upper octave does of the same spell, but you don’t have the range, and none of your relatives know how to learn new spells by notes.”

“It might forever be a mystery,” Tarak replied.

“No!” Charlie yelled. “Can’t you extend your range a little every so often?”

“I will be a little busy with this new spell for quite some time.”

Charlie looked at Leon as if the instructor might agree with him.

“Charlie, you’re insane. Do not let curiosity take away reason. Tarak is learning this new spell, and you won’t bother him about the Upper notes.”

Charlie frowned, but at least he went off toward the great hall.

Leon poked Tarak in the chest. “Good work. I’ll go tell the king that you’re going to be our first line of defense in the next battle. Have both of those spells ready, and see how far you can extend them as you train. I’m sure we’ll find a lot more uses for them.”

“Battle, when?” Michael asked.

“Whenever we need to fight.”

There was an ominous silence.

Michael broke it with a nasally question, “Yeah, obviously, but do you know *when* that is?”

“No, you idiot. Everyone back to training! And I don’t want to see anyone bothering Tarak for at least a week.” He rounded on Tarak. “You had better be out here every time I check.”

Tarak at least waited until Leon turned before he gave the inevitable eye roll. Then he waited until Leon was out of earshot to address his peers with an important question.

“Anyone up for a celebratory drink after dinner today?” he looked at Callie.

“I am,” she said with a shrug.

“I’ll go,” Tienna quickly added, then glanced at Michael.

He looked at Eden, who seemed to be glancing suspiciously at Tienna. Eden smiled at him when she noticed him, though. “You want to?”

“Yeah, but Tarak, what about Leon?” Michael asked.

“What can he do? He is already a pain in my arse.”

“True.”

“I’m going as well,” Jon announced. “Where are we headed?”

“Jon’s going? Then I will certainly be there,” Reuben said.

“So will I,” Arthur added.

“Me, too,” Aliana said.

Hadley looked up at Jon to her side. “I can’t remember the last time we relaxed with a drink.”

“There might have never been a time.”

Charlie came running back. “Did I hear Jon will be out at an alehouse tonight?”

“Yes, and the rest of us,” Michael said.

“Where are we going?” Charlie asked, mostly to Jon.

“Whichever place has the most ale.”

There was an uproar of laughter.

It was not that funny, Tarak grouched.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Callie went to Tienna in the courtyard as everyone separated after Tarak's show. Callie would make sure to show her appreciation for Tarak's skill later, when they were alone. For now, she had to convince Tienna to join Callie's scheduled meeting with her parents.

"Tienna, will you come with me to the keep?"

"Sure."

That was easy.

Callie stayed beside Tienna as they headed toward the keep. It was no longer uncomfortable to spend time with her, as it had been when Tienna first arrived at the castle and seemed intent on forcing a friendship. Callie supposed it had worked. They were friends now, but that might change.

The idea that Tienna *might* be her sister made Callie almost unbearably uncomfortable. Tienna probably would sense it soon if she hadn't already.

"I would like to speak with you about something," Callie warned Tienna as they came to the entrance of the stone tower that Callie had gotten used to thinking of as her home.

Tienna peered over. "Oh?" she asked with a tinge of fear to her voice.

It was all Callie had to ask. She lost her breath as blood went to her cheeks. She couldn't seem to find her voice to answer Tienna, but what could Callie even say at this point?

Tienna was her sister. Psyche had confirmed not only that Tienna knew what Callie was referring to, but she had been caught. It had to be this. It couldn't be anything else.

Callie had given up trying to think of an excuse. Tienna was coming with her. That's what mattered.

Callie led the way up the stairs, but she slowed when they reached the second floor. As they walked through the corridors together, she snuck looks at Tienna's face. Now that she knew what to look for, she could see a resemblance between

Tienna's eyes and her father's. *Their* father's, Callie corrected herself.

Tienna's pale cheeks became red as she seemed to notice Callie staring. She opened her mouth, but just a squeak came out. It was fine. They didn't have to speak.

It felt like an eternity before Callie finally came to the sleeping quarters of her parents. She had told them both that she had important news to share. They'd been worried and confused. They'd agreed on a time, and Callie was pleased to see that they were already there when Randy opened the door for her and Tienna.

Callie somehow managed to keep her composure as she asked, "Father, will you excuse Randy for us to speak privately?"

His face went ghostly pale as he saw Tienna coming in after Callie. Tienna already had the same pale and frightened expression. Callie's mother, on the other hand, let out a small sigh and then held a sad look as if she'd expected this but perhaps not so soon.

"Randy, you may go," Nykal said.

The guard gave a nod, then walked off. Callie closed the door and turned around. Everyone's energy was the same. They were terrified.

She suddenly realized that the next step was up to her. She had to say something, ask a question, demand the truth, anything! She needed to catch her breath and find her voice again, but her ragged breathing and her enflamed chest made it difficult to concentrate on anything else.

Their terror was becoming hers! That's what this was. Psyche was different than other spells in that she had trouble figuring out how to stop it at times. She didn't want to feel anything from them, but her own emotions had become lost in theirs.

"It's true," she managed to mutter as she struggled for breath. "Please just admit it and make this easier for all of us."

“What is true?” her stupid father asked, more terrified than the rest of them and knowing exactly what she was referring to.

“Don’t insult me by pretending you don’t know. I know you do! Oh god, I had a feeling, but for it to be confirmed...” A sob burst out. She couldn’t seem to get a hold of herself. It was their emotions. There were too many of them.

Her chest heaved as she struggled for breath. It felt like death had a tenacious grip on her heart, and there was no fighting it off. She couldn’t find enough air. White dots clouded her vision.

“I can’t breathe,” she sobbed.

Her mother crouched in front of her with terror in her eyes. “Is it your heart?”

Callie nodded. She couldn’t find the air to speak.

“I’m getting Jon!” the king yelled as he ran past Callie faster than she’d ever seen him move. He threw open the door and yelled for the healer.

Time seemed to stand still as Esma and Tienna put Callie in a chair. “Oh god,” her mother muttered. “Try to breathe, Callie, you are very pale.”

Callie took as deep a breath as she could, but there was a weight on her chest that she couldn’t overcome.

“You’re going to be all right,” Tienna told her with a strange serenity. “I’ve had what you’re going through. I call them panics. You’ll be fine, Callie. You’ll see. Jon won’t have anything to heal.”

“No, this is death,” Callie sputtered, She wanted to cry, but she didn’t have the strength.

Jon flew into the room and put his hand over the top of her chest. He paused there, closing his eyes, but then he opened them.

“I feel nothing.” He moved his hand to the middle of her back, his other on her stomach. Then he calmly stood up. “There’s nothing to heal.”

“But I can’t breathe!” she said with a wheeze.

Jon crouched back down as concern took over. He put his hands on her ribs. “Callie, I can’t feel anything.” He turned to Esma. “Maybe we should call another type of healer?”

Tienna put herself in front of Callie. “You don’t need a healer. Listen to me, Callie. I know it feels like you’re dying, but it’s just panic. It can cause that feeling.”

“No, I—”

“Yes.” Tienna spoke with certainty.

“I think Tienna is right,” Esma said. “Try to calm. Take deep and slow breaths.”

“No, that doesn’t work,” Tienna said. “Don’t fight it. You’ll lose. You have to accept it. It’s just another feeling, Callie. I know it’s the worst feeling you’ve ever felt, but once you accept it as nothing more than a feeling, you’ll start to feel better. It can’t harm you. Let it be. I promise you. It can’t hurt you. You *are* getting enough air, even if it doesn’t feel like it. You can’t die from this. It’s impossible.”

Callie could tell that Tienna was certain about this. She took her advice and stopped trying to fight it. Immediately, she realized that most of it was in her mind. Of course she still felt the brick in her chest and had the inability to breathe deep, but the fear slowly began to pass.

With fear draining, the feeling of impending doom left her as well. Her body still seemed affected, but it felt like she’d been dangling from a cliff and had recently been pulled to safety. She would be fine.

“I feel better,” she told Tienna. “Thank you.”

Tienna smiled warmly. “I’m glad my experience could help.”

Callie felt tears pooling in her eyes as she felt Tienna caring for her like family.

Jon asked, “What made you so panicked?” His gaze moved to the side to witness the king giving him a stern look.

“I just found out Tienna is my sister,” she announced, then gleefully watched everyone react with completely appropriate shock.

“Callie!” Nykal scolded.

Jon just stared wide-eyed at Callie, then over at Nykal, then Esma, then Tienna, then at Callie again, then at Nykal...it was silent for a long time.

“Is someone going to say something?” Callie asked.

Nykal put his hand over his face and fell into a chair.

“Um,” Jon uttered.

Someone spoke and turned everyone toward the open door.

“Shut your shit! Sisters?”

“Goddammit, Michael, get in here and shit the door!” Nykal demanded. “I mean shut! *Shit!*”

“I’ve never heard you curse, your majesty,” Michael commented as he shut the door. He stood in front of it with eyelids lowered. “Why keep this a secret?”

“I’m wondering the same,” Jon said. “And why was Tienna away for so long?”

Esma answered, “Because Nykal did a terrible, disrespectful thing before Callie was born, and he just told me about it recently, *after* Tienna arrived.” She glared at Nykal, who glanced up from his chair in terror.

“I am so sorry, Esma.”

“I’ve heard it all before,” she snapped, then told the others. “I am still his wife, and I am still the queen. We have responsibilities that extend far past our family. But I’m still unsure if I will forgive him. Now that is enough about our personal affairs. We talked about letting people know. It is out now, Nykal. What do you propose?”

“What would you like me to do?”

“Oh no. This is a mess *you* created. You need to come up with the best way to fix it.”

Callie noticed Tienna had tears in her eyes. She hung her head and turned away as if to hide.

“Mother,” Callie chastised. “I know father deserves your harsh words, but Tienna doesn’t!”

Esma’s mouth dropped. “Oh, I’m sorry, Tienna. I didn’t mean that you are responsible for this.”

“You said she’s a mess.” Callie put her hand on Tienna’s arm. “She’s not. This isn’t her fault.”

“I know. I apologize, Tienna.”

Callie wasn’t done. “It’s not like we’re talking about a spill Father caused. There’s a person here, and she’s my sister! He doesn’t have to clean up anything. There’s nothing to clean up! We have a situation that we’re going to remedy right now. First, Tienna, is everything you’ve told me about your mother true?”

“Yes.”

“Did you know Nykal was your father?”

“My mother spoke about him in anger all the time, so yes, I did.”

“Why didn’t you come sooner?”

“I was too young to make the trip. I was older and could’ve during the war, but I felt I would be a burden because I knew nothing of sorcery. Nykal was possibly the most important person in the kingdom at that point. I would cause him even more problems than he already had. I told myself I would wait for it to end, and that’s when I came.”

Callie glared at her father. “And I suppose he welcomed you with open arms?” she asked rhetorically.

“Callie—your mother—you—the kingdom.” He started a few different sentences before stopping and standing from his chair. “I did not have the right response. Jon and Michael, you do not need to be here for this.”

“I want them to stay,” Callie replied. “They will tell others because I want *everyone* to know, but first you will answer my questions. You’re going to lose one of your daughters right now if you don’t tell me the truth.”

“What is it, Callie?” he asked nervously.

“Do you have any other children?”

“No.”

It was the truth.

“Were there any other affairs besides with Tienna’s mother?”

“No.”

That was the truth as well.

“Do you care about Tienna?”

“I do,” he answered quickly, then looked into Tienna’s red eyes. “I do, Tienna. I hope you know this. I have been trying to show you.”

She nodded, then told Callie, “He has.”

Michael remarked in a quiet voice to Jon, “This is heavy shit.”

“Michael,” Callie scolded. “You will listen, and that is all.”

He gave a stiff bow of his head. “Sorry, Callie. I’m just uncomfortable, and I tend to talk when I’m uncomfortable.”

She shushed him. He gave another nod.

Callie asked her father, “Why was this kept from me?”

His answer surprised her. “I thought we should tell you sooner, but waiting was at Tienna’s request.”

Callie felt betrayed as she looked at her sister. “Why?”

“I didn’t want you to feel like you had to have a relationship with me. I wanted to first see if we could be friends, or I would’ve never known if it was only because of our relation.”

“Of course we are friends now. Wasn’t it hard for you not to say anything?”

Tienna nodded and, surprisingly, started to cry. Callie quickly embraced her as Tienna put her head on Callie’s shoulder and wept.

Callie felt badly until she realized that psyche told her Tienna was happy. She leaned away to look at her sister. “Are these tears of joy?”

“Relief,” Tienna uttered, then stepped back and wiped her eyes.

Tienna was usually closed off. Even now, her display of emotion shocked Callie. But there was something of her energy that Callie could grasp onto. It was like a loose thread of a blanket that Callie felt she could tug on and take apart most of the blanket if she pulled hard and long enough. She took hold and started to unravel what she felt to be Tienna’s defense against letting herself open up.

Soon she started to speak. “All I did until now was take care of my mother. I used to have panics like the one you had just now, Callie. I never could stop them until I gave up on life and didn’t care if they killed me.”

“Oh, Tienna.” Callie started to tear up.

“No, it’s fine, really. I’m much better because I realized what I told you. When I stopped trying to fight them, they came and went quickly, and then stopped coming at all.”

Callie hugged her tightly.

As Callie parted from her sister, she showed her anger at her father. “I’m with mother. You are needed and a good leader, but I don’t know if I can ever forgive you for abandoning my sister.”

“Tienna, I had no idea it was so bad,” Nykal said, his eyes glistening. Callie focused really hard to make sure she read his energy right. Yes, he was being genuine. “I thought you and your mother had a good life with all the coin I provided. I know it sounds foolish now, but it is the truth. I

would've done something more had I known how much you were suffering."

"I do believe him," Callie told Tienna.

"It's my mother I'm most angry with. She was a jealous, hateful woman, and you were not the only man she used."

Nykal nodded sadly. "That does not surprise me. I thought you would be like her, having spent all your time in her company. I should've given you a chance when you first came to the castle."

"You have made amends to me," Tienna said. "But I'm not sure how to help you make amends to Callie and Esma. If it helps at all..." She glanced at Esma, then at Callie. "My mother was very good at manipulation. It was her only job her whole life."

"I was still a fool," Nykal said.

Callie could see in her father's uncomfortable expression that he knew himself to be powerless to conclude this meeting, though he desperately wanted to. She wondered if she was cruel for forcing Jon and Michael to stay during this. No, it was the least her father deserved. The truth should be out—it *should've* been out much sooner.

"I hope that means Leon is not your cousin," Callie commented. "Because that might mean he's my cousin as well."

"No, we have no relation."

Michael asked, "So when we stumbled upon you to in the tavern that night...?"

"He was trying to convince me to leave Lycast because he was worried Nykal would put me in prison."

"Father!" Callie yelled.

"Maybe I shouldn't have spoken," Michael muttered.

Nykal had his palms pushed out. "I never would have forced her to remain in prison. It was just a threat to scare her

into leaving—and I’m hearing how I’m sounding. It was really terrible of me. I am so sorry, Tienna.”

“You have apologized many times. I understand your actions.”

“You are way too nice!” Michael declared.

Tienna shrugged. “I’m happy now. I’m finally useful, and I’m with a family who actually cares about me.”

Callie asked her father, “Do you care about her?”

“I very much do.”

“Do you?” Callie asked her mother.

“I am *learning* to,” Esma admitted with obvious reluctance.

Callie had never been so thankful for her psyche. It was a relief to know that even in this difficult situation, her parents would not lie to her.

“Tienna and I are going out to the taverns with the other sorcerers tonight,” Callie announced. “Afterward, I will *think* about forgiving you, Father, but it’s going to take some time.”

Nykal looked as if he wanted to disagree, but he said nothing as he looked to Callie’s mother.

“You may think you can take advantage of this situation,” Esma told Callie, “but taking out every sorcerer for a night of drinks is not part of this discussion. We are expecting news from Kyrro soon. You must be open to communication from Desil, and you cannot do that while out at a noisy tavern.”

“We need everyone training,” Nykal agreed. “Especially you, Callie. There are few sorcerers more needed than you are right now. I’m sorry, but no. There will be no nights off until we know the storm is either not coming or has passed.”

Callie was a little surprised at hearing her father describe how important she had become. She wasn’t sure she wanted to reveal the truth, that she’d had more trouble connecting with Desil since Tarak had returned from Kyrro. She theorized that she may be connected to Tarak in a way that allowed her to

reach Desil easier with the two young men near each other. Or perhaps it was just that Desil had not opened himself to communication or tried to reach her, but that seemed unlikely.

She glanced over to find Michael showing her an imploring look. She tried to tell him with her eyes that they could just sneak out anyway, and he, surprisingly, seemed to understand as he relaxed.

Oh, of course, it was psyche again.

She was really beginning to enjoy this skill of hers. Perhaps she would keep it hidden a little while longer and see what she could find out from her friends tonight.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Tarak still knew very little about the city of Newhaven. He'd made some memories of the city from his first trip here, when he had spent the day hungry and tired while looking for work. These memories were not fond. He had offended people in his request. Him, a tall and strong young man. What was so offensive about looking for honest work? They'd treated his request like he was asking for the clothes they had on.

These days, the city seemed to be in a better condition. People didn't appear starving, as before. The streets even smelled less like urine, more like dirt. There was a whole lot of dirt, so that made sense, but *why* was there so much dirt? It was as if none of the dirt that ended up in the city was ever taken out. It had accumulated. Even practicing in the courtyard, which was filled with dirt, didn't seem to leave Tarak's shoes with the same hard, sticky dirt. It was as if every part of every street had suffered from spillage, and no one had ever taken the time to clean any of it.

"Is there no one assigned to clean these filthy streets?" he questioned Michael and Jon, who walked with him at the back of their large group. The other young men were just ahead of them, with the ladies leading the way.

Michael snapped his head in Tarak's direction. "I have seen you scoop up fallen meat off the floor and stuff it into your mouth without so much as blowing off the grime, and you complain about some dirt on the road?"

"I would not let good meat go to waste. Now look at this." Tarak stopped and gestured at his fine boots covered in a layer of dark dirt. "And why do I always step in something sticky? What are people dropping that could leave the streets permanently sticky?"

Jon said, "I think it's worse than it was before." He turned his leg to gaze at the bottom of one of his shoes where a cluster of dirt refused to shake off. "It is actually gross."

"For two of the strongest people I know, you two sure do complain a lot about dirt," Michael observed.

“Someone should do something,” Tarak said mostly to Jon, as Michael seemed to ignore him.

“What do you suggest?”

“Maybe you should tell the king. He listens to you.”

Jon scoffed. “He listens to me because I earned that privilege by not bothering him with things like how sticky his streets are.”

“Fine, leave it up to me, then.”

“You’ll really tell him?” Jon asked.

Tarak lowered his voice. “On second thought, no. I have tempted the fates too many times with Nykal, as you two are well aware.”

“That’s still happening?” Jon asked. “I would’ve thought the princess was sick of you by now.”

“Then you would be very surprised.”

Michael commented, “You must be really good under the sheets, because she is way too good for you everywhere else.”

“Does my handsomeness count for nothing? Or my quick mastery of sorcery? Or what of my wit, my good humor, and my casual yet practiced method of keeping every conversation interesting?”

“You’re right,” Michael said. “You are all those things. Wow, it’s amazing how many good traits can be overshadowed by arrogance.”

“You really should be more humble,” Jon agreed. “Like me.”

“Oh, be more like Jon!” Tarak echoed.

“Yeah, why not?” Jon asked.

“Oh, great humble, brave healer, Jon Oklar!”

“Yeah,” he said. “You should.”

“Who killed the desmarl?”

“You,” Jon grumbled.

“Who saved you from certain death?”

Jon sighed. “You.”

“Who saved Eden’s life as well? Michael?”

“You did,” Michael muttered.

Jon looked right at Tarak. “Do you really want to start competing over how many good deeds we’ve done? Because I will beat you.”

“I propose instead a contest of drinking.”

“I don’t want to waste all my coin beating you.”

“Loser pays for the other’s drinks.”

Michael commented, “Jon can heal drunkenness.”

“You can?”

Jon nodded.

“What happens if a drunk has taken many more drinks that are not affecting him yet?”

“Then he’ll get drunk again after I heal him, and I can heal him again. Hey wait, with you healing naturally, your body must do away with drunkenness faster. I bet you even have a higher natural resistance.”

“That’s right!” Michael chimed in. “Arrogant and a cheat!”

“Cheat? That is a high accusation. Jon should have the same natural resistance and long life as I do because of his affiliation with healing.”

Michael wondered, “Doesn’t that mean both of you could one day change mana?”

Tarak found Jon looking at him in a nasty way. Tarak pointed. “Do not stare at me like I am Basael. I would never be like him.”

“Not for a few centuries, at least.”

“Who is to say that you might not end up like Xiffrik?”

“Xiffrik?” Jon practically screeched. “That has to be a joke.”

“It is just as believable as me becoming Basael.”

“I would never want to change mana.” Jon paused. “But if I had to—”

“So you would!” Tarak interrupted.

“It depends on the circumstance! Wouldn’t you if rifts are destroying cities and the king asked you to do it? I would hope so.”

Tarak thought about it for a while. “I would not trust myself with that kind of responsibility.”

He was surprised when Jon and Michael laughed.

“At least we can agree on that,” Jon said.

Their conversation continued as they made their way inside a tavern Eden had selected. It was a two-story building with one main room. A stairway right in the center of the room went up to a balcony-type second floor with tables that overlooked the rest of the place.

It was strangely empty.

“Why is no one ever in these lovely places?” Tarak asked.

“Too expensive for most, these days,” Michael said.

“There is still as much hardship as when I first arrived?”

“There is.”

“We should fix that.”

“We are a little busy dealing with the Ancients, and the king has little money to spend on, say, cleaning up streets that are bound to become sticky the very next day.”

Jon added, “We were recruited to keep the kingdom safe. When that happened after the war, Hadley and I went to Rohaer to help the people in need there. When we are done with the Ancients, we can help in other ways like Hadley and I did, but for now the best thing you can do is train.”

Tarak frowned. “Yeah, I know. Sad is all.”

Soon they had drinks in hand and took to a corner as other groups split off. Tarak had half expected everyone to swarm Jon, but Tarak could always be disappointed with that later on.

Michael peered at Jon as if they shared a secret. Eventually, Jon seemed to notice.

“What?” he asked.

“I can’t believe you haven’t mentioned what we heard. I feel like I’m going to explode, but I wanted to see if you would say something. Were you never planning to bring it up?”

Jon shrugged. “I figured you would.”

“Good god, I’m bursting, and you let me suffer all this time?” He looked at Tarak. “Tienna and Callie are sisters because of an affair Nykal had long ago. Callie wants people to know.”

Tarak wondered if he should feign shock, but he was in the middle of sipping his fine ale. The moment passed. He gave no reaction.

Michael’s jaw dropped. “You knew?”

“There are *other* things Callie and I do besides wrestle under the sheets. Like talk.”

“Oh god, don’t tell me she’s falling in love with you?”

“Would that be so bad!?” Tarak asked in offense.

“Yes, if it means you would be king one day!” Michael replied.

“And what of you?” Tarak retorted. “Everyone can see how strong your feelings have been for Tienna. You could be king one day, too! Tienna is older, can you see? Lord and bane, can you imagine the state of Lycast, then!”

“All right, neither of you are going to be king if I have anything to do with it,” Jon said. “Relax and drink your ales.”

They sipped in tense silence.

“I wouldn’t want to be king anyway,” Michael said.

“Neither would I,” Tarak agreed.

“Jon?” Michael asked.

“I wouldn’t, either. When would I have time? I’d have to stop healing and traveling.”

“I would’ve thought you’d welcome that,” Michael said.

“As tiring as it is to do what I do, someone has to. I’m glad Tarak has progressed so quickly. Now I just need a few more sorcerers who can transport people, and at least one other healer, and I might have more time off.”

“This is all too serious and upsetting,” Tarak commented. “Let us play a game.”

“Liars Mug?” Michael asked with a shimmer of hope in his voice.

“I did not think you cared for it.”

“I’m in the mood now, but we should invite others.”

Jon asked, “Eden?”

“Mm, maybe better not,” Michael replied.

“Tienna?” Tarak prodded.

Michael lowered his eyelids to show Tarak his answer with a scowl.

“Just the boys, then,” Tarak suggested. “I want to hear Charlie’s answers. I shall bring Arthur and Reuben to that large table there.”

“This game sounds a little too intense,” Jon commented.

“The game is not designed to be anything but fun,” Tarak explained.

“It was fun but also intense last time,” Michael said. “Tarak, let’s let everyone have a second drink first.”

The tavern became lively over the next hour as all the sorcerers loosened up. Tarak had spent most of his time

recently in the company of Charlie, Reuben, and Arthur, and most of that time had gone into Tarak sharing the news of Tienna's true relation to the Lennox family. After a great long conversation about that, Tarak found out from Reuben that his father was displeased with many things in the castle, which did not come as a surprise, but there was one thing that did. Nykal had his advisors questioned by Fatholl a while back. Apparently, the elf was capable of putting them in a state similar to drunkenness where they had no inclination to hold anything back.

From the complaints Reuben had heard from his father, it seemed that he had revealed a desire to bond with Nykal over lavish feasts and celebratory events in the king's honor. However, even after Reuben the elder had revealed this through psyche, Nykal had shown no interest.

Tarak's mind went to a few different places after the story. He wondered if Callie would ever have the same strength with psyche. The two of them were bound to have disagreements. Would she be inclined to use psyche? It didn't sound like her, but would Tarak even know if it started happening? Either way, he was in this with Callie and enjoying every moment of it. Starting a relationship with a psychic may seem a little frightening, but it was Callie, he reminded himself. She was an honest person who valued transparency, as did Tarak. For the most part.

Eventually Callie came over to their group. She wore a drunken smile and had a bit of a swagger. She slid an arm around Tarak's back and leaned into him. She looked up.

"Hi," she said sweetly.

"Hello," he replied with a grin and a hand on her back. This was not the right way to hide their relationship from anyone, but what could he do about that now except enjoy it?

She took her arm back, but wrapped one around Tarak's forearm and continued to lean her head against him. "What are we all talking about here?"

Both Arthur and Reuben gawked in obvious surprise. Tarak shrugged at them.

Charlie, on the other hand, showed confusion.

“Well, uh, princess,” Arthur began awkwardly. “We were discussing—”

“Can I ask a question? Oh, I interrupted. I am sorry. Would you like to finish?”

“No, go ahead,” Arthur said.

“What’s your secret, Arthur?”

He sucked in a breath. “Secret? I have none.” His quick gaze at Tarak questioned whether he had been betrayed. Tarak gave a shake of his head, no. Arthur seemed to relax somewhat until he glanced again at Callie, who was leaning toward him.

“I know you have a secret.”

Charlie asked, “He does?”

“Yes, you can tell us, Arthur. I like you, and I can tell you are happy at the castle. Don’t you want to share your secret?”

Reuben asked, “Why do you think he has a secret?”

Tarak figured it was up to him to stop this. He knew Arthur’s secret, and he also knew what Callie was doing. Her inhibitions were gone, and it seemed as if the power of detecting lies had gone to her head. But the secret of Arthur’s was nothing like Tienna’s.

“Callie, can I speak with you?” Tarak asked.

“Oh, am I being rude?”

“Yes, princess,” Arthur murmured nervously. “I think you may have had too much to drink.”

She gasped. “I’m sorry!” Then she put her hand heavily on his shoulder. “I was only trying to help. It was wrong of me.”

He gently took her hand off, though he held it between both of his for a moment. “I appreciate that, princess. Maybe take some time off ale?”

“I will.” She nodded enthusiastically. She turned to Tarak. “Can we play Liars Mug? Michael was talking about it.”

“Yes, I was about to introduce the game to these gentlemen.”

She laughed and swung her finger at Tarak. “You have ruined that word for me!”

He pretended to laugh, though he took her finger and bent it back into her fist. “I cannot say I know what you speak of.” Then he cleared his throat as she still seemed incapable of realizing what she was discussing here, in this very public place.

She gasped and put her hands over her mouth. “Did I reveal too much?”

Tarak risked a look at the three young men. Fortunately, all of them seemed utterly perplexed.

“I’m confused.” Charlie said. “What’s going on here? Are you two together?”

Tarak tried to think of a way out. Fortunately, he noticed Zarin waltzing into the tavern with a lady on each arm.

“Hey look, Zarin has just stepped in and with two dames I have never seen before.”

“Zarin, what!” Callie yelled and started to march over. “What are you doing here? Who are they?”

The other sorcerers rounded on him as well as he appeared surprised. “What are all of you doing here?” he asked.

Aliana was closest to the door, with Eden right nearby. “We snuck out. And you?”

“I snuck out as well.”

Tarak called out, “Zarin. You will lead them straight to us! They are obviously keeping tabs on you!”

“Shit, Tarak’s right!” Eden rushed toward Zarin. “I feel an enchant.”

“Nox’s blade,” Reuben complained and started toward them. “Don’t tell me.”

“Yes.” Eden stuck her hand into Zarin’s pants pocket. She pulled out a ring. “A tracker.”

“Lord and bane, Zarin!” Tarak shooed the analyte. “Give him the ring and get him out of here!”

Eden tried to hand it to him, but Zarin put up his palms and backed away. Eden followed him, but he pushed the ring away and, to Tarak’s absolute shock, turned and pulled open the door to dash out, leaving his two ladies behind and bewildered.

“Come on!” he yelled to them.

They scampered out after him. Eden shut the door.

Besides someone in the kitchen, and a serving girl, the tavern was still only inhabited by the king’s sorcerers.

“What do we do?” she asked the room as she held up the tracker ring.

“Take that thing far from here!” Tarak told Eden.

She ran to Tarak with the ring. “You do it.” She pushed it into his stomach.

“I hardly know where in the city we are! Michael.” He tossed the ring.

“Ah shit.” Michael started to rush toward the open door, but a gust of wind knocked it open. Michael froze, then looked down at the ring.

All was quiet. Even the serving girl, who was on her way back after handing a fresh ale to Aliana earlier, stopped in the walkway between empty tables and waited.

Leon walked in. “Surprise, surprise! Out drinking again!” His tone was dripping with superiority. “Oh and look, you have Zarin’s ring.” He took it from Michael’s hand.

“He went that way!” Michael tried. “You’re not far behind!”

“I will find him eventually. Is this a fresh mug, Aliana? Thank you.” Leon grabbed Aliana’s ale out of her hand.

“Hey!”

He brought it to his lips and leaned back, then started to drink.

Aliana groaned but retracted her hand.

Everyone in the tavern watched Leon drink with slow and calm care. He leaned back more and more until there was a thin line of ale left. He handed the mug back to Aliana. She looked down into it with disgust, then set it on the table nearby.

“Let’s see who’s here.” Leon started pointing at each person and naming them. “Aliana, Eden, Michael, Charlie... well, well, well, it looks like *everyone* has come out tonight. What are we celebrating?”

There was no reply.

“Tarak?” Leon singled him out. “We must be celebrating something, because I explicitly told you to be training in the courtyard.”

Callie spoke up. “This was my idea. I organized it.”

“Tsk, tsk, tsk.” Leon wagged his finger. “Mommy and daddy are going to be upset to hear that.”

Tarak started to whisper to Callie, “Let me take the blame.”

“No, I want to,” she whispered back, then announced, “We are celebrating something, the truth about Tienna.”

Leon walked over to Tienna, who sat near Hadley. Tienna quickly stood in alarm but soon realized Leon was going for her drink. Hadley reached over to guard hers but stopped as if remembering it was empty.

“For me?” Leon asked himself as he took Tienna’s full mug. “Thank you.”

He took her ale to his lips and drank in slow gulps until there was just a tiny bit left. Then he set the empty mug down. “Ah.” He wiped his mouth, then pointed at Tienna as he spoke to everyone else. “Big news or not, you all have important

things to do. I'm going to give all of you one hour before you return to the castle, and that's only because this is going to be the last freedom any of you have for a week. Kyrro's psychic trainer will be here tomorrow."

Callie said, "I haven't heard from Desil."

Leon headed toward Callie, but he made a turn to take Jon's drink from his hand. "Even you, Jon? I'm disappointed."

Jon didn't put up an argument as Leon finished off the last half of his ale.

When Leon was done, he set Jon's mug down and continued toward Callie and Tarak.

Tarak shifted to stand in front of the table, where he had set his mug down next to Callie's.

"Desil has been continuously trying to reach you," Leon told Callie, "but apparently you've been incapable of noticing, and now I see why that is. Your mind was not open because you're too busy farting around taverns when Tarak isn't chasing you around the keep. Hell, the two of you make it impossible for anyone to forget you are the youngest here. Move aside."

Tarak didn't budge. Leon looked up at him in a way that made Tarak realize Leon *would* fight him here if that's what Tarak really wanted.

Tarak sighed and stepped aside.

Leon drank from Tarak's mug first, just about finishing the nearly full cup. Then he set it down and belched. He took Callie's next.

He drank nearly all of hers, too, though there had only been about a third left.

Leon set down her mug and, holding in a belch, told her, "The portal-maker sent Reela here to inform us about the new psychic trainer." The belch erupted out of him. "That's when I found out all of you were gone. Reela will stay for a little while to smooth the transition."

He made his way over to Charlie, Reuben, and Arthur. He drank almost all of their remaining ale as well.

Michael seemed to be the only one who had something left, which Tarak did not notice until Leon bent down and pulled it out from behind the leg of a table nearby.

“Good god, can you smell the ale or something?” Michael complained. “And how much do you need to drink? You’ve had ten cups! Don’t you need to fly off and catch Zarin?”

Leon ignored him and finished his half-full glass. He walked toward the door, only to stop and turn around.

“One hour, starting now. I’d better see you all back at the castle before then, or I will be out with you every time you try to sneak off to another tavern, and I will drink all of your ales every time. Every time,” he repeated. “For a whole year.”

A collective groan followed.

Leon continued, “All of you had better be fully capable and ready to train tomorrow morning, and show some damn respect to both Reela and Grayhart.”

“What kind of name is Grayhart?” Michael commented.

“It is not a name,” Tarak agreed.

“It’s her last name, and it’s what she goes by, and I just said you’d better respect her,” Leon snapped. “I’m leaving now. You all are obnoxious shits, but you’re safe here in each other’s company. Zarin, on the other hand, needs a damn cage.”

“How are you going to find him?” Michael asked. “You wasted so much time lecturing us here.”

“You’re a fool to think we’d only put one tracker ring on him. The one in his pocket was a decoy.”

“Where’s the other?” Michael asked.

“You don’t want to know.” Leon walked out. A gust of wind picked him up.

Michael shut the door and stood in front of it. Tarak didn't appear to be the only one confused by what Leon had said as the room fell to silence.

Michael eventually blurted, "Is the other ring in Zarin's *ass?*"

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Tarak ate breakfast with the other sorcerers the next morning. All sat together, mingled up. It was a curious thing to see Michael and Eden not together this morning. They were on opposite ends of the group, but it seemed to be Callie who was the focus of Eden's annoyed glances.

Eventually, Callie set down her spoon and looked right at Eden. "Yes? Do you want to say something?"

Eden just rolled her eyes and looked away. Callie ignored her. As she sat beside Tarak and Tienna, Tarak could feel Callie's frustration, but she had said nothing last night about anything happening with Eden. It must have occurred this morning.

The king entered with the queen, and everyone stopped eating to stand. Lord Langston followed close behind Nykal, with Leon after him.

"I have some news," Nykal announced. "Zarin is currently in the dungeon."

Tarak shook his head. "The fool," he murmured to Callie as most of the other sorcerers had reactions of shock. Tarak then asked the king over everyone's voices, "What did he do?"

"Nothing in particular," Nykal answered. "He is staying there for now because it's the only place we can ensure he is safe until we have a more suitable place set up for him. He has chosen to give up his duties as an advisor, but he does not wish to return home to Korrithin. We need his cooperation before Jon can take him back, or Zarin might make the trip dangerous for both of them."

"It's a long trip to Korrithin." Jon had a dreary tone.

"Unfortunately, yes, and we also need something else from you. All of you may continue eating. Sit."

Tarak joined the others in sitting back down.

"News from Trevor Chespar has arrived stating that akorell has been discovered in a mine on his land. Jon, we

need you there today. I want the akorell brought to this castle. In the meantime, I ask whether anyone feels they have a close enough relationship with Zarin to speak with him on our behalf? He needs to either accept his duties here or return home, and right now he will accept neither.”

Tarak stood again. “I will speak with him.”

Nykal looked at his daughter as if to ensure Tarak could be trusted with this task. She nodded.

Jon spoke. “Isn’t Grayhart coming today to begin training? If so, I would like to be here.”

“She is. Reela has gone off to the forest with guards to wait for her arrival and escort her back. I also want you training, Jon, but bringing Zarin home safely is more of a priority.”

“Allow Jon a break,” Tarak said. “If I cannot convince Zarin to resume his duties, I will take him.”

Neither the king nor anyone standing beside him seemed particularly enthusiastic about this notion.

Tarak spoke again in a reserved tone. “I will convince him to resume his duties.”

“That would be best,” the king agreed.

Tarak stuffed his buttered bread into his mouth. It didn’t quite fit, some threatening to go down his throat. He made a gagging sound, then pushed harder until he could get it all in. Aliana seemed put off by the act, but Tarak wasn’t about to let his warm bread go cold.

Tarak noticed Rick by the door of the dining hall. He gestured for Tarak to follow him.

Rick led him toward the stairs. They descended into the depths of the great hall, where the air was colder. A gate with iron bars stood in the way. Rick produced a key.

“I would think the dungeons were beneath the keep,” Tarak commented.

“They extend underground below most of the castle. What are you going to say to Zarin?” He sounded concerned.

“It depends on what he tells me.”

Rick didn't pester Tarak further as he led him into the dungeon. It was dark, cold, and with stone all around except for the metal prison cell containing Zarin. He looked to be in a special cell, away from the others farther down the first hall. There was a bed with a sheet and a thick blanket. Even the pillow didn't appear any worse than the one Tarak had in his room.

“Oh this is not so bad,” Tarak commented. “Look, they even gave you a few books, Zarin.” He pointed as he noticed them on a little table in the corner.

“Tarak! Rick? Do not leave me again, Rick!” Zarin went from sitting on the bed to running over and clasp the bars.

“I am going to leave you, but Tarak will stay here.”

“I see what's happening.” Zarin let go of the bars and went back to his bed. His hair was a mess. His face could use a good washing. He didn't appear comfortable, yet he put up the illusion decently as he sat down and gestured for Tarak to begin. “So tell me what I should do, Tarak the Wise.”

“You should probably drop the attitude, or they will keep you in that prison as long as it takes.”

He stood up as fury overtook his calm demeanor. “I am the Prince of Korrithin. They cannot keep me here!”

“That is probably right. They will move you to a more comfortable room in the castle, but they will still keep you locked up.”

“Leon attacked me and took me here by force!”

“I assume because you refused to go with him?”

“How was I supposed to go willingly after I found that they put two tracker rings on me! I am not only a prince but an adult.”

“Where was the other tracker ring, by the way?”

“They replaced my earring with it, and I put it on without realizing. They must’ve come into my room while I was sleeping! I have had enough of these games. Tell them to let me out and to stop putting tracker rings on me.”

“Or what? I am only curious.”

“Or I will return home and—”

“Tell Mother what they did? I thought you were more mature than that.”

Zarin tossed a book. Tarak ducked as it hit the bars.

“Lord and bane!”

“What have you come here for except to insult me?” Zarin bared his teeth like an animal.

“You have lost control, my friend. Shall I go and tell them you are hopeless?”

He let Zarin have some time as the analyte took a few breaths. Eventually, Zarin flopped onto his bed. “Damn, what do they want?” He spoke at the roof of his cage while lying on his back, gesturing at nothing in particular. “I am bored of being an advisor. My heart isn’t in it.”

“Are you not worried about the Ancients?”

“I am, but I am not the right person to give advice anymore. I can no longer pay attention knowing what is outside the castle for me. I have never had such fun. No, I have never had *any* fun. There are years to make up for. I want to dance and celebrate life. I want the teenage years I never had.”

“Then why not return home? I could take you today.”

“Because my mother will provide me with even more responsibilities than I have here. I am free here.” He let down his gesturing hand. “Or I was.”

“I was once free as well, and I thought I would be happier to remain that way than to involve myself with the king and his sorcerers, but I thought wrong. I was unaware of all the problems happening around me. You know of the problems.

You know what your people are going through here, and I have heard they are suffering even worse in your mother's kingdom."

"The drought is over. Their suffering is coming to an end."

"The drought was not the only thing to suffer from, and you know this. We are dealing with something that will either unite everyone or tear them apart indefinitely. We need you, and you know this as well."

Zarin folded his arms and exhaled.

"My friend, you're going to have responsibilities either here or there," Tarak told him straight. "But you are still young!" he added with enthusiasm. "You can waltz around with ladies hanging from your arms. You can sing and dance, and lose track of the time, all while tending to your responsibilities. Find a balance. Look at Leon, for example."

Zarin showed Tarak a glance that made him realize how terrible of an example he'd given.

"All right, then look at me. I am needed, but I also need time to myself. I do both. You are needed, too, Zarin. You are the only one from Korrithin who knows everything that has happened here in Lycast, and as you said, you are a prince. We need an alliance with your people."

"But you would take me home if requested?"

"I would. You would still be valuable there because we trust you, and you have seen what is at stake." Tarak didn't know what he would prefer at this point. The king had recommended that Tarak convince Zarin to stay, but if Zarin would be nothing but a useless prince waiting for his chance to drink himself unconscious, he would be better off at home. Nykal would understand that.

Zarin sat up, his head bowed, a hand cupped over his mouth.

"No, I would be useless there, but at least here I have worth. I am going to stay. I have grown fond of the women here."

“Yes, I can tell that.” Tarak paused. “But can you behave?”

“I will. I’ll even let them keep a tracker on me if that’s what it takes, but I expect the freedom to venture out of the castle in the evening and spend the night wherever I please.”

“Zarin, no one on the king’s staff has the freedom to do that! We must be accounted for each night. If we are not to sleep in the castle, it must be an established place, not crammed into the tiny bed of a serving girl in a far off square of the city.”

“Have you asked the king?”

“It is unnecessary. I know what he would say.”

“But what can be done with the women in Newhaven if I cannot sleep anywhere but in the castle? It is not like I can take one I just met back here. They could turn out to be a thief.”

“You really should not be spending the nights with potential thieves, and I really should not have to explain why that is.”

“There is no time to get to know them better.”

“You have time!” Tarak reminded him with a bit of an aggressive tone. He forced himself to calm. “You have time,” he repeated.

Zarin folded his arms again and looked down. Tarak felt that he was losing the prince now. He gave a drawn out sigh.

“Why not find a nice lady here in the castle and let the gentleman have some time off? It sounds like he has taken command of his master when that should be you.”

“Gentleman—what? Oh.” Zarin laughed. “Oh, I see. Perhaps that is true. He has been the master for some time. That happens to other young men as well?”

“All the time, my friend. All the time.”

“I could see myself courting a sorcerer here.” He grew a smile. “What nice lady are you referring to?” Zarin asked.

“I believe Aliana is without a suitor.”

“She is very beautiful.” His smile faded somewhat. “But I see you meant ‘nice’ in a more figurative way.”

“I did not know you two had interacted much.”

“We haven’t, but I know about her.” He looked away as he rubbed his chin. His eyebrows lifted as if a pleasant thought came to mind. “What about Callie?” His eyes drifted toward Tarak as a smile played on his mouth.

Tarak shook his head. “No, not her.”

Zarin smiled deeper. “I was testing you.” He gave a single laugh. “I had a feeling about you two. Does the king know?”

“Aliana is someone you would be lucky to have.”

“Fine, change the subject. Yes, I know I would be lucky to have Aliana. I have grown to admire her dedication as much as I appreciate her beauty, but I never would’ve thought she’d be interested.”

“Before you go down that path, you had better be ready to be respectful and not frolic off with other women.”

“A relationship with Aliana.” Zarin seemed to ponder it. “I would be very happy. She is one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. If she would have me, of course. There is no certainty in that.”

“And she had better not be the only reason you stay. The Ancients, Zarin!” Tarak heard his anger coming out and chose not to stop it.

“I know. You have convinced me, Tarak. I should stay. I *need* to stay. You will tell the king that I will find a balance between my duties and my desires? Wait. Don’t say it like that.”

“You can tell him yourself. I will have Rick take you out. Are you ready?”

“Be honest with me first. I’m staying either way. Do I have a chance with Aliana?”

“I really have no idea if Aliana might ever be interested in you. All I know is that she does not have a good relationship with her past partners. You can guess as well as I can as to why that might be.”

“Tarak, you know her better than I do. You have to give me more than that. You can see I am handsome, right?”

Tarak chuckled. “Yes, I can see that.”

“Has she mentioned anything that would lead you to believe she might be interested?”

“No.”

He huffed. “Has she expressed prejudice against analytes at any point?”

“She has not, but.” Tarak glanced down toward Zarin’s belt. “You are not blond down there, are you?”

Zarin scoffed. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“More than you might think. Would you like me to speak with her on your behalf? I could put in a good word if you promise to show respect.”

“No, don’t mention anything. I am still unsure about courting her.”

“But you are staying, yes?” Tarak confirmed.

“Yes, I will find a balance.”

“And the problems of the kingdom will be your focus?”

“Yes, yes, I know.”

Tarak gave a nod, then started to walk off.

“Tarak,” Zarin stopped him and waited. He lowered his head slightly to look through the tops of his eyes. “Black as night, my friend.”

Illia’s was, too.

“Do all analytes have that color?” Tarak asked.

“I can’t speak for all, but the ones I’ve seen were either black or violet like their hair.”

“So you have been with women in Korrithin. Illia gave me the impression you hadn’t.”

Zarin laughed. “No, no, my friend. Illia was right, but there are analytes here, don’t forget.”

“Yeah but not very many, and most of the analytes I have seen are older and male. There cannot possibly be many young analyte women here who are ready to be courted.”

“You’re right, but that doesn’t matter. I found all six of them.”

Tarak laughed with Zarin.

“This has been fun, Tarak. Perhaps we can chat some more over a few drinks when time allows.”

“When time allows,” he agreed.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Tarak was already in the courtyard training his Gravity Field spell when Reela arrived with Grayhart. There was not a single similarity between the two of them besides that they were both women and appeared to be around the same age. Reela looked kind and gentle, with a pleasant face and bright green eyes that drew Tarak's gaze. Grayhart looked as if she'd spent most of her life scowling, and Tarak would rather not spend another moment looking at her.

Grayhart was not ugly. It was something worse than that. She seemed to exude ugly thoughts. She was on the taller side, but still shorter than the tall half-elf. Grayhart might've even been beautiful if it wasn't for her eyes. They were harsh and weathered, like the exterior of a ship that had seen too many voyages. Tarak felt an immediate disposition of discomfort as if she'd infected him with a sour mood.

"Tarak." Reela approached. "Fetch Leon and tell him we are ready to begin training."

Tarak turned around and cupped his hands over his mouth. "Leon!" he yelled toward the keep and the great hall.

Leon stuck out his head from the second story of the great hall. "All right everyone, they're here!" he yelled. "Get out onto the courtyard now! I know you can hear me!"

Grayhart seemed to tell something to Reela under her breath, but Reela looked at her sternly and maybe said something through psyche. Whatever it was, Grayhart rolled her eyes at it.

Soon every sorcerer who lived in the castle was outside gathered around Tarak. Leon made his way out with the king, the queen, and Zarin behind them. All but Lord Langston were here.

Coward.

Tarak still hadn't had a chance to speak with Callie privately today. He'd have to wait to see what had happened

between her and Eden, but he did see they still appeared to be avoiding each other except for occasional nasty looks.

There was something more pressing. Tarak approached Jon and Michael.

“Jon, did Trevor say anything about me?” Tarak asked.

“He did ask if you were with Callie. I said no.”

“Good!”

“But he had a guard there who turned out to be a psychic because the man called me out on my lie.”

“Lord and bane, Jon!”

“It isn’t my fault!”

Michael whistled. “Psychics are everywhere now. Soon no one is going to be able to tell a lie without risk of interrogation.”

“Did Trevor fume?” Tarak asked.

“He did. He also would not let me take the akorell. I’m not sure he even has any or if it was just a ruse to bring me to him so he could question me. I think he might’ve even been hoping for you to arrive. He knew that you can fly now.”

“This is really not good,” Tarak mumbled. “What else happened?”

“He asked about Tienna. I don’t know how he found out anything that happened in the castle, but he seemed to know there was something scandalous about her. He tried to question me in front of the psychic, but I told him the truth: I was insulted and disappointed in him. Then I left.”

“Everyone in the castle must be questioned with psyche,” Tarak figured. “Someone is sharing news.”

“Tarak, all of these castle workers and guards have lives outside of the castle,” Michael lectured. “Many are married with children. They leave and they talk, and it’s not like us sorcerers keep things to ourselves. Everything gets out, and then it finds its way out of the castle. I told you that secrets are

not going to stay within the walls. There is no spy to worry about. This is your fault.”

“Damn. So what will Trevor do, Jon?”

“I think he wants to marry Tienna.”

“He *what?*” Michael seemed to speak impulsively, showing surprise at how Tarak and Jon turned to him with quizzical expressions. “Not that I’m jealous. It’s that Trevor is bad for her. He has proven to be quite a...what is the word I’m looking for?”

“He is dangerous,” Tarak decided to say. “Let us cut the humor. He is a lord who wants to be king. He should be treated like an Ancient. He is a threat.”

“The king is well aware,” Jon said. “Which is why I’m sure he told you to make absolutely certain no one found out about your relationship with Callie.” Jon looked disapprovingly at Tarak.

“He did not tell me that. He told it to Callie.”

“What a fine job you two have done,” Michael replied sarcastically.

“He wants Tienna now, can you see?”

“Like hell he’ll have her!”

The king called out, “Michael.”

Michael gasped as he looked at Nykal, but the king was pointing at Grayhart, who was staring at the three of them with her hands on her hips. Everyone was looking at them, but all were too far to hear anything they’d said. That didn’t seem to matter to the psychic, who glared as if she’d listened to every word.

“Are you boys done gossiping?” Grayhart asked rhetorically. “God’s mercy, it’s really up to *you* all to defend your kingdom against Ancients? Where is your army, king?” She directed her gaze at Nykal. “Where are your hundreds of sorcerers?”

“Sanya,” Reela chided.

“No, it needs to be said.”

“Sanya?” Michael mouthed to Jon, who shrugged.

“Recruitment is open to anyone who has some skill over sorcery,” Nykal explained. “The people of Lycast know this, and they know they will receive a generous wage and prestige, but they are scared. The last war was recent. I will not force anyone to join my army, but we have guardsmen across every city in Lycast, and yes, there are some sorcerers among them. All are ready to fight, but training each and every person to resist psyche is not feasible.”

Tarak whispered to Jon, “Have people come looking to train?”

“Some, but they meet at the Stockades for review. Some have a little skill with a spell like Fire or Water and are put to better use in a city for other tasks.”

Grayhart spoke to Reela loudly enough for everyone to hear. “Did you know how few capable sorcerers they have here?”

“I have been in contact with Nykal Lennox, as I’ve told you, and I trust in him as you should.”

“We have thousands of mages in Kyrro. How many can they have here, a few hundred? You always let your heart decide on these matters.”

“It’s the reason you’re alive, isn’t it?” Reela retorted.

“You’re going to forever bring that up, aren’t you?”

“Sanya, I don’t care how many good deeds you’ve done since you’ve been gone; there is no excuse for your attitude.”

“Grayhart,” Nykal interrupted. “Or is it Sanya?”

“It is Grayhart, my last name.”

“The people here do not focus on sorcery as do those in Kyrro, and that is because there is little room for it in their lives. I have been trying to change that, but change is slow. You should also be aware that besides the existence of your Academy, Xiffrik is another reason you have so many mages

and we do not. He has changed mana in your kingdom to make certain spells more accessible.”

“I heard that from Reela, but I cannot see how you can possibly know that.”

“Because the same thing happened here. An Ancient changed mana so that a specific spell called dteria was the easiest one to cast. There were thousands of dteria mages throughout Lycast and Rohaer. I came to power to stop it, and thousands of good people died. I will not have another war if I can help it, and I will not have another Ancient changing mana here, either.”

Grayhart must’ve been able to detect his sincerity, though she stared dubiously.

He went on. “Every sorcerer in your kingdom empowers Xiffrik by using mana from the system he has manipulated, and now he wants to come here and change mana. He claims that he is willing to work with us, but that doesn’t matter. We cannot let him take over, or there will be no stopping him. I had hoped this had been explained to you before you came.”

“Basen told me most of it, but I still have a lot of questions.”

“Grayhart.” Reela pulled the other woman’s gaze.

A silent conversation seemed to follow. Eventually, Grayhart turned back to the king.

“I’m going to trust Reela and Basen. I hope you all don’t disappoint me. There are many things I can be doing right now besides training all of you. But if this distracted group is really all you have to defend the kingdom against Xiffrik, then at least give me the respect I need to teach you. Pay attention.”

Leon spoke up. “All right, daisies. Focus from here on out or there will be punishment.”

Grayhart asked Reela, “Have you pained any of them?”

“A few.”

“And?”

“They have a lot of work to do.”

“I figured.” Grayhart already appeared irritated as she scowled at the crowd. “Who of you are not here to train but just to observe?”

“I am,” the queen said.

“Anyone else?” Grayhart asked.

Tarak looked toward the king and Zarin, but neither of them said anything.

“Father?” Callie asked.

“Why do so many of you seem surprised?” the king asked. “I was at the last battle against Monrra, and you will likely see me with you again when we face Xiffrik.”

“Fair point,” Michael muttered. “But Zarin?”

“I would like to train as well.”

Grayhart pointed at him. “Why?”

“Maybe I’ll fight.”

“You are hiding something from me, so let’s start with you. Are you ready?”

Zarin appeared nervous as he shot a quick glance first to Aliana at his side, then to the rest watching him. “Should I come closer?”

“I can reach you from here.”

Tarak, still wanting to learn distances, asked Jon and Michael, “How far are they?”

“About fifteen yards,” Jon answered. “I didn’t think psyche could work from that far.”

“I am ready,” Zarin said, chest puffed.

Grayhart lifted her hand. Zarin collapsed, his mouth clamped and seemed to be holding in a scream as his eyes bulged. Tarak waited for the scream but it wouldn’t come. It didn’t seem like Zarin could breathe, though, as his face went pale.

Grayhart put down her arm. Zarin panted and pushed himself up. He ran a hand through his hair.

“That wasn’t too bad.”

“Don’t lie,” Grayhart said. “You’re just trying to be brave for her.” The psychic pointed at Aliana.

The ranger’s head snapped back as confusion bent her eyebrows down. “What?” She stared at Zarin.

“My reasoning has nothing to do with Aliana,” he told Grayhart. “Pain me again.”

She shrugged and lifted her hand in his direction.

He screamed this time. Grayhart didn’t stop, even as Zarin squirmed and looked completely defeated.

Finally, she let her spell come to an end. He slowly pushed himself up, stumbled a bit and had to drop to a knee, then rose up completely. “I will have a rest before the next.”

“You’re actually staying?” Grayhart asked in shock. “You must really want to bed this young woman. You should know she is not impressed by this.”

Zarin’s face contorted in anger. “You are the most—!”

She pained him again.

He grunted and cringed, but he didn’t collapse. In fact, he even kept speaking.

“I did not give you...*engh*...permish—*onnnnn!* To... do...that...you...*kadish!* You will stop right now!”

Grayhart let down her hand. “Look, you resisted the spell pretty well, and all because of the state of anger I made you feel. The things I said about the woman near you were a lie in order to prove a point, and it worked.”

Tarak clapped with the others. The anger drained from Zarin’s face.

Michael chuckled. “What’s a *kadish*, Zarin?”

“A word I should not have said. I apologize, Grayhart.”

“Forgiven. Now who’s next?”

Reela told her, "I think you have it from here. Test Callie next so that I may take her after she is done. I'm ready for a return portal when Basen can be reached through Desil."

Callie took a step forward out of the loose half circle. "I understand I can resist psyche if I put myself in the plane of mana?"

"That's right," Reela said.

Callie drew a breath and closed her eyes. She looked suddenly relaxed as if about to fall asleep on her feet. "I'm ready," she murmured.

Grayhart lifted her hand. Her eyes squinted. Her mouth twisted. Her teeth showed. Her hand shook. Then she let go of her tension as she put her arm down.

"That's good," Grayhart told Callie.

She didn't open her eyes.

"Princess?" Reela tried.

Callie's eyes suddenly opened as she came back to life. "Did you do it?"

"Yes," Grayhart answered. "You are immune, but you need a lot of practice, not with resisting psyche but with functioning while putting your mind in the other plane. Go with Reela, and when you reach Desil, see if he can give you some more advice on how to do that."

"I would like to request a meal, King Nykal," Reela said, "as I figure out the logistics of the portal with your daughter. I have enjoyed everything that has come out of the kitchen here so far."

"Rick will take you." The king gestured at the head guard.

"Thank you," Reela said.

"You are most welcome."

She gave a slight bow. Rick escorted her and Callie to the great hall.

Reuben raised his hand. “I would like to go next, but give me a moment.”

“Be quick.”

He nodded.

Reuben closed his eyes. His mouth tightened. He seemed to be clenching his teeth. He opened his eyes and showed an enraged expression.

“Now!”

Grayhart’s arm darted toward Reuben. He faltered as if struck by an invisible force. His face of rage did not change. The scream he let out was one of anger. He held for a few breaths before pain won out, collapsing him to a knee. He tried to hold on, but he seemed to lose control of every muscle as he slid to the ground, and his scream changed to one of pure agony.

Grayhart stopped her spell. “That was actually very good,” she said with considerable surprise. “You must have a lot of anger. Can you channel it whenever you want?”

Reuben had pushed himself up by then. He wore a dark expression. “Yes” was all he mumbled.

“Good. Work on that, and I will test you again after everyone else. Would you like to go next, sire?”

“Yes, one moment.” He glanced at Tienna. The next breath he took was slow and almost appeared to fill him with pain. “I am ready,” he told Grayhart with a melancholy tone.

Grayhart aimed her palm. The king jolted. His eyebrows touched and his mouth puckered up. He clenched fists. His rapid breaths were loud through his nose, but his mouth never opened to make a sound.

“Holy fuck!” Leon exclaimed.

But then the king screamed and fell to a knee. He put up his palm. “Enough!”

Grayhart ended her spell. The king pushed himself up, staggered a step and drew many sorcerers closer, but then he

held steady.

“You broke my concentration,” he told Leon.

“There’s going to be a hell of a lot more going on during a battle than an expletive,” Leon retorted.

“He’s right,” Grayhart agreed. “You resisted really well, but you have to maintain your state of mind. All of you seem to know that psyche can be resisted by feeling something other than the pain, but what you have to strive for is something more than a competition between pain and your chosen emotion. Complete resistance means putting yourself in a state of mind where you are affected by nothing else. Not pain, not the news of a friend’s death, not losing a limb. Nothing. That’s the only way to keep on fighting if you cannot move your mind into another plane.”

Michael raised his hand.

“Yes?” Grayhart asked.

“If we can’t ever put ourselves in that type of state, should we keep practicing using one emotion as a competition over the pain?”

“Yes,” she said with a disapproving tilt of her head. “But if that’s the route you’re planning to take, it’s best you become accustomed to the pain. That will make the competition easier and allow you freer movement and thoughts during the spell.”

Leon asked, “How many people who you’ve met can put themselves in a state of mind that completely resists your psyche?”

“Less than ten.”

“Then why the hell are you suggesting it!” Leon asked.

“Because I hear Xiffrik is even more powerful than I am. It may be the only way to fight someone like him, and so I must mention it if it’s possible for even one of you to achieve.”

Tarak excelled at many things, but putting himself in a state of mind where he would not care about the death of a friend or the loss of a limb seemed impossible. That meant

focusing on something else and resisting the pain through practice.

He was pretty damn determined not to let Xiffrik do whatever he wanted. Maybe Tarak's determination would be enough to at least stay on his feet, after more practice, but lord and bane the agony of it. He didn't want to.

He was about to raise his hand to go next anyway when Callie returned. "I contacted Desil." Her words turned everyone toward her as she joined the half circle beside Tarak. "Basen will make a portal for Reela in the next hour. She's going to finish her meal, and I'd like to watch in the meantime."

"It's probably best you're here anyway," Grayhart said. "Because I'm about to start paining everyone at once. You can put yourself in the other plane, so try to stay aware of your surroundings here."

Leon asked, "How much weaker is your spell when you hit all of us with it?"

"It's not weaker, but I can't keep it up for as long."

"How long can you keep it up against one target?"

"Indefinitely."

"Fucking hell. And against more than ten?"

"Maybe a minute at most. Here's how we're going to do it. If you fall, I will stop hurting you. Sit down and wait until everyone has collapsed. That will allow me to keep going for as long as I need to, and we will see who is the strongest right now."

Michael asked, "If we put down a knee, are we done?"

"A hand or knee. Anything. Those of you who I've already tested move back and help me determine the order in which people go down."

When all were ready, she began. Tarak noticed a few sorcerers collapsing immediately, most likely those who had never experienced the spell before. He was too distracted by

his blinding pain to notice much more besides Leon nearby, shouting progressively worse things in each passing moment.

“Cranny hunter licking! Hot pile of shit! Asshole burning! Mother fucker!”

“Hold your tongue or I will single you out after this is done!” Grayhart yelled at him.

It was only from Tarak’s amusement of Leon’s pain that he felt himself resisting his own. It didn’t take long for Leon to drop, however. He couldn’t seem to stay up without cursing. Tarak was amused a moment more, and then the pain completely overcame him.

He noticed that he and Jon were the only ones still standing then. Determined to win, Tarak focused on keeping his muscles tight. He would not collapse, but lord and bane how he wanted to if it meant an end to this agony.

Tarak had injured himself many times. There was always a short moment of incredible pain that usually pulled out a gasp or a scream. Then the pain would dull to a more tolerable level but would still cause terrible discomfort. The pain of a psychic, however, was that single short moment of inescapable pain drawn out to an eternity. It was like every muscle in his body was tearing.

Jon groaned and wavered, but he did not seem like he would collapse. He eyed Tarak and stood confidently. Tarak figured it was a lie, but Tarak didn’t have it in him right now to feign confidence. Jon was going to outlast him this time. Tarak needed a better strategy than to find amusement in Leon’s suffering.

He stopped fighting and fell to a knee.

Jon looked relieved for a blink, but his expression of pain resumed and he glared at Grayhart in horror.

“No, I’m not stopping just because you’re the last one,” she said. “See how long you can last.”

His lips curled back to show his teeth. He gave a grunt that turned into a scream, and then he collapsed.

“All right.” Grayhart put up a hand as if asking for time to think. She closed her eyes and put a bent finger against her forehead. Then she opened her eyes and pointed at Leon.

“You’re the instructor Reela told me about, Leon Purage?”

“That’s right.”

“I can’t listen to you cussing at me the whole time we do this. You’d better figure out a way to stop, or I’m removing you.”

“Goddamn I know. I will figure it out.”

“And you.”

“Tarak,” he gave his name.

“Tarak, you cannot rely on gratification through Leon’s suffering as your only distraction to the pain.”

Michael snickered as Leon spoke.

“You gigantic shit. That’s why you stayed up so long?”

Tarak shrugged.

Grayhart told him, “I’ll come back to you. All of you who fell instantly had no strategy. You all just hoped to endure the pain, and you all failed except for him.”

“Jon,” he gave his name as she pointed.

“I could feel you had practice.”

Jon gave a solemn nod.

“But all of you should know, including you, Jon, that I’ve met many others who relied on the simple technique of enduring. Cleve Polken is one. I hear some of you met him.”

“He beat Jon in a duel,” Michael commented.

“It was just one bout,” Jon retorted.

“I’m sure that was not a fluke,” Grayhart said. “Cleve’s resistance of psyche is proof that enduring the pain can work, but it’s also proof that it’s the slowest method. You all don’t

have that much time, so I suggest you focus on something else.”

“I can’t,” Jon said. “I’ve tried to put myself in another state, but I just can’t do it consistently.”

“Then you’d better expect to practice a lot. Pain needs to be second nature to you.”

He nodded.

That was not a plan Tarak wanted for himself. He could endure pain, but only if he had to. The “lots of practice” part was just as off-putting as the pain itself.

“A question,” Tarak posed.

Leon said, “Raise your hand like a proper student.”

He raised his hand.

Grayhart pointed.

“I would like to try again, but I request that you come at me with that dagger of yours.” Tarak gestured to the one holstered to her belt. “Cut something valuable if you can reach me. This will incentivize me to resist and stay on my feet.”

“That’s a clever way to train desperation over pain.” She drew her dagger. “I will walk after you. What should I cut when I reach you?”

“Something very valuable to me. My hair.”

Callie hummed in disagreement, “Umm, how about part of your clothes instead?”

“I’ll cut open his shirt,” Grayhart said. “Begin.”

Tarak, not ready, collapsed as the spell replaced any control he had over his body with agony. It all happened too quickly. She was standing over him and grabbed his shirt. He tried to swat her away, but he seemed to lack strength to do little more than move his arm in her general direction.

She sliced the dagger down from his collar until his shirt was completely torn open. Then her spell came to an end.

“I did not even have time to think of my shirt!” Tarak complained, then looked down at his open chest. “Did you have to rip the whole thing open?”

“These threats must be serious. I have a better idea than your shirt. Take out your coin purse.”

Tarak already felt regret for bringing this up, but he did oblige. His pants were noticeably lighter as he took out the bulging purse.

“Good god,” Michael complained. “Do you keep *all* of your silver with you?”

“Where should I store it, in my quarters?”

“Yes of course!” Michael said, with many others agreeing with him. “Lock it up in your weapon chest.” He chuckled. “You are mad sometimes, Tarak.”

“How much do you have?” Grayhart asked.

“I have maybe seventy silver. I have not counted it in a while.”

“Is that a lot?” she asked the group.

There was a resounding affirmation.

Grayhart spoke again. “I could use some coin for this kingdom anyway, so it’s mine if I can take it from you.”

“Lord and bane, be reasonable and choose a LESSER AMOUAHHH!” Tarak screamed and dropped his pouch as he collapsed. *I was not ready, again!*

Grayhart was just a few steps away, her eyes on his money. On *all* of his money.

He cared nothing about the pain as he reached out and grabbed the pouch just before she bent down to snatch it. She grabbed his hand and tried to bend his fingers, but he pushed her away. He screamed the whole while, half in aggression and half in pain. He got up and scampered away from her, feeling akin to moving underwater.

His muscles burned. His vision blurred. He felt like he was in a nightmare as he stumbled over nothing in his

painfully slow attempt to get away from her.

She had not told him when this test would end, but she had mentioned earlier she could pain a single target indefinitely! Tarak couldn't go on like this forever.

He was vaguely aware of his peers laughing at him as he shrieked and swatted away her reaching hand. He finally found some distance and tried to straighten out to stuff the pouch in his pocket, but Grayhart lifted her other hand, and Tarak's pain seemed to double as she let out a strained noise.

He shrieked again, dropping the pouch. She bent for it, but he pushed her over and knelt to pick it up. Another terrible spell of agony made him fall forward onto his face. Dirt filled his mouth and muffled his hearing as he rolled and tried to pick himself up.

At least he was on top of his pouch. Grayhart tried to roll him off it, but she couldn't seem to do it.

"You're as heavy as a bear!" she complained.

He bent in on himself to grab the pouch and somehow staggered to his feet. If he could just get it into his pocket, she probably wouldn't be able to fish it out.

But she grabbed him from behind, reaching all the way around to take hold of the pouch. Her spell of pain took out his legs, but he managed to hold his pouch as he fell to his knees. She knelt in front of him, huffing as if exhausted.

"Just give it to me and this will end!"

"Never!"

He twisted, ripping the pouch from her grip and starting to run. He didn't even realize her spell had ended until it struck him again with double the force. He yelped and inadvertently tossed the pouch high into the air as he fell onto his hands and knees.

Grayhart sprinted past him, but he grabbed her pant leg on the way. She fell. He climbed on top of her back before she could get up. She groaned as she aimed her hand over her shoulder, and agony ripped a scream out of his throat, but he

felt that he had become accustomed to it now. He was too pissed off to care how much she hurt him.

“It is over!” he yelled. “I have you!”

She tried to wiggle free but soon gave up. “Well done. Now get off me so I can breathe.”

He rolled off. Both of them drank in as much air as they could. Tarak gave himself just two breaths before he used the last of his strength to stand up and fetch his pouch. The king already had it and was offering it to him.

“Well done, indeed, but you really must keep this in a better place. I’m not going to replace any lost wages.”

“I will, sire,” Tarak said, then went over to help up Grayhart, who was still catching her breath, though from a sitting position.

Once on her feet, she said, “I don’t think you’re going to need much training after all so long as you can answer one thing for me.”

“What is that?”

“Do you value the lives of these people as much as you value your coins?”

He looked at them. A few already seemed perturbed as if expecting the worst answer, but as he imagined standing beside them in battle again as he had in the forest, and he pictured someone disabling them all with psyche and heading toward them with a knife, the answer was obvious.

“They are far more valuable than my coins.” He gave a lingering look to Callie.

It earned him a smile from her.

“Good,” Grayhart said. “Now does anyone else want to use determination as their method of training?”

Every sorcerer shook their head.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

Everyone appeared to be in high spirits toward the end of the day. Reela had left. Grayhart would stay as the only instructor. She'd turned out to be a good teacher in resisting psyche because she could identify the strength of every sorcerer and show them how to improve it.

It didn't seem like Tarak would have to wait until the night to find out what had happened between Callie and Eden. During a break in training, he saw his chance when Michael was resting at a table in the dining hall with a mug of water. Most everyone had broken out in a sweat even during the cool day, but it was a good sweat, one of progress.

"What has Eden told you about her spat with Callie?" Tarak asked as he sat beside Michael.

"Has Callie told you anything?"

"I will not have a chance to speak to her privately until night. I am curious of Eden's viewpoint."

"Eden's point of view is that yesterday Callie was being obnoxious to everyone in the tavern but especially to Eden. She kept pestering Eden with things that were none of her business."

"Like what?"

"That's what I asked, and eventually I got it out of her. Callie claimed Eden doesn't care about me like Tienna does."

"Oh." Tarak remembered how Callie had been behaving last night. She'd been on a hunt to divulge the truth about everyone. Tarak was the one who had advised her to keep her psyche skill hidden and use it secretly to detect lies. Perhaps this was somewhat his fault, but now this might turn out to be a good thing.

He wished he could tell Michael about Callie's psychic ability, but it was up to Callie when she wanted people to know. She should be careful, however. Putting her friends in such positions and then later revealing she could detect lies

was taking advantage of them. At least she'd backed off when Arthur showed a bit of teeth. She probably had not done the same with Eden.

"She knows Tienna better than the rest of us," Tarak explained. "She must know that Tienna likes you, and she knows Eden does as well," Tarak thought out loud. "She must think Tienna is better for you and that you and Tienna should be together, not you and Eden."

Michael's elbow rested on the table, his head in his hand.

"You do not like Tienna anymore?" Tarak wondered.

"I have tried to move past my feelings for her, but I can't. I like her even more now that the truth has come out."

Tarak clicked his tongue. "I did not know you cared so much about a woman's political standing."

"Not because of that, but because of the reason she hid the truth from everyone. You didn't hear what she said when Callie asked Tienna why she didn't say something sooner. She wanted a real, genuine relationship with Callie. She wanted to see if it was possible. If the truth came out before they became friends, Tienna would never know if their friendship was forced because of their relation. I know how difficult that must've been because she had trouble making friends in the beginning. It's been hard for her here for a long time, but she still did it the difficult way."

"You know these things because you have flirted with her without stop since she arrived," Tarak interrupted.

"Exactly, but that flirtation changed into something real. She's worked incredibly hard, Tarak. She's not gifted like you, but she's dedicated and a really good person. Oh shit. I really like her, don't I?"

"It sounds like it."

"If she likes me, why was she not receptive to my flirtation?"

"She was receptive. I saw so the first time we played Liars Mug. It is why I advised you to initiate. She was

probably waiting for you.”

Michael swung his head around in clear annoyance. “Why do girls wait for us if they like us?”

“I have wondered that myself, but I can see that she regrets it.”

“Does she? How do you know?”

“The way she looks at you.” Tarak paused for emphasis. “And the way she looks at Eden.”

“Eden and I fought beside each other. We’ve gone to hell and back. She nearly died, multiple times!”

Tarak didn’t need to reply because Michael seemed to realize what he was saying.

“None of these are reasons for staying together to you.”

“To me? They are not reasons for anyone,” Tarak replied.

“History is a reason. Loyalty is important to committed relationships, especially during difficult times.”

“That I can agree with when the history involves commitment and dedication, but does it?”

Michael stared at the table with distant eyes.

Tarak continued, “Imagine Eden were you in this position. Who would she choose? She could choose between staying with you because of your history—which involves you kissing another girl while you two were together—or she could choose someone new who she likes more. “

Michael’s face fell into his hands again.

Tarak patted his back.

Michael suddenly looked into Tarak’s eyes with desperation. “How do I break up with Eden and have a relationship with Tienna while both of them are still in the castle?”

Tarak sucked in air through his teeth. “Oo, that is tough.”

“You know, I don’t think Eden has really changed,” Michael stated. “Our relationship is just like it was before she

kissed Arthur.” He looked off toward a wall. “Or am I just telling myself this to make it easier?” He looked back at Tarak. “She should’ve never kissed Arthur and taken me for granted. I never would’ve opened myself up to Tienna otherwise. I was happy with Eden, but now I can’t stop thinking about Tienna. Eden has to know that’s the reason.”

“So tell her.”

“She’s going to claim I’m only going after Tienna because the truth came out about her bloodline.”

“Then she doesn’t really trust you or know you.”

“That’s true.”

They sat in silence for a moment.

“But what will Tienna think?” Michael asked.

“It depends on how much she trusts you, I suppose.”

His eyebrows lifted. “I could have the psychic verify the truth. Oh, but...maybe I do think it is a little exciting that she’s Nykal’s daughter. That might come out with psyche. Oh god, am I terrible? It’s not that I am interested in climbing the political ladder, it’s just something exciting. I can’t say why.”

“Let me tell you that if you are not interested in obtaining power through marriage, as I am not, then there is nothing exciting about it. It is a massive hindrance to a relationship.”

“You’re right. Nykal would be on my nuggins, as he would anyone who started seeing Tienna. I’ve never had a parent on my nuggins before. I’m sure it would be terrible.”

“Will you answer something for me?” Tarak asked.

“Yes.”

“Why have I heard more about nuggins in my short time here than in my whole life prior?”

“I don’t know! I blame Leon. I hadn’t heard a lot about nuggins until his whole thing with Xiffrik’s nuggins.”

“All right, enough about that. When are you planning to end your relationship with Eden?”

“Any suggestions?”

“Probably after dinner.”

“Damn, I hope she doesn’t cry. I can’t stand it when I make someone cry.”

There was desperate shouting from the courtyard. “Jon! Jon!” It sounded like Leon was on the verge of death.

Tarak and Michael bolted up and dashed out.

Leon was waddling into the courtyard...with a sword stuck up inside him from between his legs. “Jon!” he continued to yell.

“Oh my god!” Jon dashed toward him but slowed as Leon collapsed and yelled again.

“You have to save my nuggins!”

Jon’s hesitation slowed him to a near stop, but he shook his head and then dashed the rest of the way.

“Get Xiffrik’s sword out of me! Are you ready to heal?”

Every sorcerer arrived to surround Jon and Leon. Even the king and his advisers had come. Many of the ladies put their hands over their mouths, some turning away, others shrieking in horror.

“How did this happen?” Nykal shouted.

“He got me in the town!” Leon said. “Get it out, Jon!”

“I’m trying. It’s really stuck in there! There’s a lot more than your nuggins that’s going to need healing. You could die from this if I don’t act quickly and correctly.”

“Then fucking act! Pull out the damn sword, now!”

“Stand up.”

“I can’t!”

Tarak and Michael took Leon’s arms and pulled him to a standing position. He shrieked in agony and cursed up a storm.

Jon made a face of disgust as he put his hands around the part of the sword sticking out. “I have to make sure everything

stays inside you. Charlie, soften the blade but don't melt it completely."

Charlie knelt down and also put his hands up in Leon's nether region.

"I need someone else to slowly pull it out," Jon instructed.

"Reuben or Arthur!" the king demanded.

"No way." They both uttered and looked at each other.

"He could die!" Jon yelled. "We have to act now."

"Oh damn you, Leon. You brought this upon yourself." The king knelt and got his hands around the hilt of the sword.

"It's softened," Charlie said.

"Pull slowly."

Grayhart came over with a full mouth as if eating recently. "What is happening—? God's mercy!"

"Pull!" Jon repeated.

The king slowly drew out the sword. Leon shrieked harder with every inch it moved.

Everyone made sounds of disgust as Jon pushed hard against Leon's wound. The tip of the sword came out, and Jon practically picked Leon up from the pressure he applied to his groin.

"Heal, Jon! Heal me!"

"I am! Stop squirming!"

Leon shrieked in agony until Grayhart put her hand on his head. He visibly calmed.

"No, make him feel this!" Nykal demanded. "He needs to!"

She took away her hand.

"You fucking—!" Leon's scream interrupted him as he flailed out of Tarak and Michael's hold. He flopped onto his back. Jon fell on top of him, his hand squeezing up against

Leon's nether regions. They were about to knock faces when Jon tilted his head out of the way and ate a face full of dirt.

"I'm almost done, stop moving!" he yelled, his voice muffled by the ground.

Jon finally finished. He unlatched his hand from Leon's plums and rolled off him. They both heaved for breath.

"Where's Aliana?" Leon mumbled weakly.

"Here." She stood among the others circled around, but she seemed to sense something about Leon that made her draw back a step.

"Why did you not warn me that Xiffrik was in our kingdom?"

"It's a strain to feel for Ancients at all times, especially with Basael around. I told you that."

Leon looked as if a carriage had driven over him from his plums upward. A trail of blood ran up from between his legs to his chest. A gaping hole flapped at the underside of his pants, with multiple tears from his pants upward. Tarak glanced away as soon as he noticed. He hadn't caught sight of anything unsavory, but he wasn't going to chance it.

Jon picked himself up and dusted off. He glanced at his hand that had more than just blood on it. He made a face as if he might wretch.

"I'm going to clean up," he groaned and flew off toward the apartments.

"Leon, you have brought punishment upon all of us because of your idiocy," Nykal scolded. "Think about what we just had to witness."

"I know," Leon muttered.

"Aliana," the king asked, "is Xiffrik anywhere nearby?"

"No, he must have gone."

Nykal spoke to Leon again. "Did any of my citizens have to watch Xiffrik do this to you?"

Leon closed his eyes. “Can you just...let me recover before you berate me? It was bad enough I had to feel that.”

“It was the least you deserve. I want you to promise me here in front of this psychic that you are not going to attack anyone, even an Ancient, during any discussion, at any point in the future.”

“Yeah, I promise.”

Nykal glanced at Grayhart. She nodded.

“I’m going to wash up as well,” the king said.

Tarak hadn’t noticed the blood on the king’s clothes and hands until he pointed a finger toward Reuben and Arthur. He spoke nothing, only glared with his finger extended. Fear widened their eyes.

Then the king turned on his heels and strode off toward the keep.

Leon finally sat up. With a hand covering his torn garments to ensure nothing showed, he gingerly got up. Then he waddled off toward the keep with a long rip up the back of his bloody pants, his pale ass showing.

“Oh goddammit,” Michael muttered as everyone looked away.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

Callie heard from Tienna about Michael's breakup with Eden, who had apparently confronted Tienna after dinner. Afterward, Tienna spoke with Callie in her room and repeated what had happened.

"I hope you are happy with yourself," Eden had told Tienna. "You're the reason he's breaking up with me. What do you have to say about that?"

"I'd say that you kissing someone else is the reason," Tienna had replied.

"No, something happened all of a sudden. Did you kiss him? Be honest with me. It's the least you can do after coming between us."

"Unlike you, I would not cheat or involve myself with a cheater. No, I didn't kiss him."

"You wouldn't say that in front of a psychic."

"I would."

Callie interrupted the retelling to ask Tienna, "Michael has never tried to initiate?"

"No, but I thought he wanted to. He never spoke to me about his feelings, though, so I started to wonder if I might be wrong."

After Eden's harsh chat, Tienna had come straight to Callie and asked to speak with her in her chambers. She still wasn't sure she was ready to reveal her psychic ability, but she could reveal something.

"I know Michael likes you."

"Why do you think that?"

"I know," Callie repeated. "The way he looks at you... and has talked about you to Tarak."

"So you two *are* together!"

Callie nodded.

Tienna smiled with an open mouth. “I had a feeling.”

Yeah, everyone’s had a feeling. I had really thought we were more secretive. That meant other people in the castle had probably figured it out. The rumor alone was enough to spark Trevor Chespar’s suspicions. It had probably even reached him by now. Hopefully enough time had passed that he wouldn’t feel as insulted as if the news had come out earlier, but Callie was still a little worried. He had shown dangerous fury when she’d told him she was no longer interested in him and was ending their engagement.

He’d demanded to know why and had even gone so far as to assume she not only had feelings for Tarak but had already slept with him. It was disgusting to hear him accuse her of something like that, and with near certainty! She felt gross for all the times she had kissed Trevor and for what she had let him do to her body.

Callie spent the rest of the evening talking about young men with her sister. She’d always enjoyed these types of conversations, but she’d never had someone close enough in age. Aliana had been her closest friend in the castle, but Aliana was pretty tightlipped about her relationships and even about Callie’s betrothal. It was only because of Eden’s pushiness that Callie had learned Aliana’s true thoughts about it.

It was unfortunate that Michael had come between Eden and Tienna. Callie had always appreciated Eden’s candidness and found her humorous, but if Callie had to pick between Tienna and Eden, she was going to pick Tienna. Hopefully it wouldn’t come to that, though Tienna was clearly interested in Michael and deserved to have a healthy relationship with someone kind like him. She’d had no healthy relationships in her life, something else Callie learned that night. Callie couldn’t imagine Eden being friends with Tienna after that.

Tienna stayed late into the night. Callie drew her curtains across her window. It was a signal she and Tarak came up with long ago to mean that it was unsafe for him to visit. Or in this case, it was more that she was busy with someone else. She hoped Tarak still remembered the signal. She’d never drawn her curtains before his arrival until tonight.

Callie enjoyed talking with Tienna until Tienna reminded her of the terrible event they'd witnessed involving Leon and the sword that had been pulled out of him by their father. As horrifying as it was to relive it, they did share some laughs together.

"It's very late," Tienna said eventually. "I should head to my room."

"Has Father spoken to you about changing anything?"

"Like what?"

"Anything, like where you might sleep now?"

"Oh, I never thought of that. I wouldn't want anything to change. I think it would feel too strange. He hasn't spoken to me, anyway."

"He and my mother are probably figuring out what to do."

"Well I hope my opinion will be taken into consideration."

"Probably not," Callie told her, deadpan. "Welcome to being a princess."

They shared a laugh. Tienna suddenly seemed nervous. Callie confirmed it with a psyche.

"I want you to always be honest with me, and I'll do the same for you," Tienna told her seriously.

"Of course. What is it?"

"Are you worried or...maybe jealous?"

"Jealous?" Callie laughed.

"Because I'm older."

"Let me explain something. I was nobility until I was fourteen, and then I suddenly became a princess. I loved it at first. It was like living a dream, a fantasy. But from then until now I've really grown to hate it. Let me be blunt. It's even worse because our father is not a very powerful king. He has to be careful that he doesn't upset the lords who he gave power

to after their help in the last war. That means my marriage should be used for the sake of keeping power within the family, or we may risk a rebellion if we become too weak.” She paused and looked Tienna in the eyes. “But with you, that responsibility may be shared, or at least we can fight against it together.”

“I had a feeling it was like that.”

“Was this another reason you didn’t want the truth to come out?”

“No, not at all! It really was only because of what I said. I wanted to see if we could have a relationship first before you felt obligated.”

Callie could feel her sincerity with psyche. She stood up from her bed, and Tienna did the same. They shared a hug.

“I only wish we could’ve known each other earlier,” Callie said. “I think we could’ve helped each other.”

“We have many more years to do that.”

There was a tapping at the window. Tienna’s eyes widened.

“Oh, that’s just Tarak,” Callie said to ease her fear.

“Oh!” Tienna laughed.

Callie opened her curtains. Tarak smiled at her, but then made a face of horror as he noticed Tienna. He suddenly dropped beneath the sight of the window.

Callie went over and opened the window. She couldn’t see past his black sphere of gravity pulling him up. It tugged her hair toward it from the top as she held onto her locks with her hands.

“It’s okay. Come up,” she whispered.

She moved back to give Tarak space to enter. He appeared frustrated as he landed on her windowsill and then stepped in with one long leg after the other. “The curtains! Of course. I forgot. I apologize, Callie. Tienna knows now.”

“It’s all right. I already told her.”

“Hi, Tarak. I’m happy for you two.”

“Oh, thank you. Did you hear the good news about Michael and Eden?”

“Callie and I just spent the evening celebrating with a riveting game of Liars Mug,” Tienna jested.

“Without me?” Tarak sounded offended. “Wait.” He lifted a finger. “I smell no ale.”

“Smell?” Callie laughed. “You rely on smell more than sight? There are no cups here!”

“Cups can disappear, but I know what a room smells like after a riveting game of Liars Mug. There is no hiding it.”

“I seriously want to know,” Tienna said. “What does it smell like?”

“Like truth, laughter, and regrets.”

“Tarak, that isn’t a smell,” Callie said.

“Wait until we play Liars Mug in a confined space and you will experience it. Oh, and the smell of ale, of course. I forgot that part. Would you like to play tonight? I am confident I could convince Michael to come.” He nudged Tienna with his elbow a little too hard, sending her back a step as she rubbed her arm. “Oh, I apologize.”

“It’s fine,” she said with a laugh. “As fun as that sounds, I’m very tired, and we have to be up tomorrow to train.” She spoke with a wide smile. “Goodnight, Callie and Tarak. You two don’t stay up too late.”

Callie hugged her sister again. “Goodnight.”

She walked Tienna to the door, opened it, and then shut it and locked it behind her.

“So...?” Tarak raised his eyebrows a few times.

Callie walked over and kissed him as she threw her arms around the back of his neck. He reached down to pick her up, but she stopped him.

“Tarak, I still have to prepare for bed, and I am too tired tonight.”

“Oh.”

“But you can still lie with me if you wait here, and we can chat.”

He walked toward her bed as he undid his belt. “Very well, but it is not my fault if I accidentally seduce you.” He pulled off his shirt and turned to strike a pose of flexing his bicep, though he pretended it was a yawn. He gave another fake yawn as he turned his arms and flexed again.

She couldn’t help but smile and have a little touch. His muscles felt like iron when flexed. It was more a marvel than a cause for attraction at times, but other times, like now, she found herself feeling less tired and more that she wanted him to smother her with that long, strong torso.

“I hate how this is actually working.” She kissed his cheek.

“I can be quick,” he whispered as he took her in his arms.

“I know,” she teased.

“And so can you,” he whispered into her ear, then nibbled on her neck.

Her cheeks went flush. “Oh gosh,” she whispered back, then took his lips with hers.

When Callie was more than satisfied and had forgotten about everything in the world except Tarak, he surprised her with shocking news that jolted her out of her reverie.

“Trevor knows about us. Jon went to visit him in regard to the akorell, but there was no akorell. Trevor questioned Jon about our relationship. Jon had no idea that one of the men present was a psychic. He was called out on his lie.”

Callie sat up. “Oh no. Was Trevor angry?”

“Yes.”

“Angry enough to seek vengeance?”

“I cannot say.”

She lay back down beside Tarak. “I can’t believe he would lie about akorell just to question someone about our relationship.”

“I can.”

Callie had told Tarak about her mistakes with Trevor. He blamed no one but Trevor for them.

“I want to destroy Trevor,” Tarak said. “Not only for what he did in the past, but for what he is likely to do in the future.” He paused and sat up to look into her eyes. “Can I destroy him now? I believe this is grounds for destruction.” The way Tarak spoke of destroying and destruction, with guttural emphasis on the middle of the word, was as if he would feel great pleasure if given permission to act on this anger.

“It is not yet grounds for destruction.”

He lay back down. “At least this means there is no reason for us to hide our relationship any longer.”

“That’s right!” she realized with a smile. “I will speak to my father tomorrow, but you should expect him to forbid you from entering my room at night anyway.”

“The rumors of us were nearly fact to most people already. He must assume that I am here at least some nights, but he has sent no one to check on you. How can that be?”

“He’s probably wanted to but my mother most likely convinced him to give us space.”

“Does your mother like me?”

“More than my father does.”

“How much is that?”

“I wouldn’t say ‘like’ is the right word; it’s more like she tolerates you, but she sees how happy I am with you. So does my father. They’re just worried because they don’t want us to have a future.”

Callie and Tarak had discussed it here and there in the past. It was how she knew she could be blunt now. He liked bad news to be succinct and accurate. “Let the quills draw out the good times with imagery and feeling, and let daggers draw the bad in blood,” he’d say, a phrase she’d come to appreciate. She always pictured a dagger stabbing the words, quick and done, and the blood would follow.

However, just because she appreciated the phrase didn’t mean she understood why anyone in their right mind would prefer it that way, but she trusted Tarak was in his right mind, for the most part.

“Normally the disapproval of parents would not bother me, except your parents are the rulers of Lycast. What they want matters to a lot of people, including me.”

“Yes, it’s a delicate topic that is best avoided for now.”

Tarak stated, “Your father will have to become accustomed to seeing our affection in public.”

“I don’t think he could unless his perception of you changes.”

Tarak threw his hand into the air. “Why is his perception of me so terrible?”

“Oh I don’t know,” Callie said sarcastically. “Maybe because you’ve gabbed about breasts and orgies in front of him?”

“When have I...? Oh, right.”

“Hey, now that I think about it, I haven’t heard you talking about these things around me. Do you save them only for kings?”

“I talk about your breasts all the time.”

“You do not, except during...”

“When the gentleman springs to action.”

She smacked him playfully.

“I do, can you see?” he questioned. “How many times have I mentioned how you have the most wonderful wit and

charm I've ever seen, or that you must not distract me with your wit and charm when I am training?"

"You were talking about my breasts this whole time?" she almost shouted.

"Shh, yes. The left one and the right. Hey, stop!"

She tickled his side.

"It is a joke, princess!" He squealed as she tickled him again. "Are you not using psyche?"

"Say it again. Now I am focused."

"I am not *only* talking about your breasts when I mention your wit and charm. I also love your actual wit and charm, more than your breasts, in fact."

"Thank you."

"But it is close."

She tickled him again.

After they settled down, Tarak seemed to realize something.

"Actually, I *have* only mentioned such crude things in front of the king of Lycast. I do not know why I must push every boundary. The more authority someone has over me, the more I want to unmask them and show them we are the same."

She laughed. "I want to do that sometimes, too. The whole hierarchy of lords and nobles is exhausting. Half of my education used to go into learning all about the noble families around Lycast. I am glad that focus has shifted to sorcery."

"And to Tarak," he said.

"Yes, and to him," she said with a smile. "Speaking of Tarak, he has stolen my focus for too long! I still have to prepare for bed and sleep."

Tarak sat up. "Tomorrow, shall we announce our relationship at breakfast?"

She gawked at him after throwing her nightgown over her head. "What, like an engagement announcement?"

“Another jest. I thought you were always using psyche to look for insincerities.”

“Oh gosh, I suppose I have just been too distracted by you to listen to my mana. Let me focus a moment to make sure Desil is not trying to reach me about anything important.” She closed her eyes but opened them as she realized something. “The only time I can forget about psyche is when I’m with you.” She smiled warmly.

He reciprocated with a smile of his own.

She closed her eyes again and let mana take her mind to the other plane. It had been a difficult skill to learn, but now that she’d practiced enough, it was as easy as casting a spell. It involved the same type of concentration as focusing on her mana. The difference here was that once she was done, she felt her mind pulled to another place.

It was like falling asleep. There was a transition between the planes, but just like falling asleep, it was almost impossible for her to stay between them. She could only be in one plane or the other.

She could feel someone insistent to reach her, but she couldn’t figure out where they were.

“I’m here. Who is it?” She could tell they were very far away, but not as far as Desil had been. “Hello?”

She heard her name and something else, but she couldn’t quite make out anything except for one other word. “Connection.”

She could feel them desperate to reach her. Perhaps they had been trying for some time.

They continued to call out to her until she eventually realized the direction they came from. The plane of mana was an ocean of energy. She floated above it. Going into the ocean had always resulted in a feeling almost too intense to understand, her mind buzzing with pain and power. She also always awoke more fatigued than if she had avoided the ocean, but it seemed here that she would need it to amplify her mana.

She lowered her presence close to the ocean, the overwhelming energy ready to engulf her. Then she went a little lower, submerging herself, and tried to call out through the intensity of it all.

She lost track of time as she worked hard to extend her presence. Her natural mana wanted her out, but she forced herself to stay. Soon she felt too fatigued to stay in the plane much longer. It was then that she finally heard him clearly, at first.

“It’s Fatholl. I have urgent news and must..to...father...you. There has...great catastrophe.”

Her connection to him seemed weak, and it felt like he was already slipping away. She had gone through so much to receive his message that she could feel herself exhausted in both planes. If she left now, she might not be able to reach him again.

She tried to yell to Tarak. “Fatholl says there’s been a catastrophe. Bring me to my father, and hurry. I can’t leave this plane.”

She could feel herself talking, but she was unaware of anything happening to her body in the physical world.

Then suddenly she was hoisted up. She felt nauseous at first, expecting the world of mana to tilt when it did not change. She could almost hear Tarak speaking to her, but she was unaware of what he was saying.

She was certain now that she was being carried. He must be taking her to her father in the keep.

Fatholl spoke again. “The connection is clear now but very strained and heavy on my mind. It must be even more on yours. Are you with Nykal?”

“Almost there,” she said.

“Don’t leave. I may lose you for a long time.”

She felt her feet come down on something in the physical world. There was another perceived jolt, though nothing

visibly changed. Nausea struck again but passed even quicker this time.

Callie could feel her father asking her something. She wasn't sure if she heard his voice in the physical world or she felt his mana nearby in this plane. Everything was becoming blurry as her connection to both Fatholl and the plane started to slip.

"I'm with my father, I think. What is the news?"

"This will be difficult if I cannot hear his reply, but we will try. A rift exploded beneath the elven castle in Dreil. It's the worst catastrophe the elves have seen in a long time. Much of the castle is destroyed, and many elves have died. The king may be one of them. He needs to be found. Are you able to tell this to your father as I speak to you?"

"Gosh, let me try." She repeated what Fatholl had said, yelling in the plane of mana in hopes of moving her mouth and mumbling the words in the physical world.

"Do you hear me, Father?" she tried afterward.

She could tell he was talking but she couldn't understand what he was saying.

"I can't hear his reply," she told Fatholl.

Fatholl told her, "Focus on something in the other plane in order to hear him. Put your mind halfway there. Is someone touching you right now? They're probably holding your shoulder or arm so you don't fall."

Tarak, she realized. Yes, she could feel his hands around her shoulders as she focused on them, and now she could understand her father's words.

"I can hear you, Callie, can you hear me?" her father asked.

"Yes! We don't have much time," she spoke in both planes. "Fatholl, continue."

"Monrra is sending monsters through rifts to attack the weakened elves and has threatened to continue until Eslenda gives up her control of mana."

“Eslenda has changed mana?” Callie asked in shock.

“I told you that. You didn’t hear?”

“No!”

“Yes, she changed mana just now, after the catastrophe. The elves don’t want another rift to explode, so they are changing mana. They have designated Eslenda as their curator of mana.”

“Oh my god.” Callie felt a terrible headache. White spots were taking over her ability to see in the plane of mana. She couldn’t go on much longer, but she repeated everything Fatholl had said for her father.

Nykal asked, “Does Fatholl still want to be an Ancient who has control of everything?”

She asked him.

“Yes, but that is not a priority right now, and my opinion may change depending on what happens. Tell your father that I know that Reela tried to enrage me, and I regret letting it work.”

Fatholl paused, but Callie told him, “I am speaking your words as you tell them to me. Continue, and hurry.”

“I was telling the truth in your castle that I cannot function with a psychic from Kyrro trying to turn me into a villain.”

Nykal said, “I apologize for putting you in that position, but we need to ally with Kyrro.”

“Yes, you must,” Fatholl replied. “You are not to blame. I am for the mistakes I made in the past. I won’t make them again, and perhaps one day we can be allies with Kyrro together. The connection is very strained. Callie, can you hold on any longer?”

“Barely. Are you in elven land now?”

“Yes, I will be trying to assume a leadership role through which my opinions will be heard. I may not be able to update you for a long time if I cannot gain the trust of another here

who can enter this plane of mana. Just know that I am still on the side of having no Ancients, not even Eslenda. Goodbye for now.”

Callie couldn't finish dictating before she was pulled out. She would've collapsed to the floor, but Tarak caught her under her arms. She struggled for breath. She seemed to be in her parents' sleeping quarters, though there were two beds.

“Water.” Tarak pointed at the glass on the dresser beside Esma's bed. Callie's mother hurried to retrieve it. She offered it to Callie, who drank it all down.

Although still exhausted, at least she'd regained her breath. “Fatholl still wants no Ancients to have control of mana, not even Eslenda. It seems like he's trying to gain power in Dreil, but it's unlikely he'll reach us again for a long time because there is someone else there who can listen.” Tarak helped Callie up. She looked around to see the door had been closed. It was just the four of them here.

“I'm not sure he can still be trusted,” Esma said.

“We probably won't know for a long time,” Nykal replied. “But do you think he could he be lying about the catastrophe of the rift exploding underneath the castle?”

“I don't see what benefit that would provide him,” Esma replied.

“I don't, either. We will assume it to be true for now. Eslenda has most likely changed mana. We must see if anyone here can feel the change, but tomorrow.” He glared at Tarak. “There is another matter we have to discuss.”

Tarak spoke casually. “There is no point in hiding this any longer.” He put his arm around Callie as if ready to fight to keep her. “Trevor found out. Did Jon tell you?”

“He did,” Nykal replied, and Tarak let his arm down. “Esma and I have been discussing what we think would be best for everyone. We know we cannot force Callie to end your relationship.”

“You would do that if you could? Even if she would be unhappy?”

“No,” Callie’s father answered promptly, to her surprise. He looked at her. “We wouldn’t.”

Her mother also shook her head.

“I appreciate that,” Callie told them.

“But,” Nykal began, “Tarak had better start behaving more like a nobleman if the relationship is to be public.”

“Why?” Callie rebelled. But then she figured out the answer. “Because it might reflect poorly on us if he doesn’t. So who cares?”

Nykal said, “There could be a rebellion if the nobles think another family is more suited to rule.”

Esma nodded. “It’s what happened that led to your father’s coronation.”

Tarak stated, “That is absurd. I shall destroy anyone who tries to rebel!”

Callie gestured at him. “See, he will destroy them. There’s nothing to worry about,” she said somewhat facetiously, though she did believe Tarak could do it.

Tarak shook his fist. “And I shall destroy Trevor Chespar!”

“Look.” Callie gestured at him again. “All of our troubles could go away.”

“You’re not destroying anyone right now, Tarak. Settle down,” Nykal chided.

Esma added, “Tarak, try to behave yourself at all times. It would be easier for everyone and very much appreciated. We wouldn’t have to worry so much. Can you please do that for us?”

Tarak unclenched his fist. “I do try,” he said softly. “I am normally much cruder.”

Nykal gave a culminating sigh. “It is late, and the news from Fatholl means a very busy day tomorrow. Get to bed. In your *own* rooms,” he quickly added. “We *really* would

appreciate if you didn't share a bed for now. You are both too young for that.”

“But I'm not too young to *marry*?” Callie retorted, then realized that she was pushing everyone to speak the truth with psyche, even herself. She wasn't sure she could stop it if she wanted to, but she had grabbed hold of their energy and twisted it toward sincerity.

Nykal ignored the comment as he clasped his hands. “Please at least promise you know how to avoid becoming pregnant.”

“Like how you avoided impregnating—?”

“I think he understands your point,” Tarak interrupted as he put his hand on Callie's back. “We know, sire. Can you see, I could alleviate your concern with a comment about how much practice I have in avoiding impregnating women, but I am refraining. You did request I be more like a nobleman.”

Nykal put his hand over his eyes for a moment, then dropped it and spoke sarcastically. “Yes, a fine job you are doing with that!”

“Callie,” Esma said, “are you sure Tarak is still right for you? I know he is handsome and impressive, but you have had your fun, haven't you? I think it's time to be more serious with your relationships like you are with your sorcery.”

“Lord and bane, I thought you liked me!” Tarak yelled. “I cannot even imagine what Nykal is thinking! He hates me even more!”

“I am thinking I have no right to tell Callie anything after what I've done to this family. I may not see why she is interested in you, but I trust her to make the best decisions for her life. I just hope they will also be the best decisions for this family. If not, we will make it work as best we can. I love you, honey, and I am so proud of you. I am not sure why I don't tell you that more often. Perhaps I'm scared you will take it to mean you cannot be wrong. Your will to rebel scares me, but it also inspires me.”

Callie was caught off guard by her father's sincere comments. "I do want what's best for this family," she assured her parents. "Tarak may be crude, but he cares for me more than I feel like I deserve. This is not just for fun. He is the best partner I could ever ask for, Father." She stepped close. Her own psyche was still affecting her as much as everyone else, but she couldn't seem to stop it now. "I love you, too. I am proud of you, too. I hope we can both forgive you." She looked at her mother.

"I have decided I will in time," Esma said. "But he needs a little more punishment first." She touched his arm lovingly.

Everyone chuckled.

"What is happening here?" Nykal asked with a grin. "It feels like there is something in the air, does it not?"

"It does," Esma agreed.

Tarak gasped and looked at Callie. She pressed her hand over his mouth before he could blurt out the truth, which would've been her fault anyway.

"We're off to our own beds!" she announced as her parents looked confused.

"Yes," Tarak said. "Besides, Callie already met with the gentleman recently."

She smacked him.

"This is your fault!" he told her. "Lord and bane, get us out of here." He started toward the door.

They giggled as they ran to it with hands held. Even her parents laughed behind her.

Tarak threw open the door, then practically ran Callie over as he followed her through. After closing it, they took each other's hand and ran laughing down the hall. Tarak slowed and enveloped her body as she put her back to the wall. The halls were dark and empty at this time. He leaned down and whispered to her.

"I had no idea you had that kind of power. I felt drunk."

“I’m improving quickly,” she agreed as she put her arms around him and pulled him even closer. “I think I’m going to have to reveal the truth soon.”

“At least you have had your fun with it.”

“I just wish I could find out everyone’s secret first. Arthur has a big one.”

“Not everyone’s secret is like Tienna’s. Some are going to hurt them if they come out.”

She gasped. “You know what it is!”

“And I promised I would not say.”

“Oh, he likes men.”

“What!” Tarak exclaimed.

“I guessed it based on what you were feeling.”

“How?”

“I don’t know exactly. Isn’t psyche the most amazing thing!”

“Superb,” he muttered sarcastically.

“I won’t tell, but why did he let Eden kiss him?”

“To give the perception of liking women. He didn’t know Michael and Eden were together.”

“Oh, that Eden. She never really respected Michael. I am so glad they are not together anymore.”

“Although I agree, I thought she was your friend?” Tarak asked.

“She was. I am not sure if we can be called friends anymore. I can tell she regrets what she did, but she doesn’t feel the same toward Michael as I do toward you, and they were together a long time. Even Tienna feels more strongly toward Michael. I told Eden this and to let him go, and she did not take it well.”

“I noticed.”

There was a moment of silence as they leaned close.

“I could talk to you all night, but we should sleep,” Callie said. “But can you believe Eslenda changed mana?”

“I almost cannot believe it,” Tarak replied. “You have to tell me more about her.”

Callie had spoken somewhat of Eslenda, but there was much more to tell. She was probably the most powerful sorcerer Callie had met who wasn't already an Ancient or a Deviant. She'd helped Callie's father and his sorcerers but had turned against them to favor the elves in the end.

They stayed in the hall and couldn't keep from chatting until Rick walked by and told them to get to bed.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

After breakfast the next morning, Tarak went with every sorcerer in the castle to the council chambers in the keep. Caarda and Basael had been off looking for akorell metal this whole time. They showed up for this meeting, though. Grayhart came as well.

The intensity of the council chambers was emphasized by its overwhelming mahogany color surrounding Tarak as soon as he entered. The walls, the chairs, the tables, and the ceiling all were of the same honey-colored wood. It was like he'd stepped inside of a tree. At least there was one tall window along one side wall, but of course the curtains were of the same color.

The king took his place on the throne with the queen on one side and Lord Langston on the other. Leon sat beside Lord Langston, while Zarin sat beside the queen.

Basael proudly stood at one end of the center table, looking as if he was about to argue why he should be the one sitting on the throne.

“Please have a seat,” the king told him.

Caarda tried to help him into an empty chair nearby, but Basael began speaking without sitting.

“Caarda and I are leaving to witness what is happening in elven territory. We will see it with our own eyes.”

“We were going to get to that,” Nykal said. “But we may address it now. Caarda, would you like to stand and elaborate?”

Caarda stood up beside Basael. “We need to find out what the elves are doing. They have changed mana. We cannot confirm yet if it was done by Eslenda, but we can feel that it has been done. Depending on how strong the sorcerer is, it will probably take decades to reach everyone here. If we wait that long, it may be nearly impossible to stop her. She is weak right now.”

“Are you planning to fight?”

“Possibly,” Caarda answered.

“We shall destroy her!” Basael said, which made Tarak’s heart drop.

He shared a look with Callie beside him. “Do I sound that stupid?”

“No, it’s cute when you do it,” she whispered back.

But Tarak was never trying to be cute.

“Someone will go with you,” the king told Caarda. “Let me decide who.”

“We are faster on our own,” Caarda said.

Nykal shook his head. “I would like at least one of my sorcerers on this trip. Tarak.”

He lost his breath as the king looked at him.

“Tarak, you will go with them,” Nykal demanded.

He only wishes to rid himself of me, and he has the power to do so. This is why you do not piss off your lady’s father when he is king.

“You will stop in Rohaer and speak with Barrett,” Nykal said. “I have been looking for an opportunity for you to discuss your abilities with him, and this is it. Because of the unique nature of them, and his ability to understand not only mana but optics and physics, he must oversee your training for at least a few lessons. It will make a world of difference, Tarak.”

He glanced at Callie. She would give him some sort of clue as to how sincere her father was, but she only had a worried look in response that he couldn’t decipher.

“Is not Charlie the best person for that task?” Tarak tried.

“Barrett is better.”

“He is,” Charlie agreed. “I’ve learned a lot from him.”

Tarak did not want to go to Rohaer, and especially not all the way to Evesfer, and *especially* not with his grandfather so

they could fight some elf Tarak had never met!

“I see you have concerns,” Nykal told Tarak. “We will discuss your trip when we are done here. There are other matters we must address. Grayhart has told me that there is a second part to her training. Would you care to explain it to my advisors and sorcerers?”

She stood up. “Another reason Reela chose me to train all of you is not just because of my psychic ability. We heard that Xiffrik can disable mana.”

Caarda answered, “He can, yes.”

“I can do that as well.”

Caarda said, “But you are not an Ancient.”

“That’s right.”

“Are there others who can disable mana?” Caarda asked.

“I have yet to meet any.”

Murmur spread across the room.

Grayhart continued, “Your king wants me to test all of you with this ability. He wants to see if any of you can eventually learn to cast through it.”

Caarda stated, “It did not feel possible to cast anything when Xiffrik did it.”

“It is possible, but difficult.”

Basael tossed up his arms. “Wait! Someone changes mana as we speak!”

He lowered his head and reached out for Caarda. His son took his hand and mimicked his pose.

“It is true!” Caarda lifted his head and let go of Basael. “They change mana southeast from here, far. They might be in the analyte territory.”

“Zarin.” Nykal stood up and faced him. “Is there anyone you can think of who may be responsible?”

“Our most powerful sorcerer is a friend to our family. It may be her as a response to the elves changing mana.”

“Which would mean your mother was responsible for this decision.”

“That may be possible. I have not been there in a long time, but we know one thing, sire. There is a portal location within the castle because of their experimentation with akorell. They could be worried that a rift could destroy the castle like what happened to the elves.”

Basael stated, “A portal location is not a danger.”

The king replied, “They might not know that.”

“Or Xiffrik could be right in his prediction,” Tarak announced. “And it is Monrra.”

“What are you talking about?” Lord Langston asked.

Tarak glared at his father. “You and Basael were supposed to tell Nykal and his advisors *everything* that had happened in Kyrro.”

“We decided not to worry them with Xiffrik’s prediction,” Caarda replied.

“Father!” Tarak admonished. “That was not for you to decide.”

“What did Xiffrik say about Monrra?” Nykal asked, his voice rising.

The shouting of men from outside the room drew everyone’s gaze to the door. It sounded as if they were being attacked. Rick was closest to the door. He drew his sword as he stepped out, but he fell to his knees and dropped his weapon from what looked to be psyche.

Xiffrik flew in on top of a board of sartious energy. “I come in peace!” he yelled. “I just want to talk!”

Every sorcerer was on their feet by then, but Basael was the only one charging Xiffrik with some line about destroying him that Tarak didn’t quite catch over Xiffrik’s announcement.

“Stop, Basael!” Nykal demanded, but Basael was in the midst of forming a fireball and hurling it at Xiffrik. The Ancient absorbed it with a barrier of sartious energy. He

showed a face of bewilderment as he let the sartious energy turn to dust.

“You’ll burn this place down, you idiot!”

“Basael, stop!” Nykal yelled.

Basael had another fireball ready, but he held it in front of him. It hovered above his hands. A sweat broke out across his forehead.

“Let the fire dissipate!” Nykal told him as if scolding a bad pet. “Now, Basael!”

“But he—”

“Now!”

Basael grunted and parted his hands. The fire dissolved to ash and fell to the floor. A retinue of guards flooded into the room and surrounded Xiffrik with their weapons pointed.

He put his hands up and looked at the king.

“Draw back,” Nykal said. A few put away their swords, but others seemed reluctant.

Rick was slow to get up and take his weapon, but he repeated the king’s order. “Draw back!”

Xiffrik was finally given space. He lowered his arms and approached the center. He took his place behind the long table. It faced the dais where the king and his advisers were still standing.

“I’m glad to see you’re not dead, Leon,” Xiffrik said. “But I hope it hurt like hell getting that sword out of your nuggins.”

“Get on with it, you shit!”

“Touchy.” Xiffrik had a breath and took on a serious look. “Bad news. Really bad. I just came from Korrithin. Monrra entered the castle with some type of army of followers from Aathon and killed everyone. She’s taken over the castle and changed mana to her will.”

“No! That cannot be true!” Zarin shouted.

“Oh!” Xiffrik appeared shocked as he pointed at Zarin. “I didn’t notice an analyte here.”

“Tell me you lie! Grayhart, can you confirm his words?”

“I can,” she said. “He is exaggerating something.”

“Well I can’t say with certainty she killed *everyone*,” Xiffrik replied. “But I imagine she had to kill a lot of people in order to take over the castle. The queen might be dead.”

“No,” Zarin muttered and fell into his chair. He murmured something in his language as he covered his face.

The queen put her hand on his back. “She may still be alive.”

“I’m sorry,” Xiffrik told him.

“Explain exactly what you have witnessed,” the king said.

“I teleported into the analyte castle just recently. I saw a lot of bodies and clear evidence of monsters from the dark realm, and then I felt mana change from right nearby. There’s only one explanation, and it’s Monrra. Allow me to elaborate. You see, I spoke to the analyte queen a while ago. I tried to have her accept me as their Ancient. I warned her about Monrra and others who would come to change mana. I was refused. What must’ve happened after is that Monrra threatened the analytes in the same way she threatened all of you. Accept her or prepare to fight her. Unfortunately for the analytes, they have a portal location in their castle. That’s not easy to defend.”

Grayhart asked, “Monrra can create portals?”

“She makes rifts that act as portals. She brings her followers into the dark realm from Aathon, and then she makes a rift from the dark realm into the analyte castle. She must also have a way to remove the esitry sickness, as I have for...” He found Eden. “That one.”

“Thank you for that,” Eden said.

“Eden,” Aliana chided.

“What? He saved my life.”

“You’re welcome, but I must apologize to everyone here,” Xiffrik said. “This is all unfolding differently than I had anticipated, and *so much* worse. Let me explain. You see, I warned the elves about the rift underneath their castle. I told them it would eventually destroy not just the castle but many lives as well. I asked them to see reason and accept me as their curator of mana, but they did not. I knew what would happen then. It would destroy their castle and kill many of them, and then they would choose one of their own to curate mana out of fear that it could happen again. Elves are like this. They’re very protective of their culture and their people when it comes to foreigners. That happened yesterday, and I predicted right. An elf named Eslenda has changed mana.”

Nykal nodded and gestured for Xiffrik to continue.

“With the elves changing mana, the analytes would be next. They are much closer to the elves than you are here. They are most threatened by any change of mana and cannot let the elves gain all the power. Here’s where I messed up. I figured they would choose Monrra because she is an analyte, like them. That would’ve forced you to choose me in order to combat the elven and analyte Ancients’ change of mana. Finally, we could work together, and you could see that I am on your side, as I have been trying to convince all of you this whole time. We would defeat Monrra and Eslenda, and we could force them to ally with us if they wanted any input on how mana was to be changed. It would bring all of Dorrinthal together.”

“With you in control of everything,” Grayhart muttered.

“Yes, but I would be weak, you see? You all could easily drive me away. I would need your trust, and you would need mine. It would be the beginning of a beautiful relationship, or you could drive me away as soon as I helped you and deal with me being pissed off and seeking vengeance.” He gestured at Leon. “You see what happens in that case.”

“But you are wrong about the analytes because you’re an idiot,” Leon said.

“I do admit they surprised me. They must’ve refused to side with Monrra today even after the elves changed mana—even after Monrra most certainly threatened to attack them. They have a lot of honor and bravery by refusing Monrra, but now they’re in trouble, and so is Dorrinthal. The elves are a lost cause. Their stubbornness will be their undoing. They have changed sorcery to focus on the elements and healing while reducing the chance of anything else being cast. Is this the sorcery you want for all of Dorrinthal? Or do you want Monrra’s? She’s probably reinforcing her army in the castle right now. You already know her chosen form of mana, artistry and esitry, and nothing else. It should be obvious that there is eventually going to be a clash between the different types of mana. They cannot coexist. There has to be battle. Mana creates storms and kills all life where it comes into conflict. Dorrinthal will be ripped apart. You’re not going to let Monrra do this, right?”

“We must help them,” Zarin urged as he faced Nykal.

“We will. They are our allies, but we need time to prepare. Xiffrik, what has her change of mana done to the area?”

“It will do very little for anyone but her for at least a few weeks. She has become accustomed to a certain system of mana she’s responsible for in Aathon. Changing mana to the same system will allow her better control of her spells, but she’s given up a lot of her strength at the same time. She’s weaker now, physically, and strained mentally. Think of her like a version of her normal self but fatigued. Her links of artistry are going to be much weaker, but she’ll still be able to make rifts without trouble so long as they aren’t enormous.”

“So she’s sacrificed strength,” Leon realized. “And the rest of us will be unaffected?”

“You probably will feel something. It will be a little bit harder to cast certain spells, but once you have cast them, maintaining them should be just as easy as before. However, casting will only become more difficult as time goes on. You felt it in my kingdom, didn’t you?”

“Yes, you bastard. Don’t forget that you are just as much of an enemy as Monrra; you just happen to have something we want.”

“Oh *am* I?” Xiffrik replied in anger. “Really? I am just as much of an enemy after I saved the life of one of your sorcerers, spared the life of Basael, and came to you with this information? I’m as much of an enemy as Monrra, who killed hundreds of people and is planning to dominate mana through fear? Are you sure you don’t want to take back those words?”

“All right, all right! You’re not as much of an enemy as Monrra, which is why you’re still standing,” Leon acknowledged. “But don’t think we’re allies.”

“Why not?” Xiffrik asked with a shrug. “You want Monrra dead. I want her dead. We can work together on this.”

“Let me question him,” Grayhart said.

“By all means.” The king gestured at the other side of the table from where Xiffrik stood. Grayhart took her spot.

“Hold on.” Xiffrik pointed at Leon, who looked to be leaning toward the king to whisper something. “I’m feeling murderous thoughts from you, Leon. Are you suggesting to the king right now that he give the order to kill me? Because I could leave, and you all can face *me* in addition to Monrra and Eslenda. Is that what you wish?”

Leon stood up. “You are not so strong. A few good sorcerers and a concentrated effort, and that would be it for you. I don’t see why we have to deal with you at all. Yes, I was about to tell Nykal to give the order.”

“Let me question him, Leon,” Grayhart seethed. “There are things Kyrro wants to know, and I am the best person to ask them.”

Xiffrik put on a mulish expression. “I’m not staying here another moment if anyone else agrees with Leon.”

“I don’t know what to think yet,” the king stated. “But I do know we are not going to attack you during any peaceful negotiations, and Leon should know better than to even think of it.”

He glared at Leon, who muttered something and sat back with his arms folded.

“What does Kyrro want to know?” Xiffrik asked.

“What would it take for you to give up your control of mana?”

“I could change it to something else if I knew all of you could be trusted. It’s the same here. I wouldn’t put myself in such a weakened state if I didn’t have trust in the leaders.”

She squinted her eyes as she walked over to him. “Sit.” She practically pushed him into the nearest empty seat a step back from the table. He did not appear amused as she leaned over him.

“And what happens if Nykal tells you that he will not accept you changing mana?”

“I would try to convince him to see reason.”

“And if that fails? If you realize there is no convincing him?”

“I would wait until he passes and try the next leader. Someone eventually is either going to agree with me or need me. I would think all of you need me now.” Xiffrik gazed across the room. “Perhaps none of you realize how powerful Monrra is with an army and a castle at her disposal. You’re going to lose many people trying to reach her, and eventually you’ll have to give up and choose me to change mana, but you will have lost valuable sorcerers. Years will go by as we accumulate armies for war. There will be battle and carnage like nothing any of you have seen before. The deaths will be in the thousands. Dorrinthal might never be the same.”

“Caarda?” Nykal questioned. “Basael?”

“We have seen it, yes,” Caarda said. “But it is not a certainty.”

“Seen it?” Xiffrik asked. “You can look into the future?”

“That is right,” Basael boasted. “Your form of mana is simple and lacking. Your people deserve better than you as their curator.”

“Basael,” Nykal warned. “Now is not the time. We have decisions to make.”

“Look at me,” Grayhart told Xiffrik.

His gaze shifted to her.

“What would you do if Kyrro banished you?”

He turned over his hands and showed a look as if the answer was obvious. “I would go to Greenedge or Dorrinthal, or any number of other places.”

“And what if you were banished from every place? What if you were attacked on sight everywhere? If every leader across the world gave orders to kill you unless you gave up your control of mana in Ovira and Greenedge, what would you do?”

“Is that really possible?” he asked with a roll of his eyes.

“Answer the question.”

“I suppose I would have to give up my control of mana. I don’t want to be *everyone’s* enemy, but it is an absurd idea. I am not a bad person.” He chuckled as he spoke.

“You are too powerful and becoming more powerful,” Grayhart explained. “Kyrro does not want you to keep our mana altered. We will attack you if you do not leave and let it revert back.”

“Back up.” He pushed her away as he stood up. “And what is Kyrro to do if I do leave but I don’t let mana revert back?”

“Is that possible?”

“It is, because Greenedge is close and Sumar is even closer.”

“You’re lying about something.”

“You’re good!”

“Don’t flatter me. What are you lying about?”

“Sumar is complicated. That’s all I’m going to say right now about that, but leaving Kyrro would not change mana

back to its original form. Why would you even want that? You've heard of the terrible destruction that rifts can cause. It would happen in Kyrro, too, a lot at once. When mana reverts, rifts form and explode quickly as if to make up for lost time. At least let me change mana to something your people want, and we can all be happy and safe."

"You would really do that even though it would severely weaken you?"

"For a while I would be weaker, but eventually my strength would be what it is now, and I will have learned more about mana in the process. That's the whole point of this journey for me. I want to learn and feel mana in every way possible. I want to push mana to its limits and see what it can do. Mana connects worlds. It connects people. It grants immortality. It has the power to heal, to become anything. I feel that we might one day be able to transcend into something greater than our current existence, and then we could change our world in ways we never imagined before."

"I've heard enough," Grayhart said.

"You are a bitter person."

"Yes, which makes me more realistic. You are overly optimistic and arrogant, which makes you act like you are a good person when you don't seem to even realize all the problems you're creating."

"And what of the problem I have fixed? The lack of exploding rifts in your land?"

"Fixing one problem by creating another is not a fix."

"I have also heard enough," Nykal said. "You may leave now, Xiffrik. Callie will contact you through the plane of mana when we have come to our decision."

"Callie is...?" He looked around.

She stood up. "Be ready to receive a message."

"I will."

He pushed himself up from his chair and stepped up as a sartious platform appeared beneath him. He climbed onto it

and set it off toward the door. He circled around to face them all, an irritated look on his face.

“The psychic from Kyrro should warn you that I’m starting to become angry. You all really should see reason when it is plain in front of you. Many lives are at stake, including the lives of the people throughout Dorrinthal. Think of them, and don’t be stupid.”

He flew out.

The guardsmen followed him. Rick went after them, closing the door behind him as he left.

Nykal told Grayhart, “I do want my sorcerers capable of casting during a spell of Manabreak. In case we need to fight Xiffrik.”

“I agree. I should’ve forced the sorcerers of Ovira and Greenedge to do the same.”

Hadley raised her hand. Nykal pointed at her.

“Is it the same as the Manabreak curse?”

“Curse?” Grayhart asked.

“They don’t seem to exist anymore,” Hadley explained. “Maybe Basael knows more about it. He was the one who created dteria.”

Basael had been surprisingly well-behaved during most of this, after his initial attack. He stood up and seemed unusually melancholy. “I made no specific spells of dteria except to allow its possibility to exist. Rather than limiting mana in my creation, I gave mana extra freedoms. Many spells found a new home in dteria but required specific ingredients for mana to have direction from the caster. It was this way because one spell of dteria could perform many different things, like how ordia requires direction as well, and sometimes ingredients. So yes, the two spells should be about the same, and curses do exist but in another form.” He continued on with hardly a pause. “This is another benefit to allowing me to change mana. I could limit accessibility to specific spells like Manabreak, if they are a concern.”

“No one’s changing mana,” Nykal said. “Manabreak is a concern but may also be useful. I believe the same could be said about every other spell, so long as we are prepared. Zarin, I know you are more eager than anyone for us to invade Korrithin Castle and attack Monrra, but I will not let us fail by attacking before we are prepared. We have to be ready for anything. If Xiffrik can slay everyone by disabling mana, it is worth taking time to see how we can combat it. We may even have a chance to kill him and Monrra, if that is what we decide. We need the use of portals. I need my old advisor, Barrett, here. He knows about the science of mana.”

Tarak raised his hand.

“Yes?” Nykal asked.

“Is my trip canceled?”

“Yes. Caarda and Basael are to remain here, and you as well.”

Good.

The king said, “Basael, please tell me you have found at least a clue about where we can quickly obtain akorell?”

“No, not even a clue.”

This did not seem to surprise Nykal. “Then Grayhart, we need some from Kyrro for Basael to use. Your queen was going to return the ones she took once we had Kyrro’s trust. Do we have your trust now that you see what needs to be done?”

Grayhart nodded. “You have more than my trust. You have my support. Callie, contact Desil. I’m getting you more than just akorell. Tell Desil to come here with Basen. Cleve, too. It’s time to prepare to kill these Ancients.”

Tarak stood up. Fuck raising his hand. It was time to act. “We need a sartious mage!” He waited for everyone’s attention. “We need a strong one to undo Xiffrik’s spells of sartious energy.”

Grayhart said, “I know someone in Greenedge, Jek Trayden. There’s no one better than him. I don’t think we

could get to him in time, though. We have to begin training now, and fetching him could take weeks.”

“What about Desil’s mother?” Tarak asked.

“Effie? She hasn’t done any fighting in decades that I’m aware of.”

“There has to be someone,” Nykal demanded. “If not her, then you must bring someone skilled enough to keep Xiffrik from casting with sartious energy.”

“There are not a lot of people who can do that, but Effie is one of them.” Grayhart seemed to be talking mostly to herself. She looked down as if in thought. She gave a nod and told Callie, “Tell Desil to tell Basen that we need Effie, too, and we also want Neeko.”

“Who is Neeko?” Callie asked.

“He’s a mage with clear energy like Jon, only different. King, does this mean you’re certain you won’t fight alongside Xiffrik but *against* him?” Grayhart asked.

“That still needs to be decided, but we are not going to let him change mana.”

“Even now that you are certainly fighting others and could use his help?” Grayhart asked.

“Yes. Even now,” Nykal replied.

“Once he confirms that with psyche, he may decide to attack you.”

“That is why we must be prepared.”

“I see you think ahead. I’m glad.”

Callie interrupted by announcing, “I just spoke with Desil.”

That was fast! Tarak had barely noticed her closing her eyes.

“He says they will need a few hours and to have horses ready for them in the forest in case there are too many people for fliers to take all.”

Nykal asked, “Does he have an idea of how many from Grayhart’s list will come?”

“He doesn’t even know if his own mother is going to come,” Callie answered.

“That is fine. We will have horses ready. Tell him if you can.”

She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

Nykal went on to announce, “Reaching the elves would be difficult from here, but it may not be necessary. If we can slay Monrra and demonstrate our alliance with the analytes, this should scare the elves into giving up their change of mana because they’d want to avoid a battle that they would surely lose against us and the analytes.”

Callie held up her hand. “I told Desil. He says at least he will be there with akorell, but he cannot promise how many more he can bring on Grayhart’s list.”

Grayhart marched over toward Callie. “Tell him to send everyone I mentioned or I will personally make all of their lives hell! They know I have the capability.”

Callie looked a little scared. “I’ll tell him.”

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

Jon traveled with Grayhart out of the castle. He rode his horse, while she rode another and controlled four others with psyche. For a moment, he had the fear that she may lose control of the animals during the short journey out of the city, but then he remembered her paining all the king's sorcerers at once and realized it was foolish to worry.

The people of Newhaven who watched them ride past, however, looked terrified to see so many horses without riders. Jon wondered how much the average person knew of Ancients and the troubles they were causing.

Memories of the last war were still fresh in Jon's mind. Every man, woman, and even most children had known what was happening with dteria. Now, however, there were probably more people who still thought Basael to be a god than those who knew the truth about Ancients.

"That's Jon Oklar!" called a boy, pointing him out to his father.

"That's right!"

"And those horses don't have any riders!" said the child.

"That's right," repeated the father with concern, and led him away.

A similar occurrence happened once more but with two young women calling out to Jon with a wave.

"Need healing?" Jon called to them, knowing he could catch up to Grayhart if needed.

"For a broken heart!" one replied while pointing at the other, and they both giggled.

He smiled wanly and rode past. Grayhart seemed too busy ahead with the horses to notice.

It was common for Jon to be flagged down by people of all ages who did need healing when he made his way around the cities or towns, but it was just as common for others who wanted nothing more than his attention.

It had grown to be an annoyance, but he wouldn't let it stop him from offering help. Some people really needed it, and that seemed like it would never change.

It was nice to ride a horse again. It had been a long time. He had begun to feel a little like a horse himself with all the people he had taken on his back. It was also nice to know what to do about Xiffrik, finally. They had allies they could count on in Kyrro. And in Korrithin, so long as they were still alive.

Basen had confirmed that the only portal location around Newhaven was the one a short distance away, in Curdith Forest. It had to be shifted after the rift exploded, but it was still in an ideal place.

Monrra and Xiffrik could use it to transport here, but that was a risk worth the benefit.

At least that's what Jon kept telling himself. It was he who'd convinced Basen to come here and establish a system of portals. He wasn't sure what he would've done if he'd known that Tarak's family had seen visions of battles and death at a scale never witnessed before. That pesky thought sometimes kept Jon up at night.

Grayhart seemed to know where she was going, which confused Jon because she had only taken one portal here. She even stopped at the exact place of the portal, corralling the horses and tying them to a couple of nearby trees.

Jon asked, "Do you have a good sense of direction or is there something more to you finding this location?"

"I have a good sense of direction, and I can feel portal locations, like Basen."

He didn't know why he was surprised. "Can you make them?"

"Not reliably, but I can make portals into the spirit realm."

"What?" Jon had to make sure he'd heard correctly. "The spirit realm, like where the dead live?"

Grayhart shook her head. “It is not as good as it sounds. It’s because of that ability I made many mistakes in the past and even destroyed some lives.”

Jon didn’t pry. He’d rather not speak much as they waited for Basen to make a portal. He would rather train.

The last few weeks had finally afforded him some time to work on a new spell. It had also put him and Hadley in a confusing situation where they spent some nights together, but he didn’t want to rekindle their relationship, and she didn’t, either. He tried not to let it distract him as he worked on a spell that Charlie had told him about when Jon had returned.

Since learning the spell, Jon had become decent at casting it on himself, but it was when casting at farther range that the real difficulty started. He focused on a tree about ten yards away from both him and the horses.

The three notes Jon had to use were familiar to most other sorcerers, C, E, and G, all Middle notes. But Jon’s other spells had not used these notes in the past. Dvinia, or as Charlie had renamed it, Argil—though Jon still wasn’t used to that name—involved very high notes, uF, uG, uuC, uuD. Meanwhile, Jon’s healing spell was lF, F, and uF.

Needless to say, Jon was very familiar with every octave of F but not with Middle notes. E was the trickiest because it was close to F, which his mana was extremely used to casting. It had taken longer than he’d wanted to cast his new spell in the courtyard, where it did absolutely nothing the first few times. Jon had to travel into the forest before he could even confirm that he was doing it correctly.

Now he had become better by a fair amount. He cast at his target. Roots sprouted up around the wide trunk of the tree. He willed them to tie up and entangle the tree, and they obeyed. He was used to controlling mana once the spell was already cast. That skill seemed to translate between spells. It was splitting his mana into the right notes that still gave him pause.

Root was what Charlie called this spell. After becoming more familiar with it, Jon had tried it outside of the forest, in

the courtyard where no roots were nearby. He was surprised when roots still came up out of the dirt, but Charlie was not. He had predicted this.

“Your mana is turning into the roots,” he’d told Jon. “That is why you can use it anywhere the roots are strong enough to come through.”

Jon had tested it on many surfaces, and Charlie had been right. He couldn’t make roots grow out of rock, trees, or anything hard, though the roots would still show up and entangle a target, if Jon wanted. There was no point behind it, however, because they were not grounded into anything to hold the target in place.

Grayhart seemed surprised by the conjuration as she stared at Jon’s roots. Then she glanced over at him.

“You’re doing that?”

“Yes, I’m practicing. It’s a new spell.”

“What in god’s world?” She went over to the tree and crouched to touch some of the roots. “They feel like real roots.”

“Mana can turn into almost anything, as Xiffrik mentioned.”

“There is a lot more I want to understand about mana.”

“We have some books on it.”

“When there’s time,” she added.

“I’d like to also hear more about this spirit realm. When there’s time,” Jon tacked on. “For now, I’m going to practice.”

Seeing as how they were probably needing to enter Korrithin Castle where roots would be useless, Jon figured he should work on another version of the spell. It had taken a lot of experimentation, and a difficult amount of painful errant spellcasting, before Charlie and Leon had helped Jon come up with the right method of casting the new spell called Thorns. Jon might’ve never known about it if it wasn’t for someone named Wolf, who apparently had tried to kill Aliana so Monrra could enter the kingdom and change mana without

being tracked down. Wolf could fly like Jon and had cast these spells of nature, making Charlie believe they were in Jon's tree of conjuration.

As in most cases, Charlie was right. Jon felt a little bad that he wasn't here during all of that, but he'd returned as soon as he'd convinced Basen to go with him. He had been shocked to hear how close to death many of the sorcerers had come, and even more surprised to find out that Tarak had saved the life of more than one of them.

Jon had grown to like Tarak, even if he was sometimes difficult to be around. Jon did fear what might become of Tarak once he became even more powerful, but Tarak seemed honest when he said he had no wish to be a leader of any kind.

Jon was the same way. After seeing all the hardship that had fallen upon Nykal, Jon wanted less responsibility, but he worried he was only going to accumulate more as time went on.

Jon cast the spell Thorns. It involved the same three notes as Root, but there was a rev—a revision—involved. He had to change the third note, G, to A right as the spell was forming. After so many hours of practice, he had confidence he could perform the spell every time he tried it now, but it still took him a few moments to prepare his mind. He was not ready to use it in battle, where a few moments of doing nothing usually meant terrible injury.

Thorns spread across his entire body. They had started out thin and brittle, but now each one was about the thickness of Jon's thumbs until they narrowed out to a sharp point. They wouldn't stop a weapon, but they would stop everyone but a fool from putting their hands on him.

All Jon felt when the spell was done was a heaviness to his mana, but not to his mind. That was the beauty of using a rev. The spell required no further concentration once set, just more when casting. Mana took care of everything, but it also made the spell more difficult to control.

Grayhart gaped at him, but then just chuckled and shook her head.

His thorns turned to a fine dust and scattered as his spell came to an end.

Jon had a realization. Shouldn't he be able to use a rev to root a target?

"Of course," he muttered to himself.

A rev gave mana the order to act on its own. Depending on what note was changed, the mana would behave differently. Changing the first note would often result in an errant spell that hurt the caster because it was the first note that told the mana what type of spell to cast. The second note usually defined the spell further, and it was the third and fourth notes that dictated the shape or form of the spell. That was why the third or fourth note was usually the one changed, and it was also why the third or fourth note told the most about the spell to anyone reading the spell language without seeing the spell in action.

In this case, the third note was G, which was used to make mana grab targets. By using G and changing it to another note, the mana would act on its own, in this case grabbing something. Turning it to A changed the spell from roots to thorns and told it to encompass the caster. But what would happen if Jon changed it to D?

D was used to make spells denser, usually, but it could also direct mana to cast a more specific version of a similar spell.

Written out, the spell would look like C, E, G—3D. He had progressed to the point where he could picture his mana as the letters representing the frequency of the note. He focused on the tree as his target again and cast Root with a rev.

Roots came up around the tree. Tendrils intertwined and pulled at each other faster than Jon could move them with his mind.

He clicked his tongue and threw out his hand in annoyance.

"What?" Grayhart asked.

“All this time I’ve been casting the spell wrong. I could’ve spent those hours practicing something else.”

“How are you doing it now?”

“With a new note and a revision during casting called a rev. It’s a little hard to explain.”

“Try me.”

Jon would’ve rather spent the time trying to figure out how Basael had apparently used Jon’s specialization of conjuration to give temporary life to a dead body. It had frightened Aliana and the princess in the armory of the castle, presenting a message on Basael’s behalf. It had also confounded Charlie, who had been bothering Basael about it until he’d learned enough to conclude the spell was probably in Jon’s conjuration tree.

Charlie had wanted Jon to continue experimenting until they had figured out every possible spell, but Jon didn’t have months to waste, which was how long it would take him to try all variations of the notes possible to stumble across this spell. After Jon admitted this, it hurt a little when Charlie told him something about Tarak.

“He’s faster than you at learning new notes and therefore new spells.”

No one had been faster than Jon when he’d first come here with the other sorcerers. Tarak had an unfair advantage. He was born from Caarda, but Jon supposed that also caused a lot of problems in Tarak’s life. There was really no reason to be jealous. They were on the same side, even if Charlie sometimes made Jon feel like nothing more than a disappointment. He probably did the same to Tarak.

The metal mage meant well. He was mostly just an ass when he wanted something from someone.

Jon also wanted to work on reaching the supposed “mastery” spell Charlie wouldn’t stop talking about. Charlie claimed every specialization had a mastery spell using the same notes, lC, C, and uC. Jon had spent long hours learning to cast with the three octaves of C, and he had even felt the

familiar sensation of a satisfying click, like a key opening a lock, when he knew the spell had worked, but he couldn't figure out what the spell did. He'd seen and felt nothing.

He had spent even more precious hours experimenting in various ways and trying to speak with his mana to see why this spell seemed to do nothing. It had been an extraordinary waste of time. There were even other spells related to dvinia, or Argil, that Jon could be teaching himself, but he didn't have the time now.

Jon really wished there was another healer to soak up some of his hours. Leon was old. He should've expanded his range of mana to encompass lF to uF. Maybe he had and he'd been lying about it to keep from being so needed—*no, not with that sword up through his jewels*. Leon would've healed himself for sure. His range was vast, like Jon's, but it started at C and went up to uuC. He needed to reach a lot lower to have access to Lower F. It probably was never going to happen.

Grayhart was not only their trainer but an ally who would fight beside them, and she was requesting information about spellcasting. Jon owed it to her to at least provide a basic explanation of notes and chords—the formation of spells.

He explained what he could and was not surprised to find her catching on quickly. Unfortunately, she soon had questions he couldn't answer, specifically about bastial energy.

“You talk about mana as something connected to you, but we use bastial energy not just from ourselves but from the environment. How can you explain that?”

“Desil presented the same problem to Leon, and they argued. I'm going to leave that to the people who know more about mana, like Barrett.”

“What kind of sorcerer is he?”

“Well.” Jon had trouble answering. “He uses something called ordia, which is a complicated spell on its own because it can be used for many different things. I'm not sure how much has changed about it since the reversion of mana, but he used

to be called a harbinger who could create magical contracts that bind someone to a task they had agreed upon.”

“Magical contracts?”

“That was the name for them. I’m not sure if they still exist in the same form. I signed one to protect the king soon after I was recruited, but I only felt it in effect a couple times when Nykal was in danger. I don’t think it made much of a difference because I always wanted to save his life, as did the other sorcerers.”

“A binding contract. I bet Fatholl wanted to know more about those.”

“I wasn’t part of those conversations.”

There was a clap of air nearby that startled the horses until Grayhart calmed them with psyche. A hole erupted out of nothing, swelling up to a sphere greater than Jon standing tall with his arms extended. Streaks of light shot across what was otherwise a calm scene of a grass field within the portal. Wind whipped at Jon’s hair as he went to stand closer.

Time to see how many we’re getting from Kyrro.

Jon had heard of all the people Grayhart had listed off in the council chambers. Even if he had only met a few of them, the others were legendary not only for their feats but also because of their impressive talents with sorcery. More importantly, they had different skillsets than the sorcerers here. They could all be extremely useful in different ways, which would probably make them crucial depending on what Monrra had in store at the castle.

Cleve Polken was the first one through. He was a huge man, as tall as Tarak but with bulky muscle that should’ve slowed him to a crawl. Instead, he was incredibly fast. They’d only had to duel once for Jon to realize he was outmatched. It was not a sensation he was used to.

Cleve fell to his knees out of the portal. Jon helped him up and moved him over.

Cleve wore leather armor that looked as if it might be of the highest quality in the entire world. It was black and form-

fitting to Cleve's muscular body but bursting with extravagant design. Ridges along the shoulders and arms gave it a somewhat beastly shape, making Cleve look akin to the scaly kreppen lizard-men.

Jon recognized the handle of Cleve's bastial steel sword sticking out from his holster. It was a rare and extremely expensive material, stronger and lighter than regular steel. The appearance of the blade had been a sight to behold when Jon first met Cleve long ago. Hardened bastial energy swirled together, looking akin to marble only bright red and orange.

Desil Fogg hurtled through the portal next. He fell to his hands and knees. Cleve went to help him up, but Desil got himself up before Cleve could reach down for him. He had on the same armor as Cleve, with the same spiky design, but there was probably about half the material needed to surround his smaller yet still muscular body.

Jon hadn't met the woman who followed Desil. She was short and thin with black hair tied back. She did not have the same armor. In fact, she wore no armor at all but a plain tunic. Jon had to assume this was Desil's mother, Effie, the mage who excelled with sartious energy. She waited for Desil's assistance before she tried to stand.

Basen came through last with the portal shrinking to nothing. Wearing the same black armor of leather, he landed on his feet and seemed completely unaffected by the trip as he glanced around to find Grayhart first, then Jon. He put on a charming smile.

"Where's my armor?" Grayhart asked.

Basen's smile faded. "You must be joking? These were custom jobs, and you've been away."

"I am joking, can't you tell?"

"No, and I still cannot! Are you serious about making a joke? In all of our time together—"

"Never mind. Where's Neeko?" Grayhart asked.

"He can't come," Basen answered. "He's busy in Sumar dealing with something."

“With what exactly?”

“We’re still trying to determine that, but he thinks there might be another Ancient at work, or a less powerful one.”

Jon added to the conversation, “A Deviant, maybe. It’s the term we’ve used for the offspring of Ancients.”

“I hope it’s not that,” Basen commented. “Jon, do you know everyone?”

“Not me,” Effie said as she extended her hand. “Effie, Desil’s mother.”

Jon shook as Grayhart spoke. “Effie, are you sure you can fight alongside me? It’s been a long time.”

“I can. I hear you continue to make up for your crime, so yes. I can work with you if it’s for the greater good.”

Jon thought he deserved to know, “What crime?”

“Murder, and it was a long time ago,” Grayhart answered with what looked to be real shame in her eyes. “But I still think about it all the time.”

“Tell us what’s happening, Grayhart,” Basen said. “Before we stray too far from our portal.”

“Grayhart?” Effie asked.

“I prefer my surname now,” she said. “Basen, didn’t Desil tell you?”

“Callie’s message wasn’t very clear,” Desil said. “But she told me that you were the one who requested all of us to come. That’s what I told the others.”

“That’s right,” Basen said. “Considering how little you wanted to come here and train Nykal’s sorcerers, we figured this was serious.”

“It is. I met Xiffrik. I questioned him. He did try to lie once, and I caught him. I’m certain everything else he said was true. We have two Ancients on this continent who have already changed mana. The elves changed mana first, far from here. Then the Ancient from Aathon named Monrra teleported

into the analyte castle, killed a bunch of people, and took over.”

“And Nykal is allied with the analytes,” Basen remembered.

Grayhart continued, “It’s more than that. The analytes stood up against Monrra, so she killed them. It’s up to all of us now to show her and any other Ancient what happens when they start killing people.”

“I agree,” Basen said. “But what does Xiffrik want?”

“He wants to rule all of mana, but he wants to be trusted and even liked. It’s important to him. He expected the analytes to allow Monrra to change mana, and then Nykal would have no choice but to accept him as their Ancient and go to war. The analytes standing against Monrra came as a surprise, but Xiffrik still wants battle. He wants her dead, same with the Ancient in the elven territory. I’m certain it’s so he has less competition. Nykal wants nothing to do with him, and I agree. We should do this on our own. But Xiffrik is strong with psyche. I can almost feel him ready to attack when he realizes we are all turning against him. He might turn against the people here, or he might turn against us. We will all soon be a threat to him because our intentions are becoming clear.”

Jon added, “Eslenda is the name of the elf. She and Monrra are at their weakest right now. There’s no better time to strike.”

Basen said, “If we kill Monrra and show the elves the alliance is strong between Lycast and Korrithin, they should give up before battle comes to them next.”

“Nykal had the same thought,” Grayhart said.

“Then he’s smart. Now where is Fatholl?”

“With the elves,” Jon answered.

“Damn. Then we’d better expect a surprise from them down the road. All right. So the plan sounds solid to me. I remember there being a portal into the analyte castle. Is that where Monrra is now?”

“Yes,” Jon said. “With an army from Aathon, most likely.”

“Nykal wants me to teleport us there, right?” Basen asked.

“That seems to be the best option.”

Effie asked Basen, “What is an analyte?”

“Violet hair, another language.” He shrugged. “I don’t know much about them.”

“You’ve never met any of them?” Effie asked.

“No.”

“Then how can you teleport into their castle?”

“I no longer have the requirement of needing to visit a place before I make a portal there. I can reach anywhere that is connected to the system of portals.”

“All right, forgive me if I’m ignorant here, but it sounds like there must be a death trap waiting for us if that is the obvious entrance.”

“Not exactly,” Basen said. “There’s a death trap for Jon, and the other sorcerers of Nykal. But what trap could possibly prevent our group from getting to anyplace we want? They know nothing about Desil.”

“I can’t get us anywhere we want,” Desil warned Basen.

“Sure you can!”

“What about through lava?”

“Well, I’m not expecting *lava* in the castle.”

“Fire,” Desil tried.

“Spikes,” Effie added.

“Monsters from another world,” Desil said.

“There are a lot of things that would stop my son,” Effie said. “I refuse to allow you to rely solely on him.”

Cleve spoke up for the first time. “There has to be a lot of sorcery we’ve never dealt with before, as well. You didn’t see

what it was like dueling these people, Basen. We learned a lot in a short time, but now we're dealing with sorcerers from a whole other continent. We might not have a short time to figure out how to beat whatever's in there."

Grayhart said, "The alternative is riding there from Rohaer. We'll certainly be seen by the entire army of Monrra's, and I have no idea how big it will be by the time we get there."

"We've dealt with entire armies before," Basen said.

Jon told them, "It's about a thousand miles to travel from Rohaer. We'll have to go on horseback if we aren't teleporting. It will take weeks, maybe even months. The analytes could be wiped out by then."

There was a long silence as everyone looked at Basen for a solution.

"The portal into the castle is the best option," he finally said. "We'll send in Desil first."

"No, no, no." Effie shook her head.

"He's the quickest thinker, besides me," Basen replied. "But I have to go last or not at all. Desil can assess what's happening and let us know to come in, or he can retreat."

"Desil is absolutely not going first," Effie stated.

Jon said, "You're all forgetting that there are more people than you who can enter first."

"Are any of you as capable as Desil?" Basen asked.

Effie spoke before Jon could. "Hold on. Desil told me Sanya has a daughter. Where is she in all of this?"

"Busy," Grayhart replied.

"Who's the father, by the way?" Effie asked.

"I'll introduce you after all of this. We can have dinner."

"Bastial hell, you really have changed."

"I was being sarcastic. It's none of your business."

“Are you *just learning* sarcasm?” Effie asked derisively. “Notice how my voice indicates sarcasm with a *change of inflection*?”

“Jon?” Basen asked him. “Is there anyone who might be better than one of us? We aren’t risking you, the only healer.”

“We have an Ancient who is not only looking to prove himself but who we would love to get rid of: Tarak’s grandfather. He was the one responsible for taking control of mana in Dorrinthal ages ago. He used to be worshipped like a god. He lost a fight against Xiffrik and still thinks himself to be one.”

Basen snapped his fingers and pointed at Jon. “Perfect.”

“Reela tells me the food in the castle here is some of the best she’s ever had.” Cleve gave an imploring look at Jon.

“You will be fed as discussions continue with King Nykal.”

“Then what are we waiting for?” Basen headed toward the group of horses.

“One thing, actually,” Jon said. “Basen, I need you to make a portal to Rohaer for me. I have to pick up Barrett. He’s our best mind when it comes to mana. I’ll fetch him as quickly as I can to keep you from using another akorell stone for a second portal.”

Basen picked up his bag and opened it. Light poured out. “I brought plenty of akorell. Don’t worry.”

“But do try to be quick, anyway,” Cleve said.

Jon could almost feel the big man’s hunger in his pointed gaze.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Tarak admired the armor of Kyrro's best as much as everyone else when they rode into the castle. "When can we have armor like that?" he asked Leon nearby.

"When we have nothing better to do than customize fancy armor on your disgustingly large body."

Tarak swiped his hand down and walked away from Leon, happy to greet Barrett again.

"Good evening!" Tarak said.

"Tarak, I have thought a lot about your ability to alter light. Have you practiced what I told you about bending it to see around corners?"

"I have been busy with an even better spell! Did Jon inform you that you will be instructing me?"

"Hold on, Tarak." Barrett seemed to notice the king approaching, but his head whipped back to Tarak. "Did you say I would be instructing you?"

"By the king's decree," Tarak informed him.

"You must have really discovered something great, and you say it doesn't have to do with your light spell?"

"It does not."

"I look forward to hearing more about it. Nykal." Barrett smiled as if seeing an old friend.

"Barrett," the king matched his smile. "Come into the dining hall, everyone," he announced. "You may want to remove your armor."

Cleve and Desil already had half of theirs off as Basen shook Nykal's hand and answered, "We figured, but it was easier to wear it and use our bags for our other belongings. Besides, first impressions matter."

"We are glad to have you. Your armor will be well taken care of. Come, there is much to speak about."

“There certainly is.”

Tarak went with Callie as she met Desil for the first time. They seemed to have introduced themselves before Tarak could. Callie was speaking to Desil.

“I feel like you look familiar, even though we’ve never seen each other,” she said.

“I have the same sensation.”

“Your voice as well! I hear that voice in the other plane.”

“It’s the mana filling in our senses. Eventually you’ll learn to feel people’s intentions when they’re nearby, and some even when they’re far away.”

“Are you a psychic?” Callie asked.

“No, but the other plane does provide a similar benefit after I trained myself to use it.”

“Psychics must really be able to use it to their advantage,” Callie replied.

“It’s what Fatholl did in order to use psyche on the other psychics he ruled over. It’s also why they exiled him.”

Tarak wanted to show Callie a warning. She really ought to be more careful with psyche. She might’ve sensed his emotion and looked over, nodding to agree.

Tarak gave Desil a hearty squeeze of his shoulder. “Good to see you again, my friend.”

“You as well.” Desil winced and rubbed his shoulder a bit.

It took a while before everyone was seated in the dining hall with food in front of them. Tables had been pushed together to create a square with benches wrapped around. There were many additional bowls passed around with various kinds of bread, cheese, and fancy baked items stuffed with all sorts of delicious surprises. If Tarak wasn’t already enjoying his cut of stag with pomegranate seeds and a side of spicy sauce, he would’ve partaken in more of the other options. But he did

welcome the second plate offered to him by the chef's crew, this with stuffed chicken.

The men and women from Kyrro sat as a group. Basen Hiller was next to Nykal Lennox, with Barrett on Nykal's other side, then the queen, then Zarin, then Lord Langston, then Leon. Basael and Caarda were next. The king's sorcerers were scattered across the rest of the table, with Tarak far down next to Callie. Tienna was on her other side. Michael sat beside Tarak, with Jon next to him.

Nykal seemed to be speaking with Basen as they ate, but there was too much noise for Tarak to make out what they were saying. So long as they appeared to be in agreement, as they did, he didn't need to hear anything.

After everyone seemed to be settling into their meals, Aliana suddenly called out, "Xiffrik is coming! I feel him about to enter."

Everyone went quiet and looked to the doorway. A few moments later, Xiffrik soared through on one of his sartious platforms. Tarak had really begun to feel annoyed with how easy and fun it looked to ride around on them compared to using his gravity spell.

Xiffrik had blood on his tunic and breathed quickly as if just fleeing from a losing fight. "I was off trying to save the lives of analytes and you are all here having a feast? Why was I not contacted?"

"Allow me," Basen Hiller announced and stood up. "This is in regard to your influence over mana here, in Kyrro, or anywhere else. Allow me to take a line from Leon I just learned." He cleared his throat, then made a shooing motion. "Off you fuck."

Xiffrik seemed to ignore this as he approached the table. "Basen Hiller, you are someone who should know when good help is offered. Do you want to kill Monrra?"

"Yes."

"So do I."

“Good, you can help us kill her before you leave, or we’ll have to kill you next.”

Xiffrik’s copper eyebrows lowered. “This is your queen’s decision?”

“It is, and ours, too.”

“Nykal?” Xiffrik questioned.

“It is not personal to you, Xiffrik,” Nykal said. “We have made a decision to disallow anyone from changing mana in our kingdoms.”

The Ancient pointed at Nykal and Basen as he stood a good distance from the large table where everyone sat. “What do you plan to do about the rifts that will destroy your land?” Anger sharpened Xiffrik’s voice.

“We would rather figure out how to deal with them than have you or any other Ancient changing mana,” the king replied. “You could assist us and be an ally as Basael has done.”

“Basael is just waiting for his chance to change mana!”

Nykal glanced over at him.

Basael stood up. “I would never change mana without consent.”

Xiffrik pointed at Basael. “Because you know you would be killed!”

“Grayhart, is that true?” the headmaster asked.

She stood up and sharpened her gaze on Basael. “Is that the only reason you haven’t changed mana?”

“It is the primary reason.” He continued loudly as everyone grumbled. “I also want what is best for the people. I used to think that I knew better than they do, but I have come to realize that I do not.”

“And he is becoming an ally,” Nykal told Xiffrik. “You could as well if you stand with us against Monrra without asking for anything in exchange.”

“He’s lying, though,” Grayhart said. “Basael still thinks he knows best.”

As everyone groaned again, Caarda scolded him, “Father.”

Xiffrik was visibly angry as he pointed toward Nykal and Basen. “You wouldn’t ever accept a real alliance with an Ancient. You use us!”

Grayhart spoke again. “I’m certain Xiffrik wants Monrra to die so he can take over the mana of Aathon.”

“I am aware of that,” Nykal said. “At least tell us what you saw in Korrithin, Xiffrik, and you can decide whether to work with us or not.”

He seemed to force out his anger with a breath. “It’s bad. I couldn’t get far. Monrra has enlisted the help of the barbarians from Aathon. They are very different from the dorrin and the analytes in Aathon. Many are summoners, and most are large men who excel in melee combat. I can’t say if the queen is still alive, but I could tell that Monrra had a rift somewhere outside the castle. I imagine she’s barred the only entrance and stuck the rift in front of it, which means the only way in is through the portal or by flying.”

Nykal asked, “How long can she maintain a rift that blocks the castle entrance?”

“Indefinitely, I assume. It doesn’t have to be very big. She probably changed mana in a way that makes it easier for her to hold one open, even if she’s weaker. I would assume the analyte army is trying to find a way into the castle but unable to at this time. That’s all I know.”

“You are weak,” Basael said. “Let me go first, and I will clear a path!”

Xiffrik scoffed. “Be my guest!”

“Xiffrik, what are your goals now that you have heard our answer?” the headmaster asked. “We will never allow you to control mana, and we will even try to stop you if you change it elsewhere.”

“You cannot be serious! You would even try to *kill* me if I hold control of mana in another place? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Use psyche and see.”

Xiffrik walked over to the headmaster. Soon the Ancient was shaking his head. “Your foolishness is really starting to piss me off, but Monrra needs to die. I’ll fight with all of you.” He sighed. “I would’ve given up control of mana to start over and curate it to all of your liking, but now I would never do that because I see all of you mean to keep Ancients from having control. I cannot believe how foolish you are being! How can you think you know better than we do? You have barely seen any other parts of the world and have only been alive less than fifty years!”

Grayhart said, “He can never be fully trusted. He wants control of mana too badly. The same is true for Basael. I can feel that if they were given the chance to destroy their opposition, they would take it sooner or later. We are standing between them and their goals. *We* are their opposition. We just happen to share the same goal for the moment, Monrra’s destruction. We are in danger as soon as that’s over.” Grayhart pointed her hands at Xiffrik as if casting a spell.

“Bastial hell, you’re right!” Xiffrik said in shock. “And I feel what you’re doing right now. You’re making me want to see my truth. Damn, you really are good. I didn’t even realize I felt that way, but you’re absolutely right! I could decide to attack you all at any point. I am far from that now, but that could easily change when you force me out of your kingdom with the threat of *death*. Basael, we are a problem to them. Don’t you see? We will always be a problem to them. They can’t trust us! Ever!” Xiffrik pointed two fingers and swayed his arms as if gesturing at everyone. His eyes were wide as if he’d gone mad. “Bastial *shit!* I am fed up your idiocy! You will see to the destruction of your own land! Your own people!”

“Sanya,” the headmaster said worriedly. “What are you doing to him?”

“I’m making him be sincere with not only us but himself. He has refused to think far enough ahead to let himself realize how dangerous he really can be. Now he’s realizing it.”

“I am, because you are making me!”

Grayhart aimed a hand at Basael.

“So am I!” Basael yelled. “I will never completely give up! I want mana! I know I can make the world better, even if I have to destroy a few people who mean to stop me. My reign will span thousands of years! I will not make the same mistakes again. People will love me for what I bring to their world!”

“For once, I agree with Basael!” Xiffrik said.

“Sanya, I don’t like this!” the headmaster yelled.

“You cannot blame me for making them see the truth about themselves,” she growled. “I’m not stopping.”

“Are you sure that’s all you’re doing?” The headmaster backed away from the table and looked ready for combat. Everyone followed suit

Xiffrik leaned back and closed his eyes as if overcome with relief. “All this time I wanted to appease all of you. I figured you would eventually worship me, but now I see that’s never going to happen. I am to be shunned into nonexistence. I thought I might have to learn to accept that, but why? I want power, but I also want to do good with it. You all just need to be removed, and those left will see that I am good. It is only you who stand in my way.”

“I knew you were a shit from the start!” Tarak yelled. “Where is my fucking sword?” he asked himself. “In my damn room!”

“Father,” Caarda warned as Basael weaved his hands through the air. A fireball formed and shot at Nykal, who dove out of his chair in hopes of avoiding it. A wall of sartious energy formed in an instant and absorbed the fire. Effie stood nearby with a hand aimed and her hair blown back.

“Join me, Basael!” Xiffrik called to him. “We will decimate them together, then the other Ancients once they are gone!”

Basael jumped and pulled himself all the way over the table with gravity to land beside Xiffrik.

“I have hated all of you since the moment we met,” Basael seethed.

“I’ve hated them, too!” Xiffrik said with a laugh. “I never could stand their foolishness!”

“I cannot! You have Ancients here willing to help you, and yet you force us away with threats of death as if we are criminals! My own son and my grandson have disallowed me to help people. You all will perish from unstable rifts! You are fools. *Fools!*”

“That’s right, they are,” Xiffrik agreed. “Look what happened to the elves when I told them there was a rift under their castle that would decimate them. They let it happen and then chose one of their own! You would all do the same; I see it now. Fools, brutes, you think yourselves to be better than us. We have been alive hundreds of years! You still do not heed our advice. The people you lord over need better leadership than you. It is them who will die in this. You have not asked them. *Ask them!*” Xiffrik shouted so hard that he spat. “Ask them what they want, and they will tell you to choose an Ancient like me or Basael! Show them the destruction caused by the rift in the forest! Ask them what they want! Of course you won’t because you think you know better! You will be the death of them!”

“I am tired of it!” Basael agreed. “Xiffrik is right. You refuse to allow us to keep our people safe. *You* are the enemies!”

“Livea would be half gone by now if I had done nothing!” Xiffrik yelled. “And what is the thanks I get? My life is threatened.”

Nykal finally yelled back, “You want unstoppable power! No one can have that, don’t you see! It does not matter what

we have to overcome to stop you, at least we *can* overcome these things. If either of you gain control of enough mana there is no stopping you! We are not just protecting our people. We are protecting the future of humanity!”

“The Ancients have made their choice, and there’s no going back now,” the headmaster said. “Sanya.”

She pained the two Ancients. Xiffrik and Basael collapsed. Tarak wasn’t sure he could kill his own grandfather, but he could at least make sure both of these arselickers were imprisoned. He was the first one rushing for them, but Cleve overtook him, and then Jon flew past them both.

The three of them were taken down by psyche, but Tarak was used to this pain by now. He managed to stand up against the spell. Cleve and Jon were even up before him.

Xiffrik must’ve been shocked at first to be pained by another psychic, for now he seemed to be immune, and so did Basael, as they stood ready to fight.

Xiffrik made a wall of sartious energy as tall and wide as Tarak. He swung it hard. Tarak flinched as he prepared to be struck first, Jon and Cleve would be next, but it turned into dust as Effie grunted somewhere behind Tarak. Xiffrik’s eyes widened in alarm as Cleve drew his bastial steel sword moments away from running it through Xiffrik’s body.

Xiffrik made two claws out of his hands, and Basael mimicked his gesture. Hot wind from Xiffrik and cold wind from Basael threw Cleve and Jon back and even made Tarak tumble over himself behind them.

“Barricade the door, Rick!” Nykal was yelling.

The door closed from the other side. Tarak could hear Rick calling for guards to barricade.

Basael and Xiffrik came after Tarak and the others as the wind turned to fire. Tarak finally stopped rolling and tried to scamper away, but he soon noticed the heat dissipate on his back as Effie stepped forward and made a wide wall of sartious energy.

Lord and bane, she is good!

Xiffrik dissolved it with a wave of his hand. Effie screamed in fear as the fire came at her, but Arthur and Leon had come up beside her and made dense walls of water. It seemed to boil where it stood, steam hissing from the bubbling top. The fire started to wrap around and scorch them as they screamed and held. Tienna put her hands on their backs, and the wall suddenly doubled in size.

Grayhart was yelling something that Tarak finally could make out, “How much can he cast with mana broken?”

“Sartious energy and I am not sure what else!” Tarak yelled back as everyone crowded behind the wall of water.

Basael seemed to be talking to Xiffrik. “We must escape! We cannot defeat them here!”

“Get the door open. I’ll hold them off.”

“I am stuck in the floor!”

“What are you talking about?” Xiffrik yelled, then shrieked. The fire came to a sudden end. Tarak dashed around the boiling water to see both Ancients buried halfway into the floor.

But the wall of water moved faster than Tarak, splashing into their faces and searing their skin. Tarak was blown back by a gravity repeller from his grandfather. So were a few others right behind him.

Basael punched the wooden floor and cracked it. He pulled a leg up. Xiffrik blasted everyone back with hot wind. Basael freed himself, then pulled Xiffrik out by his arms. The force tore up a ring of broken wood still stuck to his waist.

Tarak made a repelling gravity field above the Ancients. Given their distance from him, he couldn’t slow them for more than a breath, but they both collapsed to the floor in that time. It allowed Tarak and others to close in, but they were just blasted away again.

“Everyone get the fuck out of my way!” Leon yelled as he formed a fireball bigger than he was. “Take away his sartious energy, Effie!”

Everyone cleared the path. Xiffrik and Basael got up and ran the other way as Leon cast. Xiffrik turned and pushed out his hands. A sartious barrier formed instantly and caught the fireball before turning to dust.

“He’s too fast!” Effie complained.

“Do it again!” Leon yelled as he flew to them with wind rippling his clothes and unleashed a jet of fire before landing.

Xiffrik blocked the fire with sartious energy, but it turned to dust after a blink. He screamed for just a moment before the fire dissipated. The acrid smell of the Manabreak spell found Tarak’s nose.

Tarak was about to make an illusion of many doors to slow them down, but he couldn’t seem to grasp his mana to even do that.

“I’ve got them,” Cleve ordered as he charged toward the Ancients.

“I can’t feel sartious energy!” Effie warned, but it was too late.

Xiffrik formed a wall of it and slammed it into Cleve to swat him away like a fly.

Basael kicked down the door in their way and charged past guards in his path. He suffered a few stabs, but none seemed to slow him. Xiffrik followed right behind.

The king yelled, “Chase them down!”

Tarak ran out of the dining hall just behind Jon. They were already too far behind. The Ancients had passed into the courtyard and flown off with gravity and sartious energy.

“Can you cast?” Jon asked Tarak.

“Still no.”

They ran into the courtyard, and Tarak finally felt mana come back to him.

“Xiffrik must not be able make fire as easily after Manabreak,” Jon said. “Or he would’ve stayed to burn us all.”

“Only sartious,” Tarak agreed.

He heard Basen back in the dining hall, “God’s mercy, the damn akorell.”

CHAPTER FIFTY

Tarak returned to the dining hall with Jon and made everyone aware the Ancients had escaped. Then Tarak noticed everyone's dinner was strewn across the floor.

"This is the last meal I will let my grandfather ruin!" Tarak promised to all.

Jon surveyed the damage, then put his hand over his brow.

Desil looked to be repairing the floor where he had softened it earlier. He even seemed to be using a dagger to etch in the floorboards to match what was around it.

Tarak and Jon made their way around as the headmaster spoke to Nykal. He was showing the king his stones of akorell, none glowing.

"Their energy was drained when Xiffrik disrupted mana," Basen said. "Now we'll at least have to wait a day for one to charge, and that's only if I spend most of the day charging it."

The king's advisors were gathered around and looking at the same sight. Zarin was the only one who had a reaction as he put his fists up to his head and leaned back with an anxious hiss.

Nykal put his hand on Zarin's shoulder. "Xiffrik's account of the state of the castle makes it seem that whatever has occurred inside is already over. All the survivors have most likely made it out by now. Your mother might be one of them."

Leon seemed to agree. "Our haste to rush in there is because we want Monrra removed as soon as possible. I doubt analytes are dying each day."

"You're probably right," Zarin said, but Leon wasn't done.

"Each *week* there will be deaths, maybe," he added. "Because your people are probably going to be attacking the castle. But not every day. They'll wait until they have a good

chance. They've probably sent a messenger here requesting help, but you know they take a while. Hell, your people might even be waiting for us, which would mean no one is dying."

Nykal gestured at the damaged dining hall. "This is what happens when we are not prepared. I'm not about to let it happen again. I hope you understand, Zarin. We need our sorcerers to train, and we need a solid plan."

Zarin stared at the round table that had been blown against a wall, dishes and food scattered around it. He had a few slow breaths, then answered, "We will make all of them pay, when we are ready." He looked at Nykal. "I'm ready to discuss the map."

"What map?" Basen asked.

"I had a team assist Zarin in putting together a drawing of Korriithin Castle. It shows the layout of the rooms. Allow me a moment." Nykal turned to address a heartbroken Chef Irwin coming out from the kitchen.

"What...what happened?"

"I'm terribly sorry chef, but we had a surprise attack."

"Here? In the dining hall?" He sounded incredulous. "But...but it was supper time, and I had your whole feast prepared."

"I'm afraid the attackers didn't seem to care about that. Is there enough left to provide even a small meal?"

"There is, but all the best was already out here." He turned and gaped at the food strewn across the floor.

Cleve was hunched over, picking at things. He looked back and with a full mouth said, "A lot of this is still good."

"No, I can't have you eating off the floor!" the chef said. "I'll have something simple put together, but promise me that everyone will still be here tomorrow for another supper, sire?"

"Yes," Nykal answered warmly. "They will be, and the dining hall will be much more protected."

The chef bowed and hurried back to the kitchen.

With the help of many castle workers, everyone assisted in cleaning up and putting the tables back to how they were.

They returned to their original seats, though two benches had been replaced because of burns and cracks. Rick assured Nykal that the castle would be better guarded at all times, but Nykal did not seem to worry. Tarak agreed with Nykal's assumption that the Ancients would not attack right now with all the sorcerers gathered. The Ancients would lose that fight. They would have to wait until at least some of these sorcerers were not present. Only then might they start trying to pick off men and women one by one.

Tarak's fears about not only his grandfather but Xiffrik had come true. Tarak could now imagine them killing anyone who stood in their way. He was glad he'd started training as hard as he had.

Lord Langston took a long parchment from a servant and put it in the center of the four connecting tables. Everyone leaned forward for a better look.

"This is Korrithin Castle," Zarin explained as he tapped the parchment. It had an outline of what looked to be a very large and complex castle. It seemed that every room, hall, and stairway was detailed from an overhead viewpoint. "There might be a few small inaccuracies because this was done based on my memory. It is a very large castle with many parts, as you can see, but it should give us a good indication as to what to expect."

"What I see is a deathtrap." Basen pointed. "Look at these long walkways. How narrow are they?"

"Narrow," Zarin confirmed. "They were designed as choke points to stop an invading army."

"And now we're that invading army," Basen realized.

"Sadly, yes," Zarin said.

Nykal reminded them, "Monrra made it through with her army. We can as well."

"Let's discuss our other options one more time, now that I'm seeing how terrible *this* option is," Basen said. "Riding

there would take a month, which I agree is too long, but what about flying?”

“Go ahead, Jon.” Nykal gestured at him. “You’ve been there, and then Zarin will speak.”

Zarin had seemed as if he was about to say something when Nykal mentioned him. The analyte gave a nod and sat back, looking as if he was about to tell everyone about a coming storm.

“Flying would take one to two days,” Jon explained. “But we only have five people who can fly, and only three of us can take someone on our backs. The other two cannot fly reliably even on their own.”

“Fuck no,” Leon agreed. “Not over a distance like that.”

“It’s also hard to keep track of everyone while flying a long distance,” Jon added. “We’ll move at different speeds, and I’m the only one who knows how to get there. We’ll likely have navigation problems.”

“You will have more than just navigation problems,” Zarin said. “Look.” He pointed at the numerous circles that didn’t seem to be connected to other parts of the map. “Let me explain what this shows.”

The map was divided in half. The left side showed three long and narrow walkways connecting sections of the castle. As Tarak looked closer, he realized this side must represent the first floor of the castle because of what Zarin was pointing at on the right side, the upper floor.

“These are ballistae,” Zarin explained. “I remember there being at least ten of them. They can only be accessed at the top of these towers, and the only way to the towers is by taking the stairs up from the first floor. If you are coming by flight, you will most likely be shot down.”

Eden said, “And Monrra certainly has a number of flying creatures ready to devour you before you can even land.”

“So that means flying isn’t going to work,” Jon concluded. “Using sorcery to fly already takes too much out of us. We can’t protect ourselves while in the air. To be attacked

or shot at means almost a guarantee we will fall short of the castle or maybe even die.”

Leon said, “We are not riding for a month just to end up outside the castle where the analyte army is likely already to be stuck. Our presence will do no good.”

“That’s not true,” Desil said. “I can make an opening through any wall.”

“But not through a rift,” Leon corrected him. “You might be shot dead or molested by all kinds of summoned creatures while trying to make an opening somewhere along the castle wall. We’d need a major distraction to hide your work. Maybe if enough of us were causing havoc inside the castle, which means taking a portal.”

“I agree,” Nykal said. “The portal is the best option.”

“You say that because you’re not the one going through the portal,” Basen remarked.

“What makes you think that?”

Basen raised an eyebrow. “Are you a sorcerer?”

“No.”

Jon explained, “He stood and fought with us the last time we almost killed Monrra.”

The queen spoke up, “Yes, but you almost died, Nykal. Basen will be there,” she told her husband. “You told me you have complete confidence in his leadership.”

“I do, but they may need assistance.”

“King Nykal,” the headmaster said. “You should stay here where you will be safe.”

“Safe from Xiffrik and Basael, as well?” he tested.

“Do you lack the confidence to fortify this castle?” Basen asked worriedly.

“Against two Ancients like Xiffrik and Basael? No castle is safe. Nowhere is safe. That is my point. I will be there to

oversee everything because I will be of the most use there, and I will be no less safe there than here.”

“Let’s put the discussion on hold for now,” Basen said. “We have a lot more to plan, but I need to know first who else is going and what each of them can do.”

Nykal said, “We’re going to take as much time as we need to become more acquainted with each other as we train and prepare. Then we will decide who is going.”

“What about the traps that are certain to be waiting for us?” Effie asked.

“Monrra has no idea we have you all from Kyrro here with us,” Nykal answered. “A psychic and a stone melter should be enough to get through any trap she has planned.”

“I feared you might say that.” Effie glanced at her son.

Desil tried to pacify her with a gesture to indicate he would be safe. She did not appear comforted as she crossed her arms.

Lord Langston spoke in his callous way, “Headmaster, why did your psychic decide to turn these Ancients aggressive before they helped us against Monrra? Don’t you see we could’ve used them here?”

Basen answered as Grayhart scoffed. “She just pushed them to feel what they already felt. It’s better this way, or would you rather one of these Ancients literally stab your sorcerers in the back whenever they decide to turn against us? At least we know the stabbing is coming now. See?”

“Lord, they are right,” Nykal said. “Psyche cannot permanently turn someone aggressive. The psychic only brought their hidden feelings to the surface, like when Fatholl brought out your grievances, only Xiffrik and Basael’s turmoil was dangerous.”

Langston bristled but didn’t speak.

“It was bound to come out soon,” Grayhart said. “I could feel it like a man who’s held onto a feeling of injustice for

longer than he can take. They always lash out. Always. Better now.”

“Except now we have three Ancients who want us dead, rather than one,” Langston replied. “I still think it would’ve been better to kill Monrra and be ready for backstabbing from the others.”

“It is done,” Nykal said. “And I appreciate the clarity of the situation. We will deal with Monrra now and the others later.”

“I would like to say something,” Caarda announced. He waited until he had everyone’s attention. “Basael, my father... I have always known the essence of who he is. I have tried to correct his behavior by showing him the cause and effects of his errors. It was like trying to train an animal, but I thought I had made progress until recently. I have failed everyone here, but this failure is not permanent. I vow to slay him if given the chance. I will not hold back just because he gave me life. Now everyone hold a moment of silence as I look into the future, if you will.”

The people from Kyrro shared looks of bewilderment with one another as Caarda lowered his head. Tarak felt the usual disruption of mana like a quake in his mind.

Even though she was seated, Grayhart grabbed the table as if to steady herself. “Whoa!”

Basen wobbled a bit in his chair and reached out as well.

It went on long enough for Tarak to feel that he might fall over if he didn’t reach out, too. He closed his eyes and thought he saw visions of something, though it was more like mana telling him something than an actual sight, more of a feeling of dread.

Caarda’s spell ended, and he opened his eyes. “I apologize if that disoriented any of you. I have seen many paths, and many deaths. There is no certainty anymore besides battle. I recommend extreme caution going forward.”

“We didn’t need a reading of the future to know that,” Basen muttered.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Tarak was taken aside by Nykal before his training with Barrett. Nykal did so to give Tarak a warning.

“Barrett is the king of Rohaer, and he was my advisor before then. The value of his time is immeasurable. I do not want to hear of you wasting it with the kind of antics I see you perform with Leon.”

“Those antics are a result of Leon’s immeasurable pain-in-the-arse-ness. I met Barrett already, if you remember. No warning is necessary.”

“I hope not. He has been informed about your skills. Wait for him in the courtyard and train far from everyone else when you are with him. If he decides to take you elsewhere, do not put up an argument. I will be speaking with him about a few things first. He will meet you when we are done.”

Tarak bowed in a way he hoped was not sarcastic, bending down with light swing of his arm.

The king’s eyebrow went up. “Is that a mocking bow?”

“No, the opposite. I am trying to show deep respect.”

“A normal level of respect is the most I would ever expect out of you.” Nykal walked off.

Tarak wondered if the king would be less hard on him if Tarak was not involved with his daughter. Alas, Tarak wasn’t going to stop seeing Callie.

Nykal’s attitude was probably warranted.

Tarak joined the others as he waited for Barrett. Grayhart seemed to be in the middle of an explanation. She faced a curved line composed of every sorcerer in the castle, including those from Kyrro.

“Manabreak can cover a great distance, bigger than this whole castle. I’ll keep the spell in a small area in case we need to move out of it and cast at Xiffrik or Basael.” She drew a little circle in the air. “It will stay confined to the space we’re in now, but there is no difference in potency that I can tell. If

you can cast here, you should be able to cast when Xiffrik does it.”

Charlie Spayker walked forward and crouched in the center of the loose circle formation. He held a vibmtaer up.

Grayhart glanced down at him with confusion.

“Go ahead.” He stared into the small glass panel and the handheld device.

“What are you doing?” Grayhart asked.

“I’m going to see what color your spell produces so I may be able to figure out the notes. I’m also going to feel what tree it’s in, if I can.”

Grayhart’s confused expression didn’t change.

“Just ignore him,” Leon advised. “Go ahead.”

She shrugged and pushed her hands away from each other with a jolt. Tarak smelled the earthy odor and felt disconnected from his mana. He tried to reach for it as he heard others straining.

He soon realized it wasn’t that his mana was far away. It was more that he couldn’t quite connect to it, like trying to remember the name of someone he certainly knew, but everything after the first letter had escaped him.

“I know it!” Charlie yelled. “I know this color! It’s uC, uE, uG!”

He showed the vibmtaer to Leon. Tarak had a peek. Behind the glass of the device, the metal had turned to a pinkish purple.

“It is,” Leon confirmed. “I recognize the tree, as well!”

“Enchanting!”

“That’s right. We got it, Spayker!” Leon lifted his arms for a shake.

Charlie laughed in celebration and mimicked Leon. It was a little strange to see Leon so happy, like watching a dog stand on its hind legs and walk around with a grin on its face.

Tarak felt his mana return to normal. It didn't seem as if anyone had a good chance to practice, but it was Reuben and Eden who looked the most disappointed. They even shared a glance as if they knew something.

"It's not in your range, either, is it?" Eden asked.

"I'm not even close," Reuben replied.

"Enchanting?" Grayhart asked. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Leon said.

"What does enchanting do?" she asked.

The king answered, "Enchanting allows an item to be imbued with the power of mana. Some items can be made sturdier, to glow or to reflect light, or in most cases made to resist a specific element. Our two enchanters here have a low range and mostly can only cast one spell that we call ordia. It's used to enchant. We are not familiar with the other spells in the tree."

"Oh I know!" Charlie exclaimed. "She is enchanting mana itself! What do you think, Leon?"

Barrett's voice rang out from behind Tarak. "Let me feel the spell, if you will," he requested.

Grayhart nodded, then made the same gesture of turning her hands away from each other.

"*Mmhmm*, enchanting," Barrett confirmed. "That is fascinating. Yes, I believe Charlie is right. You are enchanting mana itself. You should be able to do more with it. I imagine it is this spell that can turn mana into a solid state as well."

"Oh my god, yes," Charlie agreed. "Of course! She is enchanting mana now to stretch it into a form that cannot be reached easily by sorcerers. She should also be able to do the opposite, condensing it until it becomes a solid form. Grayhart, do the opposite with the same spell."

"Hold on." Her eyebrows squiggled. She looked down for a moment, closing her eyes, then she turned her hands toward each other in the opposite way as before.

Mana came into sight as a pinkish purple dust.

“More!” Charlie called out. “Harder!”

There was a squeaking sound as the dust collided and grew into bigger particles. The weight of them made them sink to the ground, but Grayhart didn’t seem to be done. She groaned and pushed her hands closer together. The mana became a block like sartious energy but retained its pinkish color.

Charlie walked up and put his hand on it. “It’s warm but cooling down as expected. It should change color, I bet. Yes, look.”

The mana darkened, slowly becoming more blue until it seemed to stop. It resembled the color of the ocean.

“Sanya?” Basen asked. “Have you ever done that before?”

“No, but it feels easier to cast here. I might not have been able to in Kyrro.”

Cleve walked up and tapped it with his knuckles. “It’s pretty hard.” He chipped some off with the hilt of his sword. “Light too. I’m not sure if it could hold up as a blade, though.”

“But maybe an arrow,” Aliana mentioned and took the chunk from his hand.

Nykal said, “A lot more experimentation needs to be done, and we don’t have time now.”

“Just one more experiment, please, sire!” Charlie begged.

“That depends on what you have in mind.”

“We have had arguments with them about what bastial energy is. They claim it is all around us, but we know mana comes from ourselves. I want them to gather bastial energy so we can figure out what it is. It will be quick.”

“Proceed.”

“Who can gather bastial energy?” Charlie asked.

A few of the sorcerers from Kyrro chuckled.

“Literally all of us,” Effie said.

“Gather it here.” Charlie remained between them as he held up the vibmtaer and pointed to a spot in front of him.

“I know it’s tempting,” Basen told his people, “but let’s try *not* to burn him, yeah?”

“I’ll leave everyone else to it,” Cleve said as he walked back to the line. “My bastial energy is used differently than these mages.”

“Then I want to test yours after.”

“It’s internal. You probably won’t be able to test it.”

“I will—whoa!” Charlie fell back as a bright white ball formed near his head. It burned hot enough for Tarak to feel from a few steps away.

Charlie squinted and held the vibmtaer close, then turned it around for a look. “Leon!”

“What does it show?” Leon shielded his eyes from the bright light. “The specialization is familiar, but I don’t know it.”

“Me, too, but look.” Charlie held the vibmtaer up to Leon. Tarak had a look.

The color inside the glass panel was orange.

“G, yes,” Barrett said as he looked around Leon. “That’s what I feel.”

“Middle G?” Leon sounded confused. “One note?”

“You can stop casting now,” Barrett told the sorcerers from Kyrro.

The white ball of heat disappeared.

“It *is* just one note,” Barrett confirmed.

Basen said, “We can feel that ‘one note’ all around us. We are just pulling it into a single spot and condensing it. Adding sartious energy will ignite it and form a fireball. That’s how we make them. Gather bastial energy, step one. Feed it a tiny amount of sartious dust, step two. Unleash the energy that

wants to escape our mind, step three. Bastial mages can do this quickly.” He snapped his fingers. “Like that.” He snapped again.

“I was trying to explain that to Leon back in Kyrro,” Desil said.

“But it doesn’t make sense,” Leon replied.

“I think it may,” Barrett replied. “There *are* energies all around us. How else can we explain the formation of rifts or the growing energy in akorell stones? These mages have learned to control that energy, but it is certainly different from normal mana. I think these energies are natural to the world, while mana is natural to our bodies, or our souls, as some people describe it. I presume you feel sartious energy in the same way?”

“Effie?” Basen questioned.

“Sartious is a lot harder for people to grasp usually. It took me many years to reach the level I’m at now, but yes, now it feels just like bastial. It’s all around and ready for my manipulation.”

Eden commented, “It sounds like esitry. I can feel it ready for me to grasp, though not in our world. I have to pull it from the dark realm.”

Charlie gasped and pointed his finger at Eden. “They are in the same tree! That’s why it feels familiar!”

“Shit, I think you’re right,” Leon agreed. “Make esitry, Eden. Let us feel.”

She nodded and lifted her hands. A small rift formed in front of her, dark and blue.

“It is the same,” Barrett concluded as Leon and Charlie nodded. “This is fascinating. It’s the first I’ve heard of esitry.”

Charlie showed Barrett the vibmtaer, which had a purple color to it.

“Middle B.” He gave a nod. “That leads me to believe sartious energy will show as D. Effie, if you wouldn’t mind.”

Basen asked, "Is this really going to be helpful? Time is of the essence."

"It will be useful," Barrett said. "Sartious, please."

Effie shrugged and made a sphere of it in her hand. Then she passed it to Charlie.

He seemed surprised as the vibmtaer showed no change. He turned it to Leon and Barrett to see.

"Try just the dust," Barrett told Effie.

She made a cloud of dust around Charlie. He waved his hand to clear it, then presented the panel of the vibmtaer to Leon and Barrett. It showed an orange color.

"You smart son of a bitch. D for density," Leon said. "Of course, and of course the brick of sartious doesn't change the vibmtaer. The birlabright inside needs traces of the mana, and nothing is reaching inside."

"But C is the basis of almost all spells in other trees," Charlie said. "We had Eden use C and nothing happened."

"You did?" Barrett seemed confused.

"I could feel it casting something," Eden explained, "but we couldn't figure out what it was doing."

"Ah." Barrett grinned. He looked around but didn't seem to find what he was looking for. His eyebrows lifted as if he was struck by an idea. "Everyone hold out your fists like this."

Everyone extended their arms and made two fists.

"Eden now..." He went over and whispered in her ear.

She let out a small gasp, then smiled.

Barrett returned and held his fists up again. "Everyone hold still now."

"Tienna, boost me," Eden growled at her.

Tienna's gaze hardened, but she went over and put her hand on Eden's back.

Eden seemed to cast something with a strenuous grown. "It's done!" she said.

“Headmaster, try to move your right fist, if you will,” Barrett said. “Gently, please.”

Basen looked confused, but suddenly alarmed. His right fist would not move.

“Thank you, Basen. Hold still please. Leon, give it a try.”

“You motherfucker, Barrett!” Leon exclaimed with a laugh. “You fucking did it!”

Tarak felt a chill as he realized what this was. The others seemed to as well, as they all tried to move their fists.

Suddenly all hands dropped.

Eden grunted and let down her hands. “I can’t keep it up if everyone moves!”

“What in god’s world was that?” Basen asked.

“Artistry.” Nykal practically slapped Barrett’s back. “Well done!”

“And what’s even better is these sorcerers from Kyrro all have access to that tree.”

“Care to explain?” Basen asked. “It felt like something was holding my fist.”

“Artistry links things together so that action taken to one affects the other,” Nykal explained. “In this case, everyone’s fist was linked together. Moving your fist would mean having to move everyone’s fist. Because everyone held their fist still besides you, you were trying to move everyone’s hand.”

“Do it again,” Basen said. “Let me see.”

Tarak held his fists out like the others. Eden repeated the spell with a boost from Tienna.

“Go ahead,” she told Basen.

He groaned as his arm shook. Eden groaned louder.

After just a moment, he broke free, and Eden staggered.

“Damn. It’s hard to hold!”

“We need all of you sorcerers from Kyrro to learn this note, C,” Nykal said. “It is the spell Monrra cast that debilitated nearly our entire army the last time we faced her. None of us could break it.”

“She held your arms?” Cleve asked.

“Our legs,” Leon said. “Couldn’t fucking move for half the battle, and many of us nearly died because of it.”

“I don’t understand something,” Basen said. “Wouldn’t there have to be something physically connecting our limbs for them to be linked in that way?”

“There is,” Leon said. “You can’t see it, but it’s there. It’s like a loose tube that moves all around from any pressure put on it. We snapped it a few times, but then she remade the link instantly. I’ve fought a lot of different sorcerers, so trust me when I tell you that it’s a fucking thorn deep in your ass. Having even one or two sorcerers who can break it like Effie can break Xiffrik’s sartious energy will be the difference between night and day.”

“All right, that makes sense.”

Charlie said, “This tree is fascinating. It seems to encompass all natural energy: bastial, sartious, esitry, and artistry. It must be this tree where portals of all kinds come from.” He gasped. “I have an idea. Why didn’t we think of this earlier? Basen, can I have an akorell stone?”

“They’re inside away from Grayhart’s Manabreak spell.”

“Get one please!”

Jon said, “I’ll go.”

Basen nodded to him. Jon flew off to the great hall and came back with a glowing stone. He handed it to Charlie.

“Look, G, as expected,” Charlie said as he showed the orange color of the vibmtaer to everyone. “That’s because the vibmtaer is sensing the bastial energy being pulled into it. But now take out the energy of this one, Basen.”

“Only because we have many more, and I’m curious.” He pulled back his hand, and the akorell no longer glowed.

“Look!” Charlie exclaimed as he showed them that the color of the vibmtaer had changed to more of a reddish orange. “It’s the octaves of G! That’s akorell! It’s hardened mana in the form of octaves of G!”

“My god,” Leon said. “You brilliant little shit. That’s it, Charlie. That’s the key to portals.”

“I know!”

“Well that *sounds* exciting,” Basen said with a tinge of sarcasm, “but it makes no sense to me.”

Leon explained, “Basen, you told us you make portals by extracting the bastial energy from akorell and you condense that bastial energy on itself. The weight of the energy becomes too much for the world to bear, so a hole opens for the energy to go somewhere.”

“That’s right.”

“We have been trying to figure out how to cast that spell without akorell.”

“It’s impossible unless you’re Xiffrik.”

“No, no, no,” Leon said with a silly grin. “Not unless you’re Xiffrik. Unless you use a *rev*.”

“A what?”

“A revision,” Leon explained. “It’s a way to increase the power of your spells and give them a command at the same time. It involves changing the notes of the spell as it’s forming. Think of it like casting two spells at once, only the spells cannot coexist so the mana changes form. The result can be catastrophic to the caster and anyone around them, but when used smartly and with practice, it opens up a whole new set of possibilities. I think it’s pretty clear what the *rev* has to be in this case, right Charlie and Barrett?”

“Esitry,” Barrett said at the same time as Charlie.

“That’s right. Basen, I can see you looking like I just told you that you can shit gold. Let me explain. Would you agree that making a portal using condensed bastial energy is like

placing a boulder on a folded blanket and expecting it to break through?”

“Yes, that’s a good analogy. It also accurately describes what making a portal feels like on my mind.”

“You won’t have to deal with that kind of pressure much longer.”

“I highly doubt that, but I am intrigued.”

“Think about what Esitry does. Little Eden here can make a small rift using it, and she’s nowhere near the powerful caster you are. Not even close.”

“Hey,” Eden complained.

Leon ignored her. “That’s because Esitry somehow fucks with the strength of these invisible walls of our world. So if these walls are represented by the folded blanket, Esitry is like a blade. Think about how easy it would be to drop a rock through a folded blanket if you have a dagger coming through the other end and poking at that shit. That’s what’s going to happen when you make a rev from G to B.”

Grayhart said, “Or you could produce a catastrophic result. I can feel your lack of confidence in this experiment, Leon, even if it’s hidden behind a thick layer of enthusiasm.”

“I am confident about the theory of it.”

Barrett agreed, “The theory is sound. I am confident it should produce a portal.”

“Hold on,” Michael said. “Leon told me revs cannot be controlled once cast.”

“Those are revs of wind, Michael,” Leon replied. “Wind already cannot be controlled very well once cast. This is different. We are talking about energies that are already in existence in their current form and react with each other. I’m certain Basen can keep control of the spell even after using a rev.”

“You are not certain,” Grayhart said.

“I am *almost* certain.” Leon retorted.

Basen looked at her.

“He is almost certain,” she said with a slight tilt of her head, though her eyes showed a warning. “But I still think it’s a bad idea for you to test this. All of them are enthusiastic but lack complete certainty.”

“Who else could test this? Do you want to?”

“You know I don’t have control over immense amounts of raw bastial energy like you do.”

“No one does. It has to be me. You have been gone a while,” Basen told her. “You might not know just how beneficial it would be to make portals without the use of akorell.”

“But you always have some around, don’t you?”

“Don’t you realize how difficult it is to carry around akorell? It’s bright and burning hot. Besides, think about what an enemy mage could do if I have an akorell stone on me. All these years, I’ve had to worry about that. I have confidence in these sorcerers. They’ve been right about everything so far. Leon, how do I go about casting this spell?”

“It shouldn’t be so hard for someone who’s mastered a spell of three octaves of G, as you clearly have. You just have to take those three notes and raise them to B. If you can do it to one note, you can do it to three in the same way.”

“Raise to B, not lower?”

“The note above G is A, then B. It’s easier to raise G to B than go all the way down from G to B. You can practice over there with Charlie and the vibmtaer. He’ll help you reach the right notes. Just use a small amount of force so the portal you open is small.”

“I can already open a small portal.”

“Right, by accumulating all the bastial energy you can hold and casting with all your strength.”

“Well, yes.”

“Don’t use much strength,” Leon instructed. “You’ll see with a rev that you can make a small portal very easily.”

“Come on,” Charlie said in excitement as he gestured for Basen to follow him away from the others.

Basen went off.

Cleve said, “I’m curious about this boost spell of hers I’ve heard about. What’s your name?”

“Tienna.”

“Tienna, your spell sounds similar to the way I use bastial energy for strength and speed, but you’ve somehow learned to cast it on others.”

“Jon.” Leon grinned. “Get the second vibmtaer.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Tarak was approached by Barrett. The king of Rohaer asked if Tarak was ready. Tarak gave a nod.

He would not participate with the others the rest of the day. He figured they would spend more time making discoveries about mana than doing much else. Tarak was interested, but he'd have to receive a summary later. There were more important things he should be doing. He and Barrett walked off to the far corner of the courtyard.

"The king has told me about your new spell which has great potential," Barrett said. His pensive expression seemed to be the same as his resting one. He had ghostly gray hair, short on his head, though his beard was dark around his mouth, graying at the edges. His thick eyebrows were of the same dark, thick hair. His eyes looked as if he'd seen everything the world had to offer, from a perfect sunrise over the ocean to a field of bodies after a battle.

"The king told me not to waste your time, so let us begin, shall we?" Tarak lifted his hands and prepared to cast his new spell, Gravity Field.

"I promise we will not waste time, but I want to hear about your light spell first."

Tarak let down his arms. "I have not attempted to bend the light as you mentioned long ago."

"Why not?"

"I have not found a use for it."

"Bending light is the first step toward finding many more uses for your ability to control light." Barrett shook his head. "I am disappointed. This is one of the most powerful abilities a sorcerer can have."

"What about healing?"

"Besides healing. What has your mana told you about light?"

"It is how we see, and it can be controlled, to an extent."

“Yes, but *how* does light let us see?”

“Um. Because it is the opposite of darkness?”

“No. Light comes from a source, in this case the sun, and strikes an object, then that light bounces off the object and reaches our eyes. We can then see the object.”

“Oh, yes that seems right.” Tarak hadn’t quite realized it was that simple, but from what his mana had taught him about light and illusions, it made a lot of sense.

“I heard you are able to make illusions that are copies of things like coins, horses, and even people?”

“I can, with enough practice or if the real thing is nearby.”

“So instead of making a copy, you should be able to change the perceived location of this real thing.”

“Yes, I have done that.” He remembered making Aliana’s arrow appear to shoot into Michael’s head.

“Good. So do you understand how you are doing it?”

“My mana does. All I understand is that I am moving the light of the object to a different location.”

“That’s somewhat right, but there is more to it. Have you ever noticed how water makes an object appear to bend?”

“No.”

“Well, it does because of how light curves. Lenses work in the same way. Images behind a lens can be greatly distorted depending on both the distance from the lens and how much the lens bends light.”

“I do not want to waste your time, but I need to know something,” Tarak said.

“Yes?”

“How can you possibly know all this?”

“The same way we have figured out truths about mana, notes, revs, and everything else you just witnessed. We conduct experiments, make guesses based on a theory, then

test that theory with another experiment to see if we understand the concept correctly. I am coming to you with theories, and you will test them. The bonus here is that if the test does what I predict, it will give you incredible potential.”

“Then let us say I trust you about all of this and need no explanation. What should I do to achieve this great potential?”

“I want your mana to curve light in front of you, below your chin.” Barrett held his hand about a half-arm’s-length away from Tarak’s chest. “From your body to here.”

“All right, but why?”

“You just said you would trust me.”

“I did say that.”

Tarak knew how to block out light and create impenetrable blackness. Bending light wasn’t much different. He just had to let it through but push it to the side.

He did so with a great amount of effort.

Something strange happened. The image of the keep appeared in front of Tarak, but the keep was to Tarak’s right. He should be able to see the rest of the courtyard.

“No, you are curving light without straightening it out after,” Barrett explained. “That is what I was trying to tell you long ago in Rohaer. You can make mirrors where you please and see things you couldn’t normally see, but that is not what I want you to do right now.”

Tarak was a little embarrassed he had never done this since Barrett had mentioned it, especially considering how easy it was. It wasn’t as if it would’ve been beneficial to him up until now, but today especially had taught Tarak that experimentation was essential to becoming a great sorcerer. Experimentation and understanding, of course. He still lacked the latter.

“Try it again, Tarak, but this time I want you to curve light at a right angle.”

“A what?”

“Like this.” Barrett motioned with his hand, going to Tarak’s right then giving a quarter turn and zooming off straight from Tarak’s side.

“Oh, I see now.”

Barrett smiled and gave a nod.

In front of Tarak was a whole slew of confusing things that his mana could pick up on, various energies, and more than one form of light. It came from above him and scattered all around in front of him. It was easier to change all of it than only some.

Light was a beast, but it could be tamed. It was Tarak’s mana that took the most out of him as it connected to all light and took control. Tarak bent the light to his right, then straight away.

He looked down at himself and saw a black shadow.

“Hmm.” Barrett didn’t seem pleased until he moved around in front of Tarak’s manipulated light. “Ah! I know what happened. Keep casting.” Barrett extended his hand and swiped down at Tarak’s right side, missing him completely. “Yes, it should work with a few tweaks. I just tried to touch your body. You can see how far away I was.”

Tarak let his spell come to an end. He was already fatigued.

“Try this. Think about your mana like a tube, sucking up the light and blowing it out two steps to your right.”

“Two steps?” Tarak repeated.

“One step, if two is too hard.”

He closed his eyes and took a long while to speak to his mana and tell it what Barrett wanted. Eventually he felt it understood. Casting the three notes, IC, C, and uC, was now the easy part.

The strain on his mind was even more intense than before. It felt as if he was trying to fit a heavy rock through a small hole as he both navigated with precision and used the muscle of his mind with strenuous effort.

Barrett walked around Tarak. When he came back to stand in front, he had a wide grin, and Tarak knew he had succeeded.

Tarak looked down and was shocked. His body appeared an entire arm's-length to his right, where he bent light. His neck appeared to curve drastically to connect his head to it. He stopped casting, and his body reappeared where it really was.

“This is marvelous, but why not move my head as well?”

“See what happens if you bend the light in front of your eyes.”

But as soon as Barrett brought it up, Tarak realized it was going to cause problems. For the sake of experimentation, he decided to test it anyway.

He cast again, extending the spell to cover the light around his head and eyes as well.

He immediately closed his eyes to stop a headache from coming on. Everything had become blurred and distorted, bent and impossible to decipher.

“This may not be that useful,” Tarak said. “Illusions take considerable concentration, and anyone will be able to figure out that my body is below my head.”

“We are just getting started, Tarak. What you've done so far is prove my theory of light and illusions to be correct. Moving the light near a person creates the illusion that the person is in a different place. Now there's something else I want you to do, if you can. Bend only the light coming off you. Let me explain. Light scatters after it bounces off you. Your mana has to take that light bouncing off you, curve it away from your right side about two steps, and then let the light scatter as it normally would. In that case, you should be able to make the illusion of being two steps to your right, and without it disorienting you. Master that, and no one will be able to touch you again if you do not want them to. A spell like that should take much less focus than something like invisibility.”

Tarak was about to cast but stopped. “Can you explain invisibility?”

“It is the most complicated spell known to us and not something you will be able to learn in the time we have.”

Tarak frowned.

“But I see you are not satisfied with that so I will explain it. Remember that we see things because light bounces off them and into our eyes. Let me ask you a question. What do you think happens if you took all the light that bounced off you and bent it away so that it never reached my eyes?”

“It does not sound like the answer is that I would turn invisible.”

“No, you would not. You would appear black like the darkest shadow you can imagine. You did that when you bent light away like a mirror standing in front of you. It didn’t reach you, so you were black. Invisibility is much more complicated. I would have to be able to look at you and see *through* you.”

“Like if I were made of glass.”

“No, glass and water can be seen, but light passes through them so we also see what is inside or past them. We are talking about invisibility. I should not be able to see you or anything inside of you, only what is behind you.”

“Is it really possible?”

“We have seen instances of it before mana was reverted; therefore we know it’s possible. I think it is important you figure this out as a lesson of how you can push your spell to its limits. These simple thought experiments are how you will go from good to great, while understanding light and mana at a complex level is how you will go from great to master. Think about what you’ve learned about light so far.”

“The light from the sun strikes me and bounces into your eyes. That allows you to see me. So in order for you to see through me, the light would have to...” He had hoped the answer would come, but he had reached the end of his sentence and it did not.

“Think about why you can see something through glass. I already told you that light passes through it. So if I hold glass up between us, we can see each other. But if I held up a thick parchment, we couldn’t. Why is that?”

“Ah! The light bouncing off me goes through the glass and into your eyes. With a thick parchment between us, the light bouncing from my body is blocked by the parchment and doesn’t reach you, therefore you cannot see me through the parchment.”

“Exactly. So think about what light is doing with glass.”

“It is passing through it.”

“Yes, without being reflected or absorbed. That is why the heat from sunlight also passes through glass and into the place behind the glass. The glass does not become hot.”

“That is true?”

“It is, but you cannot make your body mimic glass because you cannot let light go through you. Mana cannot change the physical nature of your body without destroying you in the process. But what can mana do? Think about your previous experiment.”

“Oh, it can bend light! I see what you are saying now. Light must bend around me without striking me.”

“Exactly! And what else must happen? Light cannot just bend away from you, or you will become a black silhouette.”

“It must go around me and straighten out.”

“Yes, good work. Now think about how difficult that is.”

“It does not sound too difficult.”

“Tarak, in the case of invisibility, the light has to bend around you and then straighten out to the same direction that it was going before it bent around you. Otherwise you’re going to distort everything behind you for whoever is looking, and they will easily make out where you are. It is because of the difficult nature of the spell that perfect invisibility is impossible. There is always some distortion to the invisible party. It is still a very valuable spell even with minor

distortion, especially in the midst of a fight, but like I said it is probably the most difficult spell to perform. I'm not just talking about the focus that it takes but the strain on your mana to constantly alter light in such a drastic way, especially as you move. It must feel like a mountain weighing on your mind."

"So help me practice, and soon it will no longer be that difficult."

"Not soon, Tarak. For now, you should perform the easier task of curving light. You have already proven that you can bend all light in front of your body. If you can somehow focus on only the light bouncing off of you, you should be able to distort your location, which will be nearly as valuable as invisibility. It will also be a whole lot easier to perform."

Tarak was about to try when Barrett continued.

"But, I cannot spend all my time with you. Let's see this other spell, Gravity Field."

"We were just about to reach something great!"

"After days of practice. I'm not going to stand here during all that. You can practice illusions after my lesson is done. Don't worry, Tarak. King Nykal has told me what your Gravity Field can do, and I have already figured out the best way for you to use it. It will just take a few moments for me to explain it to you before the fun is ready to begin. Just make sure you don't kill anyone with your gigantic sword I have heard a lot about. We will face the wall after you fetch your weapon. Go now and grab it."

Tarak's sword was too long to be holstered on a belt. It had to remain either in his hands or in front of his weapon's chest in his room. The sword wouldn't fit inside the chest. Normally, Tarak would be a little worried about someone stealing it, but most people could hardly lift it.

He flew up to his room where he always left the window unlocked, then grabbed his sword and flew back. Barrett chuckled and shook his head as he saw Tarak's weapon.

"You really must be as strong as they say to wield that thing. Now I'm going to teach you how to cut a monster

bigger than you in half as if it were made of paper.”

“Lord and bane, are you really?”

“If you pay close attention. Your gravity field reduces the weight of everything within it, so all you need to do is make a short field of it behind you.”

“Behind?”

“Yes, and above. Then swing the sword around as if splitting a log with an ax. Start slow so you do not lose that blade and we have a terrible accident on our hands. Even facing the wall, I worry.”

Tarak made his field of gravity behind and above him. As he swung his sword up and around, and it came back down, he drove the blade into the ground with more force than his hands could bear.

“Shit!” Tarak yelled as he walked away, his whole body jittering, his palms on fire.

“I told you to go slow!” Barrett admonished.

“I did.”

The king of Rohaer tried to pull Tarak’s sword out of the dirt where it was stuck, but it would not budge.

As the pain subsided, Tarak took over, and even he had trouble pulling it out.

“The bad news,” Barrett said, “is it seems like this is not something you can practice without breaking your arms. The good news is it doesn’t seem like you need any practice.”

“Lord and bane,” Tarak said with a grin as he realized just how much power he could put behind his attack this way.

When swinging it around from behind and above him in reduced gravity, he could double or maybe even triple the speed of his swing. As the sword swung down from above and passed in front of him, it passed through normal gravity, pulled down with even more force than Tarak could put into swinging it up and around.

“Split a monster in half? No, no.” Barrett chuckled. “I was wrong. You can split a hell of a lot more than a monster. I want to see something. Fetch it out of the armory for me,” Barrett told Tarak. “It usually requires three of our strongest to get it here, but with a gravity spell and your strength, you won’t have an issue.”

As he told Tarak what it was, Tarak grew a wide smile.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

It had been one week since Xiffrik and Basael had joined each other's cause and attacked the sorcerers. Tarak had trained every moment he could. He didn't even visit Callie, and she understood. Oftentimes they'd promised each other they would sleep at a decent hour, and more often than not, they would stay up late chatting. It was a luxury they couldn't afford these days.

A week ago, Tarak had received just a small amount of instruction from Barrett, and it had changed everything. The potential within Tarak was something he always figured was there, but ever since seeing how little time Jon had because of his abilities, Tarak had been reluctant to explore it. Now he regretted that. He should've pushed himself to train hard earlier. Better late than never, though.

He'd poured everything he had into improving as quickly as possible over these last seven days. The techniques he'd learned and the spells he'd practiced proved something that everyone soon agreed upon. There was no one more dangerous than he was in close quarters. No one.

A week ago, Barrett had instructed Tarak to take out what was called a training dummy from the armory. It was solid metal in the shape of a male torso, blackened as if blasted by many fireballs for practice over the years. A wooden pole ran up through it to keep it upright. It stood about as tall as the average grown man would stand if he had no head.

Using the technique Barrett had come up with of decreasing gravity behind and above Tarak's body, Tarak had put on a show of whipping his sword around his body as hard as he could and slamming it down onto the training dummy. It had sliced through the solid metal and the wooden pole, cutting the whole thing in half like a man-shaped loaf of bread.

The speed at which Tarak's sword could travel all around and cut anything in half was as fast as he could swing his arms with nothing held by his hands. There was little chance anyone could defend against it.

The act elicited hoots and applause, even from the seasoned sorcerers of Kyrro. Charlie was able to put the training dummy back together, though it would never look quite the same.

Tarak practiced all of his new spells over the course of the week. He increased the gravity in front of him, slowing any opponent who dared stand against him. It took more focus to apply gravity against a target ahead of him than to decrease the gravity behind Tarak for his sword to travel through, but it was still a very good option to have. It would also increase the power of Tarak's swings so long as they were made downward, through the field of increased gravity, or as Tarak had begun to think of it for simplicity's sake, heavy gravity versus light or normal gravity.

Barrett had told Tarak of something else that, unfortunately, Tarak would have to practice far from the castle, far from the city, far from any being at all, really. A team had to accompany Tarak to the forest to experiment with this one, just in case Xiffrik or Basael showed up. Tarak's father was happy to participate. Jon and Leon were less happy.

That changed when Jon and Leon saw Barrett's idea in action.

With the help of light gravity, Tarak could hoist up a boulder and throw it with considerable speed. What came as a surprise to Tarak but not to Barrett was that the boulder maintained nearly the same speed even as it traveled from light gravity to normal. The only thing that changed was the trajectory, which Tarak learned was a fancy word for the path of flight.

Tarak merely had to throw the boulder high and hard within his light gravity field, and the boulder would fly out of his gravity field at a tremendous speed. It arced down as any object would, but the power behind it was enough to break a tree!

"He's a fucking human catapult," Leon had said.

"Why doesn't it slow down once it leaves the light gravity?" Jon had asked Barrett.

“Because gravity doesn’t affect the horizontal motion of the boulder, only the vertical motion.”

“Tarak,” Jon had uttered. “Please, *please* be careful during a fight.”

“Jon’s right,” Leon had said. “You’d better not be whipping boulders around unless I give the command.”

“So I will have boulders with me?”

“We’ll stick them on a wagon or something,” Leon had replied.

Tarak had only hurled one more boulder after that, destroying another tree. Everyone had then agreed that the damage he caused was not worth the improvements that could come from practicing, especially seeing as how he was already as powerful as a catapult.

Tarak had spent the rest of the time training his Gravity Field spells and his illusions of displacing his whole self two steps to the side. Barrett had turned out to be right, yet again. Tarak could manipulate the light scattering off of him. It wasn’t that hard to learn given that he’d already figured out how to displace things like an arrow, or to create copies of other things, like Michael shooting a ballista. The notion was similar. It involved moving light from one place to another while keeping the behavior of light the same.

He wished he had another week to perfect these skills. By the end of the last day, the only one he felt really comfortable with was the light gravity behind and above him.

He had run out of time. It was the final dinner before all went to bed early. They would teleport into the castle the next morning.

Tarak sat beside Callie. There was no reason for them to hide their relationship anymore, a pleasant change, but Tarak had at least expected to turn a few heads when they gave each other an affectionate touch or kiss on the cheek, as they had many times over the last week.

No, everyone seemed to know already. Tarak and Callie really had been terrible at keeping this a secret.

All had been quiet from Chespar land, fortunately. There were other things to worry about besides the wounded feelings of an idiot lord.

“How has everyone fared?” Tarak asked Callie. He’d barely had a chance to speak with her much these last few days. Every meal for Tarak had been short so he could rush back to training.

“Very well,” she answered. “Some of us have learned how to cast during the Manabreak spell.”

“Us, as in you?”

“I can make fire, yes, but it’s not easy.”

They sat around four tables pushed together. Callie’s father sat beside the headmaster with the queen and his advisors on his other side. Tarak’s father was among them, though he seemed to be mostly keeping to himself.

He had left Tarak completely alone during these days, as had everyone else. It was important that Tarak practiced as much as possible, but he had half expected Caarda to say something about Basael’s betrayal. He had not.

Caarda had appeared even more determined than he usually was as he practiced with the other sorcerers to cast during Manabreak and to resist pain from psyche. Like Callie, Caarda had probably learned what he’d set out to do.

“How can you cast with mana disrupted?” Tarak asked Callie.

“Are you hoping to learn right here during dinner?”

“If I can,” he admitted, knowing he could not hold anything back from a psychic.

“You can’t.” She smiled and touched his arm. “There is no trick to it. Practice is all that it takes. It feels like learning to cast all over again.”

“I was fast to learn, if you remember.”

“You *were*,” she remembered. “But we just don’t have the time. I saw what you’ve accomplished in the short time you’ve

been training. It was worth it for you to spend that time on your new spells.”

“I wish I had more time.”

“We all do. We uncovered so much in this last week.”

“What else was discovered?” Tarak asked. “I was banished to my sad little corner and practically spent a week on my own.”

“I was well aware and missing you every day.”

He squeezed her hand.

Callie explained, “Charlie demanded that the name of the tree Kyrro’s sorcerers specialize in will now be called ‘nether magic.’ Nether as in lying beneath the earth, as the energy supposedly comes from underground. The king allowed it after Leon agreed. They think it’s the last tree that hadn’t been discovered.”

“How many specializations are there? I have lost track.”

“I think I have, as well.”

“Charlie!” Tarak called. He was not seated far from them.

Charlie looked over.

Tarak asked, “How many specializations are there?”

The sorcerers nearby stopped their conversation to listen.

Charlie leaned down and grabbed a pack. He set it on his lap and started to fish through it. Soon he pulled out a parchment and unrolled it.

“The lad has a bag of parchments nearby at all times?” Tarak muttered to Callie in amusement.

“I’m sure he has ink as well. He’s been taking notes laboriously.”

Charlie said, “Let’s see. There’s elemental. That was your grandfather’s favorite tree and the basis of most sorcery here in Dorrinthal for a long time. We know the most about it. My Mitalia spell is in that tree, and we recently found out that the mastery spell of the tree—IC, C, uC—is the Majlan spell Desil

casts to change the state of things between solid, liquid, and gas. It's all the other trees we've had to learn the most about, so there are still many unknowns. I am almost certain we've at least discovered the existence of all of them."

He looked over the scroll again and seemed to be skimming and reading. "Elemental, one. Divination, two. That's your tree, Tarak."

"I recall."

"Enchantment makes three," Charlie continued. "That one has the most potential for new and exciting spells at this point. Conjunction makes four. That's Jon's tree, and no one else seems to have any spells from it, which means it might be one of the rarest."

"Wolf had it," Aliana muttered.

"I wasn't counting the dead," Charlie said. "Nether magic is the fifth specialization. It has all the natural energies: bastial, sartious, esitry, and artistry. It also seems to be the only tree through which rifts and portals can be made. The last one, number six, is the mortal magic specialization. That's where psyche and entering the plane of mana reside. It seems to have the closest relationship with mana itself, including the way mana interacts with our bodies. Leon's healing spell and his strength spell are in that tree. Leon's healing spell is not as strong as Jon's, but that's only because Leon doesn't have access to the third octave of F that Jon does. They use the same notes. I imagine they work similarly but must be a little different because they are in different trees. I have wanted Leon to conduct more testing, but he keeps claiming he's busy." Charlie sounded bothered by this, but Leon *was* busy. Everyone should see it, including Charlie.

"So that's six specializations in total. Speaking of testing," Charlie went on, "we figured out that your father's trap spell is in the enchantment tree, which means he should have more ability over other enchanting spells. Reuben tried to spend some time teaching a few to Caarda, but it was unfruitful. I'd say the enchanting tree has gone from one of the less interesting to one of the most. We need a lot more time to

explore it, but the problem is that Eden and Reuben have similar low ranges, and some of the more interesting spells are higher in frequency. Also, Eden is going to be preoccupied with esitry and now artistry for a while.” He stared at Eden as she ate in between them. She shifted her gaze for hardly a second, then ignored Charlie.

Tarak said, “I had thought enchanting meant altering items like weapons and armor?”

“Apparently there is a lot more to it. Mana can be enchanted. And Caarda seems to be able to enchant a location. We have a lot more to learn.”

“I see, Charlie, thank you.”

Charlie opened his mouth as if to keep talking, but he got the hint and put away the scroll to return his focus to his meal. Tarak had heard plenty more than he needed to about mana for now and wanted this last chance to speak with Callie.

He asked her, “How have the others fared with artistry?”

“Basen has shown the greatest ability with it so far even though he has spent the least amount of time with it.”

Tarak was going to ask about the headmaster. He had seen him off in the opposite corner of the courtyard making portals, but he had been too far for Tarak to tell if Basen had akorell with him.

“How are his portals?”

“Not as strong as with akorell, but he can make them now without it. They will work if we need them, but akorell will remain with him just in case.”

“He must have been quite pleased with that result, but hey, hold on. Did Basen make a new portal location within the courtyard?”

“Apparently the act of practicing is the same as making a connecting portal location. So yes, he did, but then he spent most of today undoing that. It’s gone now. We were not too concerned while all of us were there practicing.”

“A better alternative to Basen practicing portals in the forest,” Tarak agreed.

Callie nodded. “He spent the rest of his time over this last week making links that Grayhart, Effie, Desil, and Eden tried to break. No one is very skilled with artistry yet except for Basen. It’s only with Tienna’s help that anyone besides Basen can make a link that will hold two legs together.”

“Basen can do that?”

“He can, surprisingly, but it takes him some time to formulate the spell. I doubt it will be of much use in the heat of battle, especially when his ability with fire is unmatched.”

“He can outcast Leon?”

She tilted her head as if in thought. “It’s different. Leon makes actual fire that he controls, while Basen pulls in bastial energy and feeds sartious to it. The fireballs of Basen are faster and hit harder. They can kill on impact, I have heard. Leon, as you are probably aware, has more control over fire itself, but his fireballs aren’t as fast or strong. I don’t think they burn as hot, either. I’ve learned a lot about bastial energy in these last few days. The energy itself can be even hotter than fire.”

Tarak wished he could’ve spent more time with the sorcerers he would be fighting alongside, but there was no denying how useful his solo training had proven to be.

“We also found out that my sister’s empowerment spell is in the same tree as all the natural energies. She uses Lower C, E, and G. Apparently Cleve has been using that spell for decades, but one octave higher. He’s not sure if his spell can be cast on others. He has been trying but without luck. The current theory is that Cleve’s spell can replenish fatigue, provide strength, or add quickness to his movements, but to himself only. Desil and Basen can use the same spell and are also unable to cast it on others, and they aren’t nearly as good at it as Cleve is. Tienna uses the lower octave version to boost the power of mana in others and replenish other people’s stamina, but she can’t seem to refresh herself.” Callie touched Tarak’s arm. “Isn’t it exciting how much we’ve learned? And

there is still so much to find out! No one has access to the higher octave version, so we can only guess what it might do.”

“All it does is make me angrier at the Ancients. We should be able to invest all the time we need into sorcery and discover all it has to offer. Instead, we prepare to risk our lives against those arselickers.”

Callie nodded sadly.

“Attention, everyone,” the king said. Conversations died down. Forks were set on plates. “We have decided who will go into Korrithin Castle tomorrow and who will stay here to defend our land. Both tasks are important. Xiffrik and Basael may attempt something while Lycast is susceptible.”

Reuben raised his hand. The king pointed at him.

“What of Rohaer? I see King Barrett is no longer here, but will he and his land be defended?”

“Barrett did return. Jon helped him safely enter his castle and came back to us through the same portal. King Barrett has recruited his own team of sorcerers who are in the midst of training. They have a long way to go to be of use against an army, but with the help of guards and hired sorcerers, Barrett and his kingdom should remain safe from attempts of control by Ancients.”

Reuben asked, “Is he no longer the king reagent but the official king now?”

“Yes. After the attempt on his life and Fatholl’s assistance in catching everyone involved, there are few people left who want a different king. He has done well, and the people have seen this. There is time to celebrate this after our success.” The king had shown a quick look to Basen as he did mention Fatholl’s name, but this appeared to be a conversation they’d had already. There was nothing in Basen’s calm expression to indicate shock or even displeasure.

“While we can assume some risk to our land,” Nykal explained, “the risk and danger within Korrithin Castle is much greater. Everyone who is to go there tomorrow has a specific skill that we expect to need. First the women.

Grayhart: psyche, sword, Manabreak, and disruption of artistry. Effie: sartious energy, fire, and disruption of artistry. Aliana: tracking and bow. We must know where our enemies are. Eden: rift disruption and artistry disruption. Make it difficult for any summoner to open a rift. It is my understanding there will be many of them. Tienna: empowerment of all. That is it for the women. Callie and Hadley, you will stay here.

Callie opened her mouth. A squeak came out, but she must have realized the same thing as Tarak. She would be of more use here, separated from Desil, who was clearly going. Also, her most useful skill in combat was fire, and there would be plenty of fire among them with Basen and Effie going.

“On to the men,” the king continued. “Basen: portals, fire, sword, and artistry disruption. Desil: Majlan, sword, and psyche immunity. Cleve: sword and resistance to all. You will be our shield. As well as Tarak: gravity, flight, light manipulation, innate healing, sword, and strength. The last men to go are Arthur: water defense. And Jon: healing, Argil, flight, and sword. Zarin will go with all of you to the castle but will remain out of harm’s way. This team of women and men should allow for the best chance to slay Monrra. It is also a small enough group that you should be able to pick your battles and keep every member safe. There may be some confusion as to why some are to go and others are to stay, so allow me to speak of those who are staying.”

Tarak was not surprised that he was going and Callie was staying, but Leon’s name had been left off that list.

The king continued, “Reuben and Hadley: You both are crucial to the support of everyone but won’t be as useful in a clustered group roaming unfamiliar halls and battling strange monsters. Reuben, your skill with sword and enchanting will be of better use here in case of an attack.”

“I agree, sire.”

“Hadley, your potions seem as if they could be debilitating to potential enemies, like your curses had been,

but you're still in an experimental phase. We believe the chances of accidents in Korrithin are high.”

“I understand and agree, sire.”

“Callie, we have to keep you separate from Desil in case there needs to be communication between the groups. Your skillset is of much better use here, while his is far more useful there.”

She gave a slight bow of her head without words.

“Michael: Wind, flight, sword. You are to stay here where we may need others with flight to quickly travel from one place to another. Charlie: mtalia. You are to stay near me and the others. You will prevent any injury from a blade. Leon: fire, water, wind, strength, sword, and psyche resistance.”

Tarak looked at Callie with a question in his eyes.

She nodded. “He learned to resist psyche very well in the short time we had.”

“Leon has decided he will be the most useful where Xiffrik is most likely to attack because of his ability to resist psyche and cast through Manabreak. If Xiffrik shows up in Korrithin, it will most likely be to slay Monrra. If he comes here, we will be his target. Leon's ability to fly also will make him of more use here, where our enemies may show themselves somewhere outside of this castle. That leaves one last person. Caarda: gravity, traps, flight, innate healing, and strength. Caarda's traps seem to have the highest power of any spell. We are still trying to determine why enchanting a location with the spell increases its power, but we are all in agreement that these spells are better in fortifying a location than attacking a castle. I have confidence that with Caarda, Leon, and the rest of the team who are to remain in Lycast, we will be able to stand against any attack from Basael and Xiffrik. I am also confident in Basen's ability to lead the Korrithin team to victory while I oversee the protection of Lycast. If anyone has any concerns, voice them now.”

All appeared silently content with the king and the headmaster's choices.

“Good,” Nykal concluded, then looked at Zarin as if expecting him to follow with something.

Zarin spoke to everyone. “There are only a few locations in Korrithin Castle that are suitable for experiments involving akorell metal. We will be teleporting into one of these locations. I should be able to recognize where we are once we take the portal and I can see the room. Depending on where Aliana feels Monrra to be afterward, I will determine the best route to the Ancient.”

“Armor and shields will be ready for everyone by tomorrow morning,” the king announced. “You should all prepare to rest. Grayhart will come by each of your rooms in an hour and use psyche to assist you with sleep. We attack at sunrise.”

Tarak had passed out promptly after Grayhart had come in, but he had awoken sometime during the night. After trying to fall back asleep for what felt like an hour, he eventually realized sleep would not come. He would try again after a snack from the kitchen.

He made his way from his room to the dining hall. More guards than usual stood watch, one at the hall in the apartments, another at the door, and an extra two in front of the keep. Would they have to do this every night until Xiffrik and Basael were slain?

“Thank you for standing watch,” Tarak told them as he passed. *Poor souls*, he thought as he walked into the dining hall.

He recognized the large body of Cleve sitting at one of the tables, Jon across from him. A lamp on the table drew long shadows behind them. Tarak greeted each of them with a nod as he approached, then he sat beside Jon on the bench.

“Been up long, gentlemen?” Tarak asked as he took a loaf of bread from the basket between them. He ripped off half and took a bite before setting the remaining portion on the table in front of him.

“Not long,” Jon said. “I just sat down before you. Cleve was already here.”

“I came to gather my thoughts,” the big warrior said.

The guests from Kyrro were staying in the great hall. Tarak had seen the guestrooms during his time in the castle. They were just as large and lavish as the ones for the king’s sorcerers in the apartments. Cleve would no doubt be comfortable gathering his thoughts in his room, but there was food out here.

“Have either of you fought before?” Cleve asked.

“Jon fought in a war. I have been part of a small battle.”

“You’re both too young for all that.”

Jon said, “I heard you fought in a long war when you were only seventeen.”

“I was too young, also.”

They ate silently for a little while.

“Do you have any advice, Cleve?” Tarak asked.

Cleve looked off to the side. He swallowed the bread he was eating and tilted his head. Then he glanced back at Tarak.

“Some people say that the worst battles are the ones inside your mind.”

“And what do you say?” Tarak asked.

“I would not have chosen this, but my battles have guided me through life.”

Tarak replied, “The real ones or the ones in your mind?”

“The real ones.”

“What about the ones in your mind?”

“The fears of the mind hold no weight when you have confidence.”

Jon looked to be nodding. He asked Tarak, “Are you worried?”

“Me? No. Of course not.”

They stared at him.

“A little,” he admitted. “A lot of lives will depend on abilities of mine that I only recently learned.”

“I heard how you fought in the first battle against Monrra,” Jon said. “It sounds like you had no fear.”

“None, that is true. My mind was clear.”

“It will be again. Some people don’t perform well under pressure, but others thrive on it.”

“As you do?” Tarak wondered.

Jon nodded. “You as well. Have confidence in yourself.”

Tarak hadn’t even realized it was a lack of confidence that had kept him awake. It had not been a problem in the past, but in the past, he’d never been responsible for other lives.

Jon was right, though. Tarak had enjoyed the battle as soon as Monrra’s link was broken and he could actually fight. It had been his chance to finally show Monrra and her followers the true consequences of their actions.

Tarak would have another chance tomorrow. Monrra would be there, but her followers were different now. These were people who came and murdered, and for what? Monrra had probably promised them power and usurped land, and they had *killed* for it? These were people who needed to be destroyed!

Tarak stood up. He gave a nod of thanks. “I am off to bed.”

“I’m going back as well,” Jon stood.

Cleve stood and brushed the bread dust off his hands. “Me, too. Goodnight.”

Only a lack of sleep would put Tarak at a disadvantage, and he wasn’t about to let that happen.

He and Jon parted with Cleve at the entrance to the great hall. They stopped outside in the courtyard.

“I look forward to fighting beside you, Tarak.”

“And I you, Jon.”

They shook hands, then flew up to their respective rooms.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Breakfast was brought to Tarak's room. He appreciated the solitude as he gathered his thoughts. When he finished, he made his way down to the courtyard where his armor awaited.

The king had opted for better visibility and movement over full metal suits. Tarak's armor was a metal cuirass with no sleeves. Others had on similar gear, though three out of the five from Kyrro wore their full body suits of hard leather. Apparently it was just as light as the single breastplate of steel Tarak put on. Nykal and his people were advanced in many ways, but Kyrro seemed to have armor-making mastered.

Tarak spoke to his father about the likelihood of an attack. "Do you believe Basael will come for the king?"

"I do."

Caarda had appeared perpetually in a poor mood since the betrayal. Tarak had always figured that Caarda's relationship with his father had been strained in the same way Tarak's had been with Caarda, but Tarak was realizing that he was wrong. All of Basael's children had looked up to him at one point, and Caarda had probably been the same. It likely made it that much harder that Basael had turned against him and Tarak.

Tarak looked up to his father now. If Caarda turned against him and made an attempt on the king, Tarak would probably be in the same mood.

"Basael is a *shit*," Tarak reminded Caarda.

Caarda surprised Tarak by giving a light laugh. "I have come to see that is true."

"He has always been a shit. Do not think of him as a father. You are a father. Do not think of him as being good, even in the past. You are good and have always been good. I have been a shit...sometimes. You inspire me to be less of a shit."

Caarda smiled. "Although vulgar, I appreciate your words, my son."

They might have said more, but the king swept into the courtyard and announced, “Gather around.” Everyone seemed to be done equipping themselves with their armor and weapons. Tarak moved close to Callie and put his hand on her back. She touched his back for a moment as well. Then they both parted and stiffened. Tarak readied himself for the last instructions from his king.

Nykal spoke. “In a moment, the Korrithin team will ride to the forest and take a portal into the castle. If any of you end up in the dark realm for any reason, you are to return as quickly as you can in any rift near to you. If you end up stranded in the dark realm, look for a rift that will take you back. For those of you who can fly, Jon and Tarak, cover as much distance as you can while searching for a rift, but be wary of flying creatures. If you cannot find a rift, search in caves, caverns, or any place underground that you can reach. We believe rifts are most likely to form in these places as they do in our realm. Keep in mind that time progresses slower in that realm. We will find a way to come for you, but you may have to survive on your own until then. This is a worst-case scenario. It is best not to enter any of Monrra’s rifts, even if you believe you can kill her. We are hoping never to find out if Grayhart can cure esitry poisoning like Xiffrik can.”

“Thank you, sire,” Basen said. “Korrithin group, follow me into the forest.”

Those staying behind wished them well. Tarak had a last look at Callie. She gazed back at him without worry and gave a nod as if she had the utmost confidence he would return safely.

They rode through the city, turning the heads of everyone they passed. Dagaric was probably the only horse that could support Tarak’s weight, especially as he clutched his huge weapon. Some noticed that he held it with one hand, and their eyes widened. Others noticed the enormous round shield strapped to Cleve’s back and appeared in awe, though some looked more frightened than anything.

The people probably knew nothing about the devastations in elven and analyte land. Half of these people probably even

still thought of Tarak's grandfather as a god.

The truth would come out soon enough, hopefully without more deaths attached to it.

Basen led the group. He made it first to the portal location in the forest and dismounted. Tarak made a weakened spell of Gravity Sphere and floated off Dagaric carefully with his gigantic weapon. His horse stopped and looked back at him with what Tarak assumed was annoyance.

"There is time for games, but this is not it," Tarak explained to his animal. "This is serious."

"Grayhart and Jon will now take back the horses, and Jon will fly her back here," Basen explained. "In the meantime, we are to collect some boulders for Tarak."

He smiled in anticipation. "Oh good. I had hoped for some boulders."

"You had better be very careful using them," Basen cautioned. "Do not toss one without an order from me. I have to make sure no one steps in front of you."

"Confirmed."

"I can help you locate them," Aliana offered. "I can sense them. Take me on your back."

It only took a short time for Tarak to fly around and locate two boulders with Aliana's help. They were each probably twice as heavy as he was. He used Gravity Field to haul them back to the portal location, where he had left his sword. No one else had located any large rocks, so two boulders it would be. One was more than enough considering he could reuse it after hurling it and catching up to it later.

He knew he should be at least a little nervous, but all he could feel was excitement. Nothing was going to stop him from getting to Monrra. Nothing could stop him.

Jon and Grayhart returned. Jon set them down.

Basen made sure he had everyone's attention, then spoke.

“We have absolutely no idea what to expect when we take a portal into the castle. Monrra must know either Xiffrik, Basael, or an army of sorcerers is coming to face her. She probably has something prepared for all scenarios. But all of us here are the best. I have come to see why swordsmen and archers are easily countered by most sorcery. We are not sending in an army. We are not enlisting the help of other sorcerers. They would cause us to endanger ourselves in an attempt to keep them safe. We are the best for this scenario,” he repeated. “There is nothing in the world, and there is certainly nothing in that castle, that can stop this group.”

Everyone nodded.

“Stand back,” Basen warned. He had on two bracelets, each with a glowing stone. He flicked his wrist and grunted, but nothing happened. “Something’s blocking it.”

Tarak’s heart dropped. After all this time, was there no way to take a portal into the castle any longer?

“I might be able to destroy whatever it is,” Basen said. “Hold on.”

He groaned as he made claws out of his hands. A portal slowly opened. Chunks of bricks rolled out, looking as if something had taken bites out of them.

Basen collapsed to a knee as his portal shrank to nothing. “I’m not going to be able to make a very big portal if there are bricks all around.”

“I sensed something,” Aliana said.

Eden asked, “What?”

“Something besides brick. I think it was another portal of some kind. I have to feel longer to tell.”

“Basen, what if you use the akorell?” Grayhart asked.

“Let me see how much I can destroy without akorell first.”

Basen made another portal about twice the size. It was still only about half as tall as Tarak. Double the amount of bricks poured out.

The portal shook before deflating into nothing. Basen collapsed again. Cleve, Tarak, and Jon cleared out the bricks in the way. By the time they were done, Basen was ready again.

“I’m going to use one of the akorell stones now. Stand even farther back. Tienna, come boost me when I call for it.”

They all made plenty of room. Everyone flinched and put an arm up as there was a bright flash of light. The third portal was barely bigger than the second. More brick was broken and pulled through.

“Now, Tienna!”

She ran to him and put her hand on his back. Basen audibly strained, and his portal opened perhaps another inch all around. A few small chunks of brick fell out.

“That’s as wide as I can make it!” he said. “Gather around and look inside. Tell me what you see. Tienna, stop boosting or I may lose control.”

The sphere shrunk a little as Tienna stepped back.

Tarak said, “There is nothing but a brick wall here.”

“Same here,” Effie said.

“Here as well,” Cleve agreed.

“I am certain there’s a rift in there nearby,” Aliana said.

“Ah shit,” Jon muttered. “I see it. Monrra put a rift at the only exit.” He gestured from his side of Basen’s spherical portal.

Everyone came around to Jon’s side.

Desil asked, “A rift to the dark realm?”

“It looks like it,” Jon said.

Tarak confirmed, “Correct. Those rifts are dark and blue like this one.”

Basen said, “I can feel more brick pushing against the edges of the portal everywhere but one side. Zarin, any idea where we are in the castle here?”

“No, they must’ve stacked the bricks in the portal room. I’d have to see more of the room to tell.”

Tarak wondered, “What happens if we go through a portal and into a brick wall?”

“I hope you would be unable to exit and be pushed back through into our location, but it could be something much worse. I wouldn’t venture to try.”

Grayhart asked, “Can you make the portal smaller so that Desil can fit through and destroy the brick?”

“No way,” Effie said. “It takes Desil time to soften something as hard as brick. He’ll either be killed by some creature, or he’ll be pushed into the dark realm where he’ll die from esitry poisoning. He’s not going first.”

“Then what do you suggest?” Grayhart asked.

“I don’t know, but not Desil.”

“As embarrassing as it is for my mother to defend me,” Desil said, “she’s right in this case. I wouldn’t be able to do anything before I’m attacked or forced into the rift.”

“How likely is it for esitry poisoning to occur?” Cleve asked.

“It is a certainty,” Basen said, his face concentrated. “I can hold the portal open a little longer, but it’s not easy with brick pushing against it.”

“Xiffrik cured my esitry poisoning with psyche,” Eden said. “What is the realistic chance Grayhart could cure someone else’s?”

“Whatever the chance, it’s not a risk I’m willing to take when failure means death,” Basen said.

“Let’s put one of Tarak’s boulders in first,” Cleve suggested.

No one objected to that.

Basen said, “Put it in at an angle where it will hit the wall, not go into the rift.”

“Here it comes,” Tarak said. He lightened the boulder with a light gravity field and dumped it into the portal.

The portal cracked and dissolved as the boulder fell through and to the ground. Basen shrieked as he grabbed his head.

The other sorcerers surrounded him.

“Are you all right?” Jon asked. “I don’t feel anything I can heal.”

“I’ll be fine.” He stayed on one knee as he held his hand over his forehead. “Just give me a moment.”

Grayhart said, “You’re creating a hole, and the force of it is bearing on your mind. Then you’re dumping something incredibly heavy into that hole, but there’s nowhere for it to go. Of course you’re going to have to then hold the boulder with your mind. It’s too much.”

“Oh, thank you for that explanation,” Basen replied with sarcasm. “Where was all of that before?”

“I just figured it out,” she grumbled.

Tarak sighed as he realized that he was the only one who could go first. “I’m immune to the esitry poisoning. I will go into the portal, then into the rift and the dark realm. I shall go around the rift in the dark realm and enter again to come out its other side, back into the castle where I will take on Monrra. I am bringing my sword with me.”

“Tarak, you have no ability to break artistry,” Jon reminded him. “She might link your body to a tree and have a creature kill you while you’re immobile.”

“God below!” Eden exhaled with frustration. “I cannot confirm if I’m immune to esitry poisoning, and we don’t even know if Grayhart can cure it, but seeing as there is no other way into the castle, I will go, dammit!”

“That’s very brave of you, Eden,” Tienna said.

“Shut up, Tienna.”

Grayhart put her hand on Eden's shoulder. "If Xiffrik can cure you while weakened in this realm, I should be able to as well."

"I'm *really* hoping for that."

"Take the shield, Eden," Tarak suggested.

"*That* thing?" She pointed to it on the ground nearby. "I doubt I can even lift it!"

"Well, try. It could save your life if you could hold it."

She bent down and tucked her short arms into the straps. Tarak helped her up, then slowly took his hands off her.

She bent her knees and looked as if she would topple forward at any moment, but she leaned back and waddled over to the rift.

Arthur came up to her. "It's likely to kill you if you go through with it tucked under your chin like that." He took the weight off its bottom so she could slide her arms out.

"Forget the blasted thing." Tarak helped Arthur set down the shield. "I will go first, and I am taking my sword. It should be all we need if you can destroy Monrra's links."

"I will try my best," Eden replied.

Basen said, "Everyone will follow you as soon as the rift to the dark realm has collapsed."

Tarak looked over his team of sorcerers. Of the men, there were Jon, Cleve, Desil, Basen, Arthur, and Zarin. Of the women, there were Grayhart, Effie, Aliana, and Tienna. This was not a group of people who could be defeated so long as they made it safely inside the castle. Tarak and Eden just needed to make Monrra's rift collapse.

He really hoped Eden would survive this. Just because she wasn't good for Michael didn't mean she deserved to die.

She had on a metal chest piece like Tarak did, though it looked a lot heavier on her small frame even though it was probably half the weight.

He asked her, "I have not seen Saffy in a while."

“You will,” she interrupted before he could finish asking how strong the dragon had become.

He nodded, then told Basen, “I am ready.”

“So am I,” Eden said.

Basen made the portal. Tarak navigated around until he could see the dark rift rather than a brick wall.

“Monrra does not want us going into the castle through a portal,” Basen said, “but yesterday was her last day of getting what she wants.”

Tarak punched his fists together as adrenaline surged. “Damn right!” He jumped into the portal.

He was pulled with incredible speed. Lights flashed before blending into static beams that followed along beside him. The force pulling at his body was almost too much for him to keep hold of his sword. It *was* too much for him to breathe. The lights turned blue, flashing and breaking into streaks that ran across his tunnel of dark energy.

Just when he thought he couldn’t take it anymore, he was dumped into the dark realm. He gathered his dizzy self and stood up preparing to fight. He appeared to be on a field of grass, but it was blue and covered in animal corpses. He didn’t see Monrra, but there were a whole slew of creatures all around, most bigger than a horse. They eyed Tarak aggressively.

Eden plowed into his knees from behind and tripped him.

“Come on!” he yelled as he yanked her to her feet.

She was limp and barely conscious as she groaned. He used one arm to scoop her up, the other never letting go of his sword. Coming out from this side of the rift meant going back the same way would send him into Basen’s portal. So he carried Eden around to the other side of the rift. Monrra’s creatures were charging, screeching. They reminded Tarak of some of the most disgusting insects he had seen, some with twenty legs, except they were huge.

There was one especially nasty one that scampered faster than the rest with quick feet and a mouth filled with sharp fangs. Tarak could hear it skittering as it neared them. It looked like an eyebrow with legs and a gaping mouth, only it was as big as a house.

He felt Eden come to. “What the fuck is that!” she yelled and squirmed in his arms.

“Monrra is not here. We are entering the castle!”

He jumped into the rift still holding Eden.

He was ready for the pull this time, clenching every muscle in his body and forcing his lungs to breathe. He wanted to yell for Eden to do the same, but the strain made it impossible to speak.

Red light streaked across the tunnel this time, then flashed and turned white. Tarak twisted his body to put his feet out in front of him. They flew out of the rift. Tarak let go of Eden and pushed her away as he realized part of her was underneath him. Tarak landed on his arse with a “fuck!” as Eden screamed and rolled away.

Tarak pointed his sword protectively as a furry behemoth stomped toward him on two legs. There were five claws on each hand, close enough for Tarak to see just how long each was. The head of the beast had two eyes and a mouth stuck into a flat face, which was the only part not covered in gray fur. With Tarak sitting down, the beast looked like a giant.

It tried to swipe Tarak’s sword out of its way, but Tarak turned it to prick the monster on its arm. It howled as it backed away. Tarak scrambled to his feet. He prepared his light gravity spell. The head of the beast was probably just near the tip of his lifted sword, but a strike down its chest would be just as good.

He swung. Suddenly, he fell over. He knew he had been linked, but he needed time to figure out how.

He noticed Monrra behind the creature with her arm aimed at him. The monster stomped toward Tarak to end his life. He tried to lift his sword, but his legs moved with it.

“Eden!” he yelled.

“Break it with your strength; I’m weakening it!”

Tarak moved all of his limbs in opposite directions. Monrra growled through gritted teeth.

The link was broken. Tarak rolled out of the way of the creature’s stomp. He shoved himself up with one hand as he made light gravity, floating up to his feet. He stepped toward the approaching creature and attacked with his practiced spell, swinging all the way around with incredible speed from the light gravity.

The tip of his sword sliced through the creature’s chest and came out between its legs. Innards spilled out.

Amazingly, the creature still came after Tarak for two steps before collapsing and splitting in half.

It quickly died in a puddle of gore.

Tarak charged the analyte Ancient. She had tattoos on her arms, messy violet hair, and wore earrings and bracelets containing fangs and claws. She did not appear very tall or strong, but Tarak would be a fool to underestimate her.

Monrra had a long moment of shock before realizing her creature was dead. She extended her hand, and Tarak tripped and rolled over himself. His feet wound up smacking against her leg.

She stabbed him in the leg with her dagger. He tried to roll over and protect himself, but moving all limbs at once caused him to flail like a fish on land. He expected another stab to come down on his neck or head, but Monrra started to scream. Her link was broken.

Tarak rolled over to see Saffy scratching at her face as he beat his blue wings. Eden’s creature looked about the size of Tarak’s torso. It bit down on Monrra’s shoulder. She shrieked and flailed her dagger, managing to embed it in the side of Saffy.

He didn’t relent. He didn’t even seem to notice the dagger until Eden shrieked, “Back, Saffy! You’re hurt!”

He flew off Monrra's shoulder but fluttered clumsily down to the floor.

Blood stained Monrra's pink-purple hair. Gashes ran down the olive skin of her cheeks. Her eyes held the rage of a plan ruined.

"I know you," she told Tarak. "You should be dead from esitry poisoning. Did Xiffrik save you?"

"No one is dying from esitry poisoning anymore. You will be killed if you do not give up your control of mana and leave this place forever. This is your only warning."

She heaved for breath but stopped to give a laugh. "Come and get me." She stepped back into a hall and slammed a door shut. The sound of a lock turning rang out.

Tarak looked behind him. Her rift was gone. They were in a room without windows. All furniture had been cleared from the stone floors and walls. A partially destroyed enclosure of brick surrounded one section of the room. One of Basen's portals suddenly emerged from within it.

There was a sound from behind the closed door, a pounding like a hammer driving a spike into the floor. Tarak and Eden watched the door for a moment, but the sound continued without the door moving.

Tarak went to the portal and motioned for the rest of the sorcerers to come as Eden tended to her creature. Jon was the first one through, landing on his feet.

"Does anyone need healing?" He approached and looked around.

"My pet. Can you?"

"Let me try."

Grayhart was next. She landed on her feet as well but fell to her knees for a moment. Tarak helped her up. Jon bent down and put his hand over where Monrra's dagger was protruding from the side of the little dragon.

"Yes, I can." He pulled out the dagger, then put his hand over the wound. The creature screeched for a few breaths, then

stopped.

By then, Desil and Cleve had come through the portal, and Effie was just behind them.

“Do you feel any poisoning?” Grayhart asked Eden.

The summoner opened a small rift. Saffy flew into it.

“No, I think I’m immune to it now, too.”

“Good,” Grayhart replied. “What’s that pounding sound?”

“Maybe you can tell us, psychic,” Tarak said. “But be wary of the door. Monrra recently retreated behind it.”

Grayhart took a spot along the wall as she reached over and felt the door. She closed her eyes for a few moments, then opened them and looked displeased. She walked back toward the rift on the other side of the small room.

“There are many people in the hall. They are calm. I think I feel them setting a trap.”

“Monrra locked the door when she left,” Eden said.

Almost everyone had come through the rift by then. Aliana came through next, then Tienna, and then Arthur. Zarin tumbled through afterward. Tarak helped him up. Finally Basen entered, not staggering a step.

“What happened?” he asked.

“She was not in the dark realm,” Tarak explained. “But there were a lot of creatures there, some of which were too big to fit in here. We took her rift back into the castle, and I was attacked by that one before I destroyed it.” Tarak pointed at the head and shoulders of the furry beast on a pile of blood and innards.

“Tarak killed it with one swing,” Eden said.

“I would’ve liked to have seen that,” Zarin said.

“You will again, my friend,” Tarak assured.

“I’m pretty sure I witnessed Monrra shit herself,” Eden continued, “but she still locked Tarak in a link. I was too slow

to break it. He was stabbed in the leg. She then escaped and locked the door. The hall looked empty before, but I'm sure there's hell waiting for us on the other side now."

"Any idea where we are, Zarin?" Basen asked.

The analyte unrolled the map as he glanced around. "It's difficult to identify our location without anything in the room." He glanced at the map for a while, then at the room again. "No, I can't tell yet. Let's get that door open first."

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

Basen turned to Aliana, “What do you feel, ranger?”

She was already shaking her head before walking up and putting her hand to the door.

“Hundreds of them, all around. Let me see if I can figure out how many are in this hallway.”

“And you, Grayhart?” Basen asked.

“I cannot sense anyone anymore. They must not be close.”

“Zarin, where in god’s world are we?” Basen said with a tinge of anger. “I need you to figure it out.”

“I’m trying.” The analyte was crouched over the map rolled out on the floor. Sconces on the walls illuminated the bare room. “Is this a *secret* room?” he seemed to ask himself. “There are no rooms without windows that only have one entrance.”

Aliana said, “I can feel maybe fifty far down the hall. It’s hard to tell.”

“Away from the door everyone,” Basen said.

It was a thick door. No amount of arrows or fireballs could get through, but there had to be some beasts born in the dark realm that could knock it over and flatten anyone on the other side.

Zarin stood and picked up the map. “This has to be a secret room I never knew about,” he said.

“Is your mother known for secrets?”

“I suppose she is, but I didn’t think any of those secrets were kept from me. Here, look.”

“Hold on, let me secure our position,” Basen instructed. “Aliana and Grayhart, stay near the door, not right behind it, and feel for aggression. Arthur, stay close to them and have Water Wall ready. It’s the best defense we have against the unknown.”

Zarin showed the map to Basen as Tarak and the others stood behind for a look. The analyte prince pointed toward the top left side. "I imagine we're underground. We're probably around here, the northern side of the castle. Given the terrain near the outside of the castle here, it seems the most likely place for a hidden room to exist underground. There are no mountains to dig under, only dirt."

"So if Desil makes a hole in the ceiling, we're hitting dirt?" Basen asked.

"I would assume so."

"I was really hoping there was another way into the rest of the castle," Basen admitted.

"Someone's coming closer," Aliana warned.

Cleve took the large round shield and assumed the first position against the wall near the door. Everyone gathered behind him.

"Common tongue or analyse?" asked someone from far down the other side.

"Common tongue," Basen replied. "Who are you?"

"I am Raineer, captain of Army Monrra." He had a rough accent. "Who are you?"

"I'm Basen, the captain of this group who have come to stop Monrra. Do you realize how powerful she will become if her control of mana is not challenged? Grayhart," he whispered, and motioned for her to come close. "Can you feel for lies?"

She shook her head. "He's too far."

"We realize. We empower her," Raineer said.

"And what are you getting in return?" Basen asked.

"Unnecessary question. You cannot offer what we trust to receive."

"Is it land, money, and power?"

"Unnecessary question."

Basen kept talking through the door. “Monrra may turn on you once you are no longer needed, but we may be able to make a deal.”

“You waste breath. No deal. No trust. This is only warning to you. Go back and live, or open door and die.”

“Aliana,” Basen whispered and gestured for her to come close. “Do you feel Monrra?”

“Yes, but she’s farther than everyone else.”

“How many are there?”

“They’re crowded together, it’s difficult,” Aliana said.

“But you’re certain they’re crowded?” Basen asked.

“Yes.” Aliana replied.

“Grayhart, you’re certain you felt them make a trap?”

“I cannot be certain. I haven’t felt a lot of people making traps before.”

“We need eyes on them,” Basen said.

Tarak had an idea. “Desil, make a small hole in the wall, and I will bend light to see them.”

“Bend light?” Desil asked.

“Trust me.”

Desil glanced at Basen, who shook his head. “Tarak should be able to give us sight in that case, but I don’t want any of them knowing what Desil can do yet. Even if it’s a little unsafe, I’d rather open the door a bit and let you bend light around it.”

The stench of Monrra’s destroyed creature was starting to get to Tarak, but it only made him more eager to get out of this room.

“Allow me,” Jon said and cautiously went to the door. He put his hand near the keyhole. The lock clicked open. Jon stepped back.

“Everyone stay clear.” Basen pulled open the door slightly.

Tarak came closer and tried to see through using the trick Barrett had taught him to bend light, but there wasn't very much light to use.

"I need more light that comes from a stationary source."

Basen made a ball of bastial energy nearby. "Is this good?"

"Closer to the opening."

Basen crouched nearby but made sure to keep his body away from the small sphere of white light.

"That works," Tarak said.

Tarak did not feel light move. It was too quick. It was more that he felt the existence of it. The light from Basen's energy passed through the small opening and reflected off many things down the hall. Tarak found this reflected light with his mana and returned it to their room.

A few people made remarks of surprise as the image of what was behind the door appeared in front of them like an illusion. There was a narrow hallway with spikes across the entire floor. Tarak played with the angles of the light for a better view, but the image of people at the end of the hall was hazy and dark, no matter how he tried to change it.

An arrow shot into the door, breaking Tarak's focus, but it seemed clear enough what lay ahead.

"That's fine, Tarak. That's good," Basen said. "We know now we can open the door. They can't charge through."

Basen waited until everyone else was clear, then he opened the door as he stepped out of the way of the doorway. About ten arrows flew past them. A fireball exploded against the back wall. Twenty more arrows pattered against the wall, but another fireball blasted all the scattered arrows away.

The barrage continued as Basen waited with his arms folded, looking a little bored.

Eventually it stopped.

He looked around the corner. His head snapped back as more arrows and fireballs stormed through. He gave a loud sigh.

“Shut the damn door,” he eventually told Cleve, who had come to the other side with the shield ready.

Cleve threw the door shut. Arrows pattered against it.

Basen explained, “The hallway’s twenty to thirty steps, spikes across the whole thing. There’s an army of them waiting at the other end. There are probably summoners there, too. Nykal told me that no one besides Monrra can make a rift that will support the weight of a human into the dark realm, but Nykal also told me that he could not confirm this. It would be too easy for them to block our only escape through the hallway with a rift to the dark realm. That means there’s a chance one of them could send us to the dark realm when we get through the hall.”

“I will go first,” Tarak offered.

“I want to be behind Tarak,” Jon said.

“Eden is immune to esitry poisoning,” Basen reminded him.

“But Eden cannot fly or shield herself with energy. I felt some of the esitry from her and Tarak when I entered this room. My mana understands it now. It may sicken me for a short time, but I’m confident it won’t kill me.”

“You’re certain, Jon?”

“I trust my mana. I think I might even be able to heal it now, but that I’m less sure about.”

“Let me go far ahead of you, Jon,” Tarak said. “I can disrupt their entire army with gravity if I make it there without a rift interfering, but my spell will disrupt you as well, if you are too close behind.”

“I’ll stay far enough not to be disrupted but close enough to enter a rift with you if they make one.”

Cleve handed Tarak the large shield. “I’m not sure this will be enough,” Cleve said as he looked toward Basen.

Their leader put up his palm. "Give me more time to think."

Arthur asked, "And how are the rest of us going to traverse the spikes?"

"Effie could make sartious energy on top of them, and we will walk across," Basen suggested.

Effie asked, "And if they have a sartious mage who breaks my energy?"

"Then crawl across and Jon will heal us."

Effie scoffed.

"All right, hold on, let me think," Basen said.

Jon looked at Tarak. "I wish Charlie had come with us to melt those spikes."

Tarak nodded.

"Can you soften them, Desil?" Jon asked.

"Maybe if I could position myself close enough, but it will be too slow. It's not going to be a viable strategy."

"If the sartious energy is broken," Jon said, "I might be able to ferry everyone across one at a time while Tarak disrupts them."

"Tarak spending that much time alone will leave him maimed like a mammoth taking on a swarm of spear-handling men," Basen said.

"I have a new plan," Tarak proposed as he realized Basen was probably right. "I will lessen gravity, and we will all cross together."

"Yes, that is the plan," Basen agreed. "Arthur and Cleve at the front with Water Wall and shield. Jon nearby with Argil as backup. Effie, have sartious energy ready in case Tarak's gravity spell fails. If they make a rift, Tarak and Jon will go in as we wait on top of sartious energy." Basen put everyone in a specific order, ensuring Grayhart was right behind the essential people. "Tienna, boost Tarak and Arthur."

“How well can you boost two people?” Tarak asked her.

“Pretty well.”

Basen said, “Don’t be modest right now.”

“Very well,” Tienna corrected. “There isn’t much power lost when I boost multiple people, but it does tire me out faster.”

Tarak looked at Basen. “I hope you have big plans with her.”

“She knows them. We were all training together while you were becoming more familiar with your new spells. Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Tarak mentally prepared his spell as he took his place behind Cleve, Arthur, and Jon. “We must move quickly,” he warned. “I cannot lighten so many people for long.”

“We will jog,” Basen said. “Say when, Tarak.”

“Be ready for my call.”

Tarak shut his eyes and listened to his mana. He wanted to extend his gravity field a little past his comrades in case separation occurred. He had practiced this. He took a firm hold of his long sword and envisioned the spell working before taking the time to act.

He cast and felt the weight of all eleven people on his mind. He was not going to last long.

“Now,” he said. Cleve threw open the door and absorbed at least five arrows and a fireball with his shield as he pushed forward despite it all. Arthur stood right behind and made a wall of water in front of Cleve.

Tienna touched Arthur’s back, and the water darkened and extended outward.

People exclaimed in pain as they walked on the spikes, and Tarak realized he needed more strength as he stepped on one and felt it go through the sole of his boot.

Tienna put her hand on his shoulder as he put more force into it, and suddenly everyone became weightless. They

floated and slowed, all legs scrambling for purchase.

“Tarak!” Basen yelled from behind them.

Tarak tried to decrease the strength of his spell, but it was difficult to judge with Tienna’s boost. They fell too quickly and pricked their feet and legs on the spikes. Many screamed. Tarak lifted them up again, but their speed had slowed to that of a crawl.

“Keep everyone up!” Jon yelled as he flew back.

Arthur’s water wall had become dense with arrows and now boiled from the fireballs it continued to absorb.

Suddenly, Tienna bumped into Tarak’s back and pushed him along through the air. Muffled shouts sounded through shoves. Jon must’ve been behind everyone pushing them all with Argil.

“Maintain the line!” Basen shouted. “Maintain the line!”

Jon slowed his pushing as everyone found their spot again, Tienna’s hands on Tarak’s hips. Tarak put his hands on Cleve.

“Push, Jon!” Basen ordered.

“I can’t hold it any longer!” Arthur yelled. His wall of water had shrunk, now shaking with the quiver of his arm. Arrows and fireballs came around the sides, but everyone remained tightly behind each other.

One fireball exploded against the wall beside Tarak, and the force pushed him into the other wall. An arrow caught him in the arm, then a fireball blasted him in the chest and sent him spiraling backward as it broke his focus. His spell came to an end as he screamed in horror at what was about to become of him and his comrades.

He and the others fell onto sardonic energy covering the spikes. *Thank you, Effie.* Tarak was now at the back, and he wasn’t the only one who had been pushed out of formation by fireballs. Many of his comrades were strewn across the sardonic energy with arrows sticking out of them.

The plan had failed. Someone had to do something, or arrows and fireballs would whittle them away.

Tarak ripped the arrow out of his arm and made a sphere of gravity over his head. It pulled him up to the low roof of the hallway. He then directed the sphere of gravity forward. It pulled him over the heads of the other sorcerers. He would've kicked them in the back if he hadn't twisted and curled his body up to run parallel to the roof. He flew horizontally, upside down, with his arms out in front of him, his sword pulled into his gravity sphere and almost breaking the spell.

Cleve seemed to be the only one still standing of their fallen and injured comrades. If it wasn't for him and his shield, they all would have already been decimated by arrows and fireballs. Tarak flew over them, covering the entire hallway in the span of two breaths. He broke out into the open room flying at such a speed that no one could hope to stop him.

Maybe fifty men, some as tall as Tarak but with twice the girth, crowded this space. They had tattoos on their faces and down their necks. They looked wild and uncivilized, their armor boiled leather but with animal furs, claws, and teeth strewn about them. There was no furniture here, nothing on the walls. It was like entering an arena.

Tarak let his spell go and twisted to put his feet out in front of him. He mowed down three men before crashing onto a fourth. Tarak had barely hit the floor before he pulled himself up with the most powerful gravity spell he could make.

It swirled up about half the room into a tornado of sweaty men. They yelled in their language. Some sounded confused, but most shouted in clear anger. Tarak pulled his spell back in the direction he'd come, ensuring he yanked up everyone in his path. Most did not remain in the air with Tarak, as he'd had immense levels of practice maneuvering his body and mana in such a way as to keep only himself suspended. He flew around them like a hurricane, pulling all of them off their feet and slamming them into each other.

Eventually, he could not endure the strenuous spell any longer and came down back near the end of the hallway, where he saw Cleve charging through with his shield out. The large warrior seemed shocked at the sight of nearly every enemy on the floor. He tossed the giant shield into the nearest man getting up, then unsheathed a sword Tarak had never seen before. It was glowing without glowing, made of red and orange hardened energy, it seemed. Cleve sliced through three of them before Tarak had a chance to engage even one.

Tarak shot a look over his shoulder to see Jon healing everyone else in their group. A look back showed Cleve killing two more, then four, then six. He cut through them as if he'd done nothing his entire life but slay sweaty men as large as he was.

Tarak didn't see Monrra, but she could always show up in a rift later.

The largest of them all finally started shouting orders in his language. He had the same voice as the first one to speak through the door, Raineer. Tattoos of unfamiliar symbols marred his face. The pelt of some blue creature covered his shoulders and draped down his chest. He was one of the few soldiers in metal armor. He twisted his arm and pointed his sword somewhat inward as he made a large rift, stepping back to allow it to grow even bigger, until it reached the ceiling. Out stepped a four-legged, no, six, no eight-legged beast. It stretched out and brushed its spiky back against the low ceiling. Tarak couldn't see its mouth because tendrils hung down in front, swinging as it looked in each direction, its eyes glowing.

Raineer pointed his sword at Tarak, and the creature followed the direction. It hissed, blowing back the jiggling tendrils and revealing a circular mouth full of long teeth.

Raineer screamed instructions, and shield bearers lined up to defend the path of his beast. Just in time, unfortunately, as two large fireballs blasted the men into the legs of the fast-moving creature. Effie and Basen came to stand beside Tarak, blood covering their arms but probably now uninjured from Jon's healing. They shot higher fireballs, and one struck the

tall back of the beast yet did nothing to slow it as it charged. Tarak stepped forward to take the lead.

He grinned as he made his light gravity field behind and above him.

There was a flash of light, heat, and pain surging through his chest and back. All he could think to do was grip his weapon as tightly as possible.

He found himself slumped against the wall, smoking, as he realized he'd been struck by a fireball of an enemy mage and probably blown back through his light gravity to fly even farther.

The creature was just about on top of him! He tried to move but was too slow. The abomination opened its mouth as if to devour Tarak's head.

Something blasted it hard enough to turn it away. There was another blast that collapsed half of its legs. Jon flew onto the back of it and stabbed his sword down into its side, but he was torn off by a fireball.

The creature screeched and twisted. It lifted one of its legs and pushed out Jon's sword left behind, but Tarak had found his bearings by then. He had everything prepared by the time the beast turned on him again.

He let out a war cry as he swung his sword around and cut through the whole head of the beast. The carcass fell apart in front of him and spilled out the grisly contents of its body.

He walked around the carcass blocking his view and felt as if he was stepping into another world. There were swarms of massive bats, tall lizards, giant snakes, and engorged insects everywhere he looked. Of course every creature was unfamiliar, but it was clear enough how to kill any of them.

Tarak's party had been pushed back toward the hall again as they battled this entourage. Aliana dropped a bat with a well-placed arrow. Effie destroyed two more with a single fireball. Eden and Tienna stood behind them, and Zarin behind all with a sword and shield in hand and a brave but overwhelmed look on his face. Arthur seemed to be guarding

them all, giving anyone who looked their way a face full of water.

Tienna still had her hand on Effie's back as the fire mage unleashed a giant stream of flames to stop a man charging at them. Then she made a barrier of sartious energy to block a fireball and a couple of arrows. Effie appeared unafraid and ready, while Arthur more resembled Zarin, flinching constantly as if he expected something to come out of nowhere and slay him at any moment.

Desil stayed nearby and entrapped a group of men in the floor. Basen cut them down with surprisingly quick swings of his sword. Jon looked to have recovered and found a new sword, fighting far ahead with Cleve beside him. They were doing fine, more than fine, even, against anyone who came at them with sword, but then a giant lizard turned and smacked Cleve off his feet with a whip of its tail. He flew off and took down three barbarians in his path.

Tarak soared over and pounced on one of the many swordsmen looking to stab Cleve as the warrior rolled across the floor. Tarak made his practiced illusion of bending light to make it seem as if he was two steps over. He didn't bother to put up a defense as he swiped his gigantic sword in every direction and cut through arms, torsos, and necks of maybe a dozen men. Meanwhile, Cleve got up and started fighting in the other direction.

Tarak saw many swords stab and swing into his illusion. He used it like a magnet, maiming the arms and hands of too many men to count, but his plan was ruined when the pincers of some hideous-looking creature snapped down on Tarak's illusion with enough power to have sliced him in half.

Startled, he instinctively jumped away, though he did manage to keep up his illusion. Fatigue was wearing on him. His sword felt heavy, his mind foggy. He would die here if he fought until exhaustion. He put what he had left into lifting himself up and out of the swarming barbarians.

The pincers belonged to something akin to a gigantic mantis that jumped over everything in its way and would've

taken off Tarak's leg if he hadn't stuck his sword out to block the pincer. The strength of the creature was too much, pulling Tarak's sword out of his hand and flinging it out of the way. It jumped after him as Tarak pulled himself backward with Gravity Sphere.

A fireball knocked him out of the air. He slammed against the wall, and slid down into a herd of men, but they were blasted away by a fireball from Basen before any of them could stab him.

Unfortunately, that meant a path was now clear for the gigantic mantis. Tarak had little stamina left, but Cleve stepped in front of him and swiped at the creature, slicing off a pincer. It shrieked and tried to snip him in half with its other pincer, but Cleve rolled forward and jabbed his energy sword up into its abdomen. Then Cleve dove to avoid a fireball as the beast collapsed on the spot where Cleve had rolled from.

He'd given Tarak time to locate the fucker who had shot him. There seemed to be no end to her casting as she unleashed one fireball after another, every one of them at Cleve. A creature was attached to her shoulder, small and disgusting, like a bulbous slug, no doubt feeding her energy somehow.

She stood on a platform in the back of the room that was defended by many untouched soldiers. Tarak wanted to destroy them or at least disrupt them with a gravity spell, but he lacked the stamina to do little more than lift his sword.

Grayhart had moved the farthest forward. She wielded a sword with great skill, incredibly aware of her surroundings as she dodged attacks from behind, no doubt with the use of psyche.

She went completely still for a moment, clearly linked to something with artistry, but she swiped her hand down as she broke it with her mind. Jon ran past Tarak on his way to her.

"Pace yourself!" Jon advised Tarak as he tossed Tarak's sword near his feet. Tarak didn't even have time to thank Jon for recovering it before he flew over the heads of enemies and landed on top of someone closing in on Grayhart. Jon

positioned himself behind her, defending her flank. A swarm of swordsmen blew away as Jon expelled them with Argil.

Grayhart aimed her hand at the fire mage and took down the woman and all five men guarding her. Tarak was about to fly over and end her life when he noticed Tienna bravely dashing toward him with Zarin protecting her.

A large bat suddenly came down and clawed at her face. She stopped and covered her head as Zarin swung and sliced off its wing. Two more came at them. Tarak was there by then, stabbing at them but missing. He set down his sword and jumped up to grab one, then ripped off its wings and threw it to the side. Zarin had poked the other and caused it to flutter off.

Tarak picked up his sword as Tienna put her hands on him. He immediately felt recovered. He checked on Cleve and found him surrounded by many men and monsters. He might've looked overwhelmed if it wasn't for arrows from Aliana picking off men trying to flank him. Two came up on Cleve's back, but a fireball from Effie's wand blasted both of them away.

Desil seemed to have somehow detached the spikes from the hallway and reattached them to the floor in front of Aliana and Effie. Desil had then melted and reshaped the floor to now stand as a wall that went up to Aliana and Effie's waist. There was very little chance of anyone or anything getting to them unless it had wings.

Grayhart still had the fire mage subdued along with a dozen more. Jon was looking to clean them up, but his sword was trapped in the maw of a huge globular creature that was more mouth than anything else. Tendrils that acted as its many legs wrapped around Jon's ankles.

Tarak flew over everyone and landed on the back of the fire mage. He jammed his sword down through her body. Her screams of agony did not change. She might not have realized she was dying, distracted by Grayhart's spell of pain. Tarak took out his sword and stabbed it through the back of another

pained soldier, then another, and was about to slay a fourth when a link stopped him.

Monrra had come. She stood not ten steps away from Tarak on the same platform. Still emboldened by Tienna's recent boost spell, Tarak attempted to push every limb in opposite directions. He ripped apart the link and pulled a grunt out of Monrra's throat. She even staggered a step toward him.

She really was weaker. Her greed to change mana would be her downfall.

Tarak charged her with his sword out like a spear. She formed a rift between them, and he could not stop in time.

He tumbled into the dark realm and felt creatures all around him. He immediately got up and turned around as the rift started to close. Something that felt like vines grabbed at his ankle. He swiped his sword behind him without looking and freed himself as a creature shrieked. The rift seemed to close slower than normal here. It had to do with the snail's pace of time, no doubt. Tarak was thankful for it as he managed to dive in and made sure to kick up his feet so as not to lose part of his sole like he had the first time he'd fallen into one of Monrra's rifts.

He flopped back into the castle. Tarak turned over and tried to get his knees up as he sensed an attack coming, but a gargantuan man diving on top of him was too close already. The barbarian fell while driving a dagger into Tarak's unprotected sword arm.

Tarak made gravity behind the barbarian to yank him off. His eyes went wide as he let out a surprised squeal, soaring into the side of what had to be one of Monrra's creatures, based on its size.

Tarak pulled out the dagger from his arm and threw it at the massive beast. The handle bounced off. Tarak muttered a curse. The creature had four legs, a long and sharp tail, and spikes along its top. It had two eyes above a gigantic mouth. There seemed to be an opening in its skin across its long neck, showing molten red as if it was glowing inside. It might not

have been all that threatening if it didn't take up half of the room.

Two rifts were open behind it, and Monrra's people were dashing in as if to retreat. The man Tarak had thrown back fell on top of two others. They tried to scramble up to their feet, but Basen bathed them all in fire as he ran in. He jumped to the side to avoid the slow swipe of a claw from Monrra's massive creature that his fancy armor would probably do nothing to mitigate.

Cleve somehow had gotten on the back of the dark gray monster and jammed his energy sword into its thick neck. Instead of blood, fire spurted out as Cleve yelled in shock and fell backward to avoid it.

The room emptied out quickly into Monrra's rift. Large creatures rolled bodies and the injured into the blue sphere and also acted as a shield against Aliana's arrows and Basen and Effie's fireballs. Monrra's fire beast swiped at Jon flying at its face, just missing as he zipped upward and went over its head. It ignored him to open its mouth and belch out a stream of fire from one side of the room to the other.

"Behind me!" Arthur yelled as Tarak was already fleeing toward him.

Basen was the only one caught by it as it struck him in the back while he fled. He screamed but dove behind Arthur's water wall, thickened by Tienna. Cleve and Jon both appeared on top of the thick neck of the beast. They jammed their swords down in various spots, opening up several jets of fire.

The creature suddenly collapsed and stopped spewing flames. Smoking blood oozed out of its wounds.

All enemies were gone by then. Two new rifts had formed while the others had disappeared. One blocked the hallway from where Tarak's group had come in, and the other blocked the doorway on the other side of the room.

Jon quickly healed everyone. It was strange to look around the room and see no bodies, only blood. Everything

had been swept away, even the severed wings of the large bats Tarak knew should be somewhere.

“Monrra probably has a healer in the castle,” Basen said. “Eden, can you do anything about those rifts?”

“Tienna.” Eden gestured for her to follow.

The two young women approached the rift covering the new exit. Eden extended her hand. The rift shook like an unstable bubble. Eden gritted her teeth and used both hands. It broke apart and disappeared, but then a new one formed in its place.

“God below, she must be in the other realm making it again,” Eden concluded.

“Can you keep her from making one long enough for us to get through?” Basen asked.

“I don’t think so. She forms them too quickly.”

“Grayhart, what about with Manabreak?”

“I’ll try if everyone’s been healed.”

“They have,” Jon confirmed.

Grayhart approached and turned her hands. Nothing happened to the rift. She shook her head as she turned around. “It is unaffected.”

“At least her artistry is weaker as we predicted,” Tarak commented. “I was able to break her link on my own.”

“It is,” Aliana said. “Effie and I broke one holding us together.”

“There were a number of artistry mages that we fought against,” Basen said. “I broke a lot of links with my mind.”

“I did as well,” Grayhart added. “I had to break so many that I couldn’t focus on psyche very much.”

A silence passed as all eyes fell on Basen.

“Desil, soften the wall for us to have access to the way we came, around that rift. We’re going to grab a few things we left in the first room.”

“I like this plan,” Tarak said.

“You don’t know what it is yet.”

“It involves my boulders left behind, does it not?”

“It does.”

“Then I like it.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

They took a short break as Basen told them his plan. When the headmaster was done, Effie built a tall block of sartiuous energy that Desil could stand on and reach the ceiling. He softened the stone above him carefully, scooping out stone until half his arm was inside where he began clearing out the rest. It took him a long while to widen his hole enough to start melting the dirt that was on top, but eventually it poured down like mud, only it was dry. It was the strangest thing to see.

Desil eventually cleared enough space for him to climb up on top of the ceiling. Soon after he disappeared, more dirt poured down in the form of mud, splashing against Effie's block of sartiuous energy and running down the edges. It started to collect, blocking Desil's ability to return, but Jon cleared it with Argil. All the while, Monrra's rifts remained. The windy sound of their volatile energy was a distraction for a while, as Tarak feared a creature or two might emerge to attack their group, but it seemed more likely that she was using them to prepare a trap.

She might've had one ready in the dark realm for Tarak and whoever else was brave enough to pass through, but she didn't know about Desil.

Eventually, Desil stuck his head back down from the hole. "I've made it to the surface."

"Good," Basen replied.

Desil nodded, then pulled his head back in and disappeared again.

"Monrra, Aliana?" Basen asked.

"She isn't in our realm."

"Go, Jon," Basen commanded.

Jon flew up and disappeared for a short while. Then he came back and helped Desil down onto Effie's sartiuous block. The two sorcerers jumped off.

“You were right,” Jon told Basen. “The analyte army is outside the front of the castle. They have a few battering rams ready, but they can’t get to the door because of a rift in the way. The army looks exhausted, and there are many carcasses of creatures nearby. Farther from the castle are a lot of men who seem injured. I think there might be two thousand in total. It looks like the analytes have been battling creatures for a long while. Given Tarak’s account of dead creatures in the dark realm, I’d say you were right that Monrra’s beasts are chasing the non-controlled creatures into a rift and forcing them into our realm to harass the analyte army.”

“Yes, I’d say so. Do you think anyone saw you?” Basen asked.

“I doubt it. I just poked my head up. The hole is mostly covered by tall rocks, as Zarin predicted.”

“All right, bring Zarin for a look.”

Zarin climbed on Jon’s back. Jon then carefully navigated up into the hole and disappeared for a short time.

He came back with Zarin and landed on the sartious block, then floated down the rest of the way. Zarin hopped off his back.

“I know where we are and where the rest of the castle is,” Zarin said. He pointed toward the exit they had not taken yet. “If we go in this direction, we should be able to find our way to the first floor. However, I’m not sure what we’re going to find on the way there. I didn’t know any part of the castle existed underground except for the dungeon. We may be attached to it somehow.”

“All right,” Basen said. “Keep a good sense of where we are as we move. Jon, take Desil up to plug that hole. We don’t want anyone seeing it.”

Desil was busy for the next half hour as he patched the hole at the surface out of Tarak’s viewpoint. Then he came back down and began softening the wall around Monrra’s rift to allow access past it. He stopped right before finishing.

“It’s Callie.” He closed his eyes. “Basael and Xiffrik attacked the castle after you all teleported out, but we fought them off. They then tried to take the stockades, but we caught up to them and fought them off again. Xiffrik was injured. It is unlikely they are going to attack Lycast again.”

“Tell her good work and thank you,” Basen said. “We’re all fine here.”

Desil spoke the same words aloud. When he was done, he seemed to be speaking for Callie again.

“I am glad to hear that. There is a lot more to tell, but nothing urgent. All are safe. Good luck and stay safe there. Give Tarak a kiss for me.” Desil groaned at hearing the words come out of his mouth. “That was a joke. Sorry, Desil.” His voice changed to more of a natural tone. “It’s fine, Callie. I will contact you when we finish, but it may take some time.”

Then a moment passed and he opened his eyes.

“What are the stockades?” Desil asked.

“An area at the docks of the city,” Jon said. “It’s where prisoners are kept and a place that could be fortified. It seems to me that the Ancients were looking for a safe place where they could either change mana or start trying to convince people to protect them. I’m glad they were fought back.”

“One or both of them might be coming here,” Basen warned. “We must be wary of them coming from the same portal we took into this castle.”

“It’s done.” Desil pushed on the wall and a slab fell forward, revealing a short hallway lit by a sconce. He had made an opening right near Monrra’s rift, giving everyone a safe path into the hallway previously blocked.

Tarak was glad to see there were no traps there. He took Cleve’s shield and went first, soon coming to a twisted staircase going up and, a little ways down, a thick door with a glass panel.

“There’s no one nearby,” Aliana said from just behind him.

Zarin squeezed through. Ignoring the staircase for now, he stepped up to the thick door with a glass panel and looked inside. “It seems like a torture chamber. I see a table with cuffs and chains nearby.” He stepped back and told the group, “My mother promised that torturing had ceased.” It sounded like he was certain she wouldn’t have used it.

It wasn’t anyone’s place to object right now. Basen asked, “Aliana, what do you feel up the stairs?”

“A lot of people, but not directly above it. They are scattered more this way.” She pointed in the direction the hallway had led. “In the castle, most likely.”

“I agree. Tarak, go first and watch for traps. I’ll give you light. Aliana behind me. Then Grayhart. Everyone else follow.”

Tarak had left his boulders behind for now, but he would come back for them. He was slow up the stairs as he checked for traps. Basen illuminated everything from right behind. It didn’t take long before they reached the top, where there was a square-shaped opening in the ceiling. Tarak pushed on it, but it didn’t budge.

“Don’t push harder,” Basen said. “Or you may alert them. Desil.”

Desil squeezed past Tarak and worked his hand through the trap door until he could undo a lock somewhere above it. He went back and allowed Tarak to open it.

Tarak slowly lifted the trapdoor. He tried to use the trick of bending light to observe the room, but there wasn’t anything he could see.

“It is too dark for me to tell.”

Grayhart came and stuck up her hand. “There’s no one in the vicinity.”

She must’ve trusted herself, because she pushed open the trapdoor enough to stick her head through. She lifted her leg and perhaps used psyche to ask Tarak for a boost. He helped her through, then he pulled himself up next.

Grayhart made light. They looked around to find themselves in a small storage closet with empty shelves. Tarak bent down and whispered, “Zarin, come look.”

He helped the analyte up as others pushed Zarin’s feet. The prince took a few looks around.

“I still cannot tell where we are.”

“Oh come on,” Grayhart complained.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t!”

Grayhart went to her knees to tell Basen and the others, “He still doesn’t know. I’m not sensing anyone nearby. Aliana?”

“Not so close to us, no,” she replied.

“Tarak,” Basen said, “open the door to the closet.”

Tarak opened the door. It was another dark room. His mana sensed nothing alive.

“It appears empty,” he muttered. “But I need light.”

Grayhart made light as Zarin cautiously came out. “Oh it’s the kitchen. I know exactly where we are.”

“Thank god,” Grayhart muttered. “No one’s here.”

Tarak helped all the others up. By the time he’d walked back into the kitchen, Zarin had unfolded the map on a counter and Grayhart had given him light.

Zarin pointed at the map. “We’re here now. I had no idea there was a trapdoor in the storage closet.”

“But are you certain that’s where we are?” Basen asked.

“I am. I know this kitchen.”

He was pointing to a section on the map indicating the northern side of the first floor. It was a square room that appeared to be adjacent to a spiral tower that led to the upper floor of the castle. Tarak looked around and found the curved wall of the spiral staircase. There was a doorway leading to it. The other doorway must’ve led to the hallway he saw on the map.

“Monrra’s in this realm now,” Aliana warned. “I think I felt her close the rifts below us as well and open another somewhere there.” She pointed in the direction of the circular wall.

“At the front gate,” Basen assumed. “She probably had to let down the rift at the gate to entrap us, and the analytes might’ve attacked. The question is what kind of traps does she have waiting for us in either of these two directions? We will have to encounter the rest of Monrra’s army somewhere in this castle, and the location of that battle is crucial. I do not want to fight anyone or *anything* up spiral stairs, and the last thing we want is to fight on top of the castle where the ballistae are manned, so that means we’re headed down the hall. Let’s hope they’re there without too many traps. Remember the plan. We’ll have to hit them with everything we have in order to draw their attention. We want Monrra to send everyone.”

Basen went to the door leading to the hall and opened it. This one was different than the last in that it did not open straight into the hall but at a right angle. That meant directly behind the door was one wall of the hallway a few steps away.

Basen looked back at Grayhart, who confirmed there was no one nearby, then he opened it and stuck his head out for just a blink before quickly retracting it.

“I don’t think I saw anyone. Let me make light. Tarak.”

Tarak stepped close as Basen made up a ball of white light near the open door. There were two ways to go, left and right. According to the map, the path to the right led to other rooms in this section of the castle. There were also other circular staircases that would take them to the top of the castle, but there were no walkways up there, meaning there was no way to get from one section of the castle to another. Still, Tarak bent light and tried to look for traps in both directions. He saw around a few corners before he reached his limit and couldn’t see farther. There appeared to be no one there.

He looked back at Aliana, who was nearby with her eyes closed. “There’s no one that way,” she said as she pointed to

the right. “But a lot of them are to the left. And let me see about above...” She paused. “There are not many above us.”

“Zarin, you’re sure there’s no way to the middle section of the castle from above?” Basen asked.

“I am absolutely sure. I’m also certain that if anyone is manning the ballistae from any of the sections, you will be in extreme danger trying to get across the top of the castle. It’s probably why Monrra doesn’t have a lot of people above us. She knows you have to cross through this hallway.”

“I figured but just wanted to make sure. All right, Desil, seal the door to the tower behind us. Even if there are not a lot of people above us, I don’t want a single person coming from behind us. Seal the trapdoor as well.”

“Wait, my boulders,” Tarak reminded Basen.

“Go fetch them. Cleve, go with him to help. Grayhart, keep them safe from ambushes.”

Tarak rushed back to the bottom of the stairs with the warrior and psychic behind him. He then traversed all the way back the way they’d come. Monrra’s rifts were absent now. Eventually, Tarak came to his two boulders.

He made light gravity and lifted a boulder. Cleve picked up the other. Then they all sped back through the same route as before. Grayhart sensed no one.

Basen went through his plan again but with a few modifications as Desil worked.

Eventually, everyone but Desil made their way into the hall. They wouldn’t see him again for some time.

Basen made sure of one thing, “It may be tempting to leave their healer alive, but take the chance to kill anyone, including a healer, when given. We cannot afford to show any mercy, or it may be one of our lives taken instead. In fact, prioritize any healer and fire mage. They will cause our party the most problems.”

Tarak nodded with the others.

Cleve volunteered to lead with the shield, allowing Tarak to focus on his manipulation of light as Basen illuminated the hall. It was long, indeed, and halfway down, it was covered with more spikes.

“Arselickers,” Tarak mumbled.

With Basen’s powerful light spell and Tarak’s ability to manipulate it, he could see past the spikes. The hallway opened into a large room—a large room filled with large people—large people who probably had a whole slew of large creatures they could summon—*fuck*.

Zarin confirmed that the room at the end of the hall was a ceremonial room used for banquets and special dinners. It was bigger than the first room they had fought in, and there were more entrances and exits as well. That might not matter. The size of the room did, however. It meant a whole lot more soldiers to fight.

Basen spoke ominously. “This time, they know what all of us can do, and they’ve had time to call in more of their army.”

“There are hundreds of them now,” Aliana told Basen. “Monrra’s there, too.”

“I figured that would be the case. The battle plan is the same. We can’t delay too long, or Monrra may start sending some away to keep better tabs on the analyte army. Everyone come close.”

They huddled in a circle.

“Defend each other,” Basen said. “Call for help when needed. Take out their priority targets. Kill as many as you can in as short a time as possible. We want Monrra calling in the rest of her army for support. Be aggressive yet safe. Everyone got that?”

They all nodded.

“We cannot be stopped,” Basen said. “Let’s hear it.”

“We cannot be stopped,” they all repeated.

“That’s right. Now let’s go kill an Ancient.”

They gave a soft cheer and split to form up according to Basen's plan.

Tarak's role was by far the most dangerous, but he wouldn't have it any other way. He took the lead and stepped up close to the spikes. Using light gravity, he stacked one boulder on top of the other. Then he reduced gravity even more to lift up both. He pushed off the floor and floated to get his boots on the tips of the first bed of spikes.

The boulders covered more than his body. There was no better shield, but this was still going to hurt.

He charged as he kept up his light gravity, moving as quickly as his floating body could hop off the spikes. Arrow started pattering against the boulders. He barely felt them. Then a fireball struck.

It stopped him dead. He gave a quick look behind to see the rest of his party following on Effie's sartious energy. Cleve remained at the head with his shield, but nothing got through Tarak's boulders.

He pushed onward against the batter of fireballs. The weak patter of arrows felt like little more than raindrops, but the fireballs seemed to grow larger with more space between each cast, as if the fire mages were taking time to put more strength behind each one.

Tarak had covered half the hall when he heard Raineer's voice shouting commands in his rough language. A swarm of flying creatures came around Tarak's boulders and enveloped him. He ducked his head and tried to mitigate their talons picking at his ears and eyes with swipes of his arm. His other arm was needed to push the boulders forward.

Jon had told him before to pace himself, but there was no way to do so through this deathtrap. Tarak was already almost spent with his Gravity Field having to take off the weight of the boulders, and there was so much more to go.

Suddenly the flying creatures all screeched and fell away from him. Psyche, no doubt. Someone touched his back. He realized it was Tienna giving him a necessary boost. He had

hardly even noticed that he'd stopped. There was too much distance to cover. Time for a plan change.

"Make me fly, Jon!" Tarak called as he kept gravity light and braced himself.

He heard Tienna scamper out of the way. Argil pressed against Tarak's back. It pushed him slowly at first, no doubt to ensure he wouldn't veer off and slam against the walls or ceiling. Tarak could hear Jon huffing behind him as he hovered with Tarak and shoved him along.

"Here we go!" Jon said and threw Tarak with ungodly force.

All Tarak could do was push off the boulders to give himself as much space as possible, though it was not nearly as much as he wanted. He flew out of the narrow hall and into the large room. He couldn't see the entire result of the impact as he collided with Monrra's waiting army, but he certainly heard and felt them.

Tarak plowed through the armored men as if running a wheelbarrow through a full chicken coop. Most flew sideways as he clipped them with the boulders, but a few were struck straight on and soared up into Tarak's view with expressions of agony.

He felt a link entrap his limbs firmly, but it wouldn't matter. He didn't need his arms or legs. He made his powerful Gravity Sphere above his head and threw all the surrounding swordsmen off balance. He guided himself back the way he'd come, toward a large group of archers and the two female fire mages who'd been firing down the hall. Each woman had a slug on her shoulder.

None of them saw Tarak coming until Raineer shouted something that caused them to look. Many dove out of Tarak's way, and that was disruption enough.

The others were picked up and tossed as Tarak passed by. He scattered them as easy as swiping his hand through a cluster of neatly positioned dolls ready for a tea party. He

landed at the end of the hall and saw his group. They were only about halfway through.

He had greatly misjudged how slowly Effie would lay down sardious blocks of energy. He would be completely alone for a while longer.

Something told him to remain confident as he turned to face the army on his lonesome. Perhaps it was because confidence was the only thing that might keep him from having to flee with his tail between his legs, bringing all hell back to his party.

He was afforded a clear view of about three hundred men who all had eyes on him. Riffs formed in the midst of everyone, and an assortment of hideous creatures stretched out their limbs and bodies to fit through. The twenty or so archers and the two fire mages all found their footing as they scampered back to hide behind the ranks of large men.

The army stared at Tarak without attacking as if expecting a trap, a spell, something. It was eerily quiet.

Jon came flying out of the hallway. He dropped off Tarak's gigantic sword and took his place beside Tarak.

Confidence seemed to be working. The entire army still seemed to be waiting for a trap. It was as if they couldn't believe two young men could be this stupid to come before them without even a shield. Tarak had lost track of his boulders, but he did locate one of the priority targets. It was another woman who was making her way around to those with dented armor, the unlucky souls who had been in Tarak's way. Some had blood on their faces. Others had their shoulders or arms twisted in ways the body should not twist. This rather petite woman stood out among the huge barbarians. She was the healer.

Monrra stood at the back. She shouted something. Raineer toward the front repeated the same thing. Soon all the army was shouting. Even the creatures, as well behaved as they seemed, picked up on the aggression. They screeched and cried out in horrific ways, the sound reverberating through the walls.

They charged Jon and Tarak.

“Come on,” Jon said and pulled Tarak back into the hall and out of sight of the army. “The plan,” he reminded Tarak. “I’ll get the others here as soon as possible.” He flew back over the spikes.

Tarak made his illusion to alter his appearance two steps to the right. Then he charged out to meet his enemies.

Monrra’s army would not fire arrows and fireballs as swordsmen dashed at the corner leading out from the hall. Tarak could not lighten gravity while keeping up his illusion, but he could still spin like a madman.

He kept his massive sword at head-level and turned his body with powerful swipes. Those near his illusion ducked and tried to stab him, but it was the people two steps to their side that he cut. He sliced through necks and faces as those nearby screamed out in alarm. He was as strong as two men combined, and his sword was sharp enough to slice through bone.

Heads rolled, some with only half a face connected to it. Soldiers bumped into him, but all it did was dislodge him backward as he kept spinning.

Raineer yelled. Monrra screamed. Creatures of all kinds descended upon his illusion, but it was only when a gigantic beast plowed through Tarak on its way to his illusion that he was finally hurled back. His illusion faded, but he had bought them enough time. The rest of his party stormed out behind Cleve.

The large warrior slammed his shield into the sides of two men. Their bodies broke a line through the advancing army. Cleve crouched behind the shield to stop the swing of a mallet, then pushed it against the attacker. It created enough space for Cleve to drop the shield and draw his sword. He promptly cut off the arm of someone trying to stab him from the side.

Jon came to Cleve’s other side and blocked an overhead swing that Cleve must’ve trusted Jon to stop. Jon then used

Argil to blast back the attacker as well as ten others behind him, but it made space for a massive creature on four legs with two sharp tusks to lower its head and charge.

“Make room, Jon!” Tarak yelled as he dashed at the creature.

Jon jumped to the side. Tarak screamed to draw the attention of the black creature that was the size of a large tavern. It ignored Jon as it turned toward Tarak, knocking over two men in its way.

Tarak planted his feet and made light gravity. The tusks of the beasts were too long. Tarak would be impaled before he could slice its head in half. Instead, he swung his sword horizontally with as much strength as he could. The blade cut both tusks in half. The creature stumbled to Tarak’s side as he whipped his sword around vertically and cut all the way through the gigantic head of the beast.

Raineer shouted and pointed at Tarak. He had the healer near him, as well as the two fire mages and a number of archers. The attention of maybe twenty men and the two fire mages turned to Tarak. Flying creatures came at him. A few were as big as his torso, all with long talons and vicious eyes.

He strengthened his light gravity and jumped as he spun. Everything became a blur as he floated up. The creatures screeched. Blood splattered his face. He sliced through many before all seemed calm. He let his gravity spell come to an end as he looked down to land in front of charging spearmen.

Tarak repelled them with the gravity spell he’d learned that didn’t affect him on its other side. One spearman managed to come around enough to stab Tarak in his unprotected arm, drawing blood. An arrow from Aliana’s bow went through the neck of the spearman. He dropped his weapon as he scuttled back into two others trying to get around Tarak’s spell. They were all blasted by Effie’s fireball. The impact forced Tarak into a tumble, but Basen must’ve unleashed a gigantic fireball from Tarak’s other side. The explosion against screaming men tossed Tarak the other way. He landed hard on his injured arm.

“Sorry, Tarak!” Basen yelled before unleashing another fireball that cleared out the rest of the spearmen, but an arrow found a home in Basen’s shoulder. He hissed as he stumbled backward. He tried to pull it out but couldn’t.

“Jon!” he yelled.

The healer was just ahead and fending off at least five different swordsmen with dodges, counterattacks, and blasts of Argil when they reached close. He looked back, then jumped and flew backward toward Basen.

Tarak was there first, yanking out the arrow so Jon could put his hand over Basen’s shoulder and heal his wound quickly. Tarak’s arm was healed by then.

The three of them suddenly couldn’t move.

“A link.” Basen groaned as he tried to break it.

Tarak caught sight of Raineer and Monrra with their arms outstretched. Raineer yelled something, and the ten people between them cleared out as the two fire mages stepped forward.

“Effie!” Tarak, Basen, and Jon all yelled at the same time.

But it was Grayhart who grunted nearby. The link broke. Tarak dove the opposite way of Basen and Jon as fireballs sailed over them and exploded against the wall.

“Effie and Aliana need help!” Eden yelled.

Tarak looked back toward the hall where the women were supposed to be. Arthur used water to push back two men while Zarin tried to stop a swordsman, but he was quickly disarmed and cut down his leg as he fell backward into Effie, who was already losing a wrestling match against a man twice her size.

Meanwhile, more barbarians were pouring in through an open doorway on the other side of the room. There was no end to them.

“Tarak, hold off as many as you can,” Basen said. “Jon, with me.”

Tienna looked back and forth between the groups as she stood in the middle. Tarak motioned for her to come. He turned his back as she sprinted and jumped onto him. He grabbed her legs and felt her boost. With a wave of his hand, a sphere of gravity formed diagonally in front of his head. It pulled him off the ground with a sudden lurch that almost made him drop Tienna.

She screamed as she probably thought herself about to fall, her boost fading. His sphere of gravity still pulled him with plenty of strength as it yanked and flipped everyone they passed over. Her boost came back, almost too strong. Tarak lowered his sphere of gravity to keep it from hitting the ceiling.

He flew faster than a horse could gallop, too fast to see anything but the oncoming wall. He could tell by his mana that he had dragged a horde behind him. He shifted the sphere over the back of his head and weakened it to avoid striking the wall.

“No boost!” he yelled, fearful it would pull them to a stop hard enough to rip every muscle.

But Tienna must’ve had the same idea already, especially with the wall fast approaching. He felt nothing from her as he slowed.

She hissed as they came to a near floating stop in front of the wall. “An arrow in my leg,” she said. “Go faster.”

Tarak pushed off the wall and turned them around in the air, holding the gravity sphere steady. “Boost me again.”

An arrow came into Tarak’s leg this time, but a fireball had to be dodged. He dragged them to the side. It exploded against the wall and would’ve pushed them out of range of Tarak’s gravity if it wasn’t for Tienna’s boost to his mana.

Tarak drew the sphere closer, and the change in power was immense. He wobbled it left and right, swinging him and Tienna so violently that they became completely horizontal at times. Soldiers sprouted up into the air and collided with each other behind Tarak as he pulled everyone like a massive magnet shooting past sticks of metal.

He wanted to come down onto the archers and fire mages, but they were defended by an abhorrent creature. It was shaped like a giant worm standing up with protruding talons at its base and a gaping head with gargantuan fangs. It looked ready to snap at Tarak and might have the power to detach a leg from his body.

“Keep boosting me,” he said as he veered off to the side and weakened his spell.

“You’re not landing among them!” Tienna’s panicked comment sounded a little like a question, but Tarak couldn’t be sure.

“Just boost me!”

He headed down.

“God, Tarak!” She screamed, but at least she kept boosting.

He kicked a barbarian in the face to force the man out of his way and take his spot. Everyone turned on Tarak, but he already had his heavy gravity spell ready. The field of his mana extended five steps in every direction but not over Tarak’s head. It flattened everyone and turned other barbarians toward the mayhem to see what all the screaming was about. A few were archers who may have never taken their gaze off Tarak.

He ignored the arrow still in his leg and stepped on heads and backs as he darted behind one of his huge boulders, all while keeping a gap above him in the heavy gravity field. He didn’t have time to duck below the boulder as two archers shot. One arrow went into the arm he’d used to protect his face. The other struck the boulder. He dropped Tienna, who was continuing to shout in fear as soldiers and creatures all around them started to rise up with Tarak’s spell coming to an end.

Tarak switched to a light gravity spell and picked up the boulder. He took two steps as he whipped it from his hip at the group of archers and fire mages, releasing his spell of light gravity at the same time.

The boulder plowed through the heads of four rising barbarians before it smashed into three archers and one of the fire mages, landing on top of three of them and continuing to roll into five more of Monrra's army until it tripped a large cat of some kind clawing at Cleve. The warrior quickly jumped up and buried his sword in the exposed abdomen of the beast.

Tarak bent down and picked up Tienna as he made Gravity Sphere to hoist them both up. Now facing him, she screamed in his face as she wrapped her arms and legs around him. He returned her to their group and dropped her off with Effie and Aliana, who now had a large gap around them that was further extended as Basen and Jon fought back oncoming soldiers.

Tarak yanked out the arrow in Tienna's leg and then the one in his leg. "Jon, heal her," he called.

Jon turned and stuck out his hand as Tienna stepped into him.

Zarin seemed to be healed and no longer had fear in his eyes as he and Arthur guarded the two women. Arthur absorbed a fireball with a water shield, which grew thicker and darker as soon as Tienna touched his ankle. She'd tripped over a dead body on her way there. Arthur reached down and helped her up while maintaining his spell.

Tarak felt as energized as if the fight had just begun. He took to the air and navigated back over the army again, finally remembering to pull out the arrow in his arm. He dropped down to where his second boulder lay in the midst of soldiers and flattened everyone around him once again with another heavy gravity spell.

He felt the fatigue strongly this time without Tienna. He wanted to kill the other fire mage, but it was the healer who was the most dangerous. She was practically bringing an archer back to life before Tarak's eyes, but someone pointed out Tarak to her, and she started to run toward Monrra and Raineer just a ways off.

Tarak was about to switch to light gravity when a link stopped him. Monrra and Raineer had him again. He looked

around and realized he was on his own. Jon, Basen, Grayhart, and Cleve all fought beside each other, protecting the rest of the party. All were separated from Tarak by about fifty people and a few creatures still trying to find a way past without trampling barbarians in their path.

He could not move anything but his fingers and toes, but he could still cast. He gave up on the boulder and picked himself up with gravity. Someone stabbed his leg with a sword. It was a shallow yet long cut as Tarak flew away from the blade.

He intercepted the healer before she could make it to Monrra and Raineer, landing on top of her. Tarak still couldn't move, but he made a sphere of gravity that repelled every side. It rolled him and the healer toward Tarak's party, tripping a number of people in their path.

Soon Tarak and the healer became stuck on the thick legs of some beast, so Tarak put more into his spell and soon was pushing the beast along with him and the healer.

The artistry broke. He grabbed the shrieking woman and sat up with her on his lap as they slid along with a snarling cat twisting around and sliding beside them. One of its claws sliced open Tarak's bicep. He tried to lean away but couldn't quite get far enough as it cut his side next.

Tarak's party was still close to the hallway. He brought the healer, the large cat, and about twenty others—it turned out—rolling into the wall a short distance away from his party. He then flattened everyone with heavy gravity and tossed the healer on top of the snarling cat, which had rolled onto its back.

It made short work of the woman, especially because her throat ended up on top of its mouth. Zarin and Arthur cut down the other flattened soldiers as Jon, Cleve, Grayhart, and Basen still managed to fight back the rest of the large army. It wasn't just with their fancy sword work but with Jon's Argil, Grayhart's psyche, and Basen's fire that they held on, and just barely. Blood stained their armor. Their faces showed strain.

They moved quickly still, but much slower than when the fight began.

They needed a break, but Tarak couldn't give them one. He had done everything in his ability to disrupt the rest of the army, and now he barely had the strength to cast another spell.

Arthur and Zarin carefully moved around the outskirts of Tarak's gravity spell. They slayed the last of the men and stabbed at the thrashing cat until it finally stopped moving.

Tarak had lost his sword a while back. It was somewhere near the boulder, most likely. Lord and bane, there were still so many of them. He needed a boost, but Tienna could only do so much after so long. Sweat and blood ran down her cheeks as she heaved for breath and seemed to be taking a moment to recover without boosting anyone.

"Arthur, we need more time!" Basen was yelling. "Tienna, help him now."

She stumbled over and fell as she grabbed his ankle. He stood taller and looked confident as he cast a jet of water with the force of a charging horse, but Tienna looked like she lacked the stamina to get up.

The rest of their party dropped down as Arthur shifted the water from side to side, stopping anyone from coming close. It bought everyone time to recover and seemed to be working well until Arthur was struck by a fireball.

He was either dead or unconscious as he slid back. Jon crouched and put his hands on Arthur, and life popped his eyes open again.

Tarak joined Cleve in front of everyone as a horde of men and monsters way too large to be stopped came at them. Tarak was about to make gravity to disrupt them again when there was a flash of light. A burning pain coursed through from his chest outward. He couldn't seem to take a breath. Or was he breathing? It felt like he was inhaling only fire.

He couldn't seem to move. His blurred vision slowly cleared to reveal Basen and Cleve locked together by artistry as Cleve's side was impaled by a sword and Basen took a

mallet to his upper arm. It broke the link as they each fell. Jon had an energy shield of Argil in the mouth of a creature that had lifted him up by its snout and pinned him against the wall near Tarak.

Their line was broken. Victory could be seen in the eyes of the charging swordsmen. Zarin bravely tried to fend them off, but he was cut through by one sword and then another and kicked out of the way. Many had their sights on Tarak as if he'd caused them personal grievances. It looked like a competition between them of who would kill him first.

He struggled to his feet. He had some fight left, but it wasn't much. Jon's abilities were the only way they could survive this now, because many had taken lethal cuts.

As Tarak prepared to repel as many attackers as he could so he could fight his way to Jon, he caught sight of part of the stone wall falling over. Desil ran through the newly formed gap with a twisted horn to his lips that he blew. It was the sweetest sound Tarak may have ever heard. Someone turned and tried to stab Desil before he could finish his call of allies arriving, so Desil interrupted the horn blow to throw the horn into the man's face as armored analytes flooded in past Desil and caught a number of barbarians by surprise.

They charged with spear and shield, breaking the lines of Tarak's enemies. Raineer shouted. Most of Monrra's army turned around except for those nearest to Tarak with bloodlust in their eyes. He jumped as he made Gravity Sphere overhead, using it to swing his boots into the surprised face of someone who already had a bloody mouth and a missing tooth from being on the receiving end of one of Tarak's boulders.

Tarak pulled himself higher to fly overhead, then turned in the air and headed to where Jon remained trapped. The healer was still pushed against the wall with Argil as his only protection against the mouth of some creature that looked like a cross between a mammoth and a leopard.

Tarak had no weapon, so he grabbed the pointed ears of the creature as he landed on top of it and pulled until he felt

cartilage cracking. The beast immediately gave up on Jon and rolled to get Tarak off.

“Tarak!” Jon tossed his sword.

Tarak caught it, half in disbelief that Jon had kept his weapon this whole time, and half excited by what Tarak could do with it.

He made light gravity and swung it around, then brought it down through the head of the beast before the creature could rise up.

He looked back at Jon, who was quickly healing himself while yelling to Tarak, “Keep it and help me get to the others!” Jon seemed to be heading toward Arthur next, who was slumped against the wall but did appear alive.

Tarak flew over to where he had last seen Basen and the others being stabbed. Effie had blown back everyone with a shifting stream of fire not too unlike the one Arthur had used to keep them at bay. Tienna had her hand on Effie’s back, though she might not have been all there as she wavered on her feet and sported a huge gash down her temple.

Cleve had one hand over his bleeding side but used the other to fend off three swordsmen all competing for a piece of him. Basen’s shoulder was misaligned, but that didn’t stop him from scorching one man with a jet of fire and then blasting back another with a fireball.

Grayhart had a sword sticking out of her thigh as she sat on the floor, yet she still took down a dozen men at a time with psyche, certainly extending Basen and Cleve’s lives.

Aliana screamed as she was carried toward the hall of spikes by two large flying creatures. Eden jumped up and grabbed one by its bird legs, dragging it down and allowing Aliana to get her feet back on the floor. The two women minced the creatures with their daggers.

Tarak didn’t have time to kill all of these enemies, and disrupting them would also disrupt his allies. So he charged through with Jon’s sword like a javelin, picking up one of the smaller barbarians like sliding a skewer through a thick cut of

meat and then using the man as a battering ram to plow down the others.

Jon caught up and began healing as Tarak picked himself up—along with a few barbarians—with a sphere of gravity. There was a whole new line of men waiting to get at Tarak's party, but none of them had the chance as Tarak pulled them all back.

As Tarak cleared out the barbarians, he was horrified to see Zarin's bloody body on the floor. Jon practically jumped on top of him and put both hands across his body. Zarin gasped as he sat up. Still looking a little pale, he struggled to get up even with the healer's help. Eventually, Jon threw the prince over his shoulder and ran back toward Aliana and Effie's corner, which was littered with the bodies of enemies and creatures.

Tarak noticed that some of the barbarians he'd knocked over seemed to have lost their fighting spirit as they were getting up. The tide of the battle had changed. Everyone felt it. The analytes stormed through with rage in their eyes and no regard for their own safety. They didn't care when they stabbed an enemy and lost their weapon inside his body. They just kept pushing, even tackling and biting the barbarians. They gouged at the barbarians' eyes and screamed in fury as they stormed through. They even cut down some of the last remaining creatures that stood a whole person taller than any man.

Many were clearly injured, but it was as if they felt no pain. Their bodies became their weapons as they threw themselves at the barbarians as if preventing escape was more important than preserving their own lives. Tarak had never seen such anger in a group of people this large, and the barbarians surely felt it.

They stopped trying to fight and looked for Monrra, many shouting her name, but Tarak had already found her.

She made a large rift as Tarak flew over. He crashed down on top of her before anyone had a chance to jump into her rift. He grabbed her and rolled, positioning her on top of

him like a shield. She screamed as she was stabbed by her own people trying to get at Tarak.

Tarak took a few blades into his arms and his sides as he wrapped his strong arms around Monrra's neck and stomach. He rolled her back and forth to make it harder for him to be hit as he choked the life out of her. She absorbed most of the attacks, but some found his flesh as well.

The barbarians seemed desperate to free her from Tarak as they yelled at each other. One bent down and tried to pry Tarak's arms from her throat, but they would have to cut his arms off before he let go.

All went back to stabbing. He took a lot of cuts and felt as though he was bathing in blood. Some of it was his own, but most of it seemed to be Monrra's.

Suddenly people were tackled out of view as the analyte army took their place. It felt as if a pack of hungry dogs had swarmed Tarak and he was holding a juicy piece of meat. But rather than devour Monrra, they stabbed her viciously, some with no regard to Tarak's arms. He quickly let go of her and rolled away.

She was already unconscious, probably dead, as they sliced up her body, neck, and even her head. Tarak felt too weak to rise up. His arms unfolded. His vision went black.

He awoke what felt like a short time later to searing pain. He screamed as he sat up to see Jon with his hands on him.

"Hold still. I finally figured out how to heal you now that my mana understands yours better."

Tarak took in his breath and didn't let it out until Jon was finished. He didn't want anyone to hear him scream. Now that the fight was over, the pain of Tarak's injuries had caught up to his mind. Everything was exacerbated by Jon's healing. It was nearly unbearable, and then...suddenly he was better and the sound of cheering made its way into his ears.

Tarak stood up to see Illia catching his gaze. She smiled at him and turned sideways to make her way through the ecstatic analytes hopping and screaming in victory. She wore

light armor and even had a rapier in hand, which she seemed to just now realize she didn't need any more as she sheathed it. Tarak imagined she wasn't part of the fighting army originally but was prepared to fight her own people if they did not let her join.

“Tarak! You fight for us?”

“I did, yes.”

They hugged.

“Thank you. Thank you!” Illia gushed as they broke their embrace. “Monrra kill my mother and my queen! She bitch! Bitch! I very happy she dead!”

Tarak saw Zarin receiving the same news from the other analytes. The prince threw back his head and roared in anger.

“Did Zarin bring you sorcerers?” Illia asked.

“He pushed for it,” Tarak replied.

She appeared confused. “Pushed?”

“Yes, but the king already wanted to help.” He reminded himself that Illia's common tongue was probably not much better than when she had left. He spoke more simply. “Zarin and King work together. Send us. We hate Monrra, too. We fight hard. We glad she dead, too.”

Illia turned around and shouted in analyse. Tarak figured she was translating his message. Analytes soon surrounded Tarak and his party. They pulled Tarak's group up onto their shoulders and cheered. A couple men tried to pick up Tarak but couldn't overcome his weight. They lifted his arms instead.

Zarin shouted in analyse, “*Sishense ith dorrin!*”

“*Sishense ith dorrin!*” repeated the analytes, who then continued to shout the phrase.

Basen asked Zarin, “What does that mean?”

“Alliance with dorrin,” Zarin said.

Tarak then shouted it, “*Sishense ith analytes!*”

“*Sishense!*” Jon joined in.

“*Sishense,*” echoed the room.

Illia pointed at Zarin and shouted to Tarak, “Zarin leg fix!”

Tarak pointed at Jon. “Healer.”

“Jon Oklar? Famous Jon Oklar?”

“How have you heard of him?”

“Everyone know Jon. Jon!” she called as the room continued to chant the analyse word for alliance.

Jon stopped his celebration with Cleve to look her way. Illia yelled, “Thank you, Jon Oklar, for fight!”

“I wouldn’t have wanted to be anywhere else but fighting for your people,” he replied.

She seemed to understand well enough as she cheered.

Desil came over as the room continued to chant. Basen put his hand on the young man’s shoulder. “Were there any issues getting them here?”

“No, you saw how eager they were, and just about all of Monrra’s army had been called away to fight you here.”

Desil had made his own openings in the castle walls to reach outside, where he’d snuck out and connected with the analyte army. He’d brought them into the castle the same way he’d gone out, avoiding Monrra’s rift outside the front gate. Basen had assumed that eventually the army disappearing into the castle would be spotted and reported, but it shouldn’t matter if all were busy fighting Basen’s party.

“Callie has been trying to reach me, but I told her to wait,” Desil said. “What’s the official message now that it’s over?”

“Tell her we won and I’m about to initiate the three-way alliance her father wanted,” Basen replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Zarin’s king now, isn’t he?”

“I think so, but I can’t be sure.”

Tarak called, “Zarin! Are you king now?”

The analyte nodded reluctantly.

Basen yelled, “Alliance between Kyrro and Korritin?”

“Of course.”

“See, there you go,” Basen told Desil.

Desil smiled and closed his eyes, no doubt to communicate with Callie.

Basen introduced himself to Illia. “Basen Hiller, portal-maker.”

“Illia Reeve, new psychic.”

“Nice to meet you, Illia. Can you introduce me to the portal-maker of your people? I would like to meet him or her.”

“My mother portal-maker. She die. Monrra creature.”

“I’m very sorry to hear that.”

“I am, too,” Tarak said, realizing the victory of battle had made him forget his manners.

“Was your mother training another mage?” Basen asked

“Mage?”

“Another portal-maker?”

“She try train me, but I...em, very busy. Not busy. Em. Zarin!”

Zarin looked to be fielding questions by analytes wearing decorated armor, but when he noticed Basen, Illia, and Tarak, he held up his hands to pause the questioning. He hurried over to them.

Illia gasped. “Zarin king now! I not realize. Sorry, Zarin!” She bowed before him.

He brushed her off with an analyse phrase. “What is it?” he asked as she rose.

Illia told him something. He appeared disappointed as his gaze shifted to Basen.

“Her mother was the portal-maker, but she died. She was trying to teach Illia, but Illia was distracted with matters that were far less important, such as young men.” Zarin glared at Illia. “She apologizes for not taking her mother’s teachings more seriously, but there are other sorcerers here who have shown great promise. They might one day learn how to make a portal.”

“I see,” Basen said.

Desil joined them again. “King Nykal is very happy, but he wonders when we are returning and if Zarin is coming back with us.”

“We will return shortly,” Basen replied. “Zarin, would you like to come or are you staying here?”

“I am needed here, but I am certain this will not be the last time we see each other.”

The other members of Tarak’s party came over. Aliana asked, “Did I hear we’re leaving?”

“Yes,” Basen replied.

“I’m starving,” Jon said.

Tarak nodded and pointed at Jon to show his agreement. “But we cannot impose ourselves on the analytes. They will be busy repairing their castle and their lives. However, I expect a feast in our honor in Lycast.”

Cleve told Basen, “One more evening in Dorrinthal isn’t going to hurt anyone.”

“There is a problem with that.”

“What?” Cleve asked with obvious disappointment.

“Reela and the queen need to celebrate with us.”

Cleve grinned.

Basen told Zarin, “It looks like we’re leaving, but I’ll be back later, if I’m welcome?” He offered his hand. Zarin shook.

“Come anytime, headmaster. You are always welcome.”

“Thank you, Zarin.”

“It was an honor fighting beside all of you,” Zarin told the group.

Many echoed the same thing for Zarin.

Aliana stepped up and hugged him. He wrapped his arms around her.

“You were very brave,” she said.

“Thank you, Aliana. You are as valiant as you are skilled with that bow.”

She parted and looked in his eyes. “Maybe I could come visit you?”

He smiled. “I really hope you do.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Tarak took Basen's portal back to Curdith Forest. It was close enough to Newhaven for Tarak to see the wall of the city in the slits between the trees. His clothes were in tatters, his armor punctured. His skin was caked with blood, but he looked no worse than the rest of his party. He could lie down on the grass and fall asleep, but he didn't want to miss this feeling. The victory was still fresh. He had fought well. Tarak was very proud of himself.

Jon and Basen had gone in a portal to Kyrro to fetch the others who would join them in this celebration. Tarak sat with the rest of his party and waited for them to return.

Aliana was chatting with Eden and Effie for some time but eventually came over to sit beside Tarak.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," he repeated.

"Did Zarin say anything to you about me?"

"Are you referring to what Grayhart said about him during psyche training?"

"Yes. I didn't want to know if he liked me because I didn't want to worry about the affection of anyone during the last week, but now it's over and I find myself curious."

"Also, he is king."

"That is not important."

Tarak barked out a laugh. "Shall we have Grayhart check that?"

"All right, I know it's important," Aliana admitted, "but I like him now. He fought bravely for someone who was untrained with sword, and I find him attractive—"

"Now that he is king."

"Are you going to tell me if he mentioned something about me, or are you going to torture me a while longer?"

“I will tell you. He admired you, but that was before his mother died and he became king.”

“Yeah, but that was also before he saw me fight.”

“I cannot say why, but you carry arrogance well.”

She pushed Tarak’s arm with her fist. “You’re one to talk.” She got up and started off.

“Will you pursue him?” Tarak asked. “It might be quite the challenge.”

“I like a good challenge,” Aliana called back before meeting with Eden again. The two women sat on the large rock indicating the portal location.

Tarak chatted with the other sorcerers for a good while before a portal opened. Everyone got up and gathered around. Reela came through, then Beatrix, Jon, and Basen last. Basen had changed out of his armor, though there was still dried blood in his hair.

Tarak and the others bowed before the queen.

She seemed curious as she glanced around. “Are we to walk into the city?”

Desil told her, “No, I contacted Callie a while ago, and here they come.” He gestured through the trees.

The king emerged from the forest on horseback. All the sorcerers who’d stayed behind to defend Lycast trailed behind him. They appeared all cleaned up after their bouts with the Ancients, and many of them seemed shocked to see the state of not only Tarak’s armor but everyone else’s.

The king dismounted. “I was not told about what kind of damage all of you took.”

“I won’t lie,” Basen said. “It was rough in there, but we pulled through with no casualties. You have some incredible sorcerers protecting your kingdom. I already knew what Jon was capable of, so his ability to fight and keep us on our feet was no shock, but some of the others surprised me. Eden probably broke a hundred links during that fight. Aliana’s tracking skill is only surpassed by her aim. Arthur kept

everyone alive when we were all on the brink of defeat. I've seen seasoned warriors with less combat awareness than Tienna displayed, and I was told this was only her second fight. But this one." He turned his hand over in Tarak's direction. "Tarak did things I never would've believed were possible if I hadn't seen them with my own eyes. Our victory was in large part thanks to his creative uses of spellcasting, his bravery, and more than anything, his ability to disrupt the entire army on his own, which he did multiple times to keep all of us on our feet. I think everyone was saved solely by Tarak at least, hmm, three times."

Tarak was surprised when the members of his party began clapping. Everyone quickly joined in. Even Leon and the king applauded, to Tarak's absolute shock.

Caarda was grinning wider than Tarak had ever seen his father smile. He wrapped his arms around Tarak and hoisted him up for an embarrassing and painful hug.

Caarda set Tarak down and grabbed Tarak's shoulder, throwing his other arm in the air.

"My son!"

There were a few laughs among the applause.

"Well done, Tarak." Leon slapped Tarak's back. "I'm glad you finally realized your potential."

Basen said, "If he doesn't have a title already, he should."

"Do you have one in mind?" Nykal asked. "You were with him."

"May I suggest protector?" Caarda answered without a moment's hesitation.

"That suits him well," Basen agreed.

"It's settled then. Tarak the Protector," Nykal said. "Perhaps you won't need a surname after all. Come back to the castle, everyone. You can clean up and be fed. There is a lot to discuss. Queen Beatrix, it is a pleasure."

"Mine as well, King Nykal."

Spare horses were brought around for everyone to mount. Dagaric had been brought by Rick, who congratulated Tarak as he handed off the reins.

“I hope Aathon is on your list of topics,” Beatrix told Nykal as they rode. “From what I understand about the remaining Ancients, there will be a battle as to who controls mana now that Monrra is dead.”

“That is the primary topic of conversation,” Nykal agreed. “We all must learn more about the rifts that threaten the kingdoms where mana is unchanged. We also need to locate sorcerers who can teach us how to pacify them. All of that is in Aathon.”

Tarak let the higher-ups speak about these affairs as he reunited with Callie by riding beside her.

She beamed at him and leaned over for a kiss. “It sounds like you have a story to share.”

“And what about you? I want to know what happened here.”

She chuckled to herself “Oh, yes. The Ancients gathered an audience in Newhaven and preached about themselves as saviors. They spoke ill of my father and expected to turn the people against him, but the people trust my father because of everything he did to battle against dteria. The people laughed at the Ancients, Tarak. I wish you could’ve seen it. The laughter infuriated them, and they quickly decided to strike the castle in hopes of killing my father. It was easy to fight them back. *Your* father nearly killed your grandfather with a trap. The Ancients flew off and tried to take the stockades next.”

“Why the stockades?” Tarak asked. “We had theories, but I would like to hear from you.”

“They need somewhere they could fortify in hopes of changing mana. The castle and the stockades are the best places in all of Lycast. We were thinking they might try Rohaer next, but I think Beatrix is right. They’re probably off to Aathon right now. They might fight each other, separate, or

find some way to remain allies in hopes of slaying the rest of us who mean to stop them. Time will tell.”

Callie did not seem worried, though, still smiling at Tarak throughout her tale. It eased his mind.

Tarak and the others followed Nykal and Beatrix through the open gate to the city. There was a massive gathering of people of a size Tarak had never seen before. They were lined up into the thousands, all applauding. Many cheered for the king when they saw him, while others called for Jon Oklar’s attention. Some others welcomed the sorcerers and the queen of Kyrro, their new allies.

“How does everyone know what happened?” Tarak had to shout to Callie to be heard.

“My father gathered an audience around his castle after the two attacks and explained everything. He had feared the people might rebel after learning about the dangers of rifts, but all of that changed after they had met the Ancients and seen them attack. The people easily recognize oppression after living with dark mages for so long. They want to be free, and they are now. It’s happening, Tarak! We have started an alliance that will surely extend to every kingdom, every country, every race eventually. The elves will soon be pressured to give up control of mana and join us. We are looking at the beginning of freedom, Tarak! Real and true freedom of mana and freedom from oppression!”

Tarak felt something coming out of him that he couldn’t seem to hold back. He used a sphere of gravity to balance himself as he hopped up on his horse.

“For freedom!” he yelled.

“For freedom!” the city resonated with enough power to knock down a castle wall.

The king was going to hate this, but Tarak couldn’t stop himself. He felt like celebrating this victory with style.

He floated off Dagaric and ran ahead. He lightened gravity as he glided through the open road between the

audiences. They floated up as he passed by them, and they roared with awe.

“Tarak the Protector!” Callie yelled from behind. “Son of Caarda!”

“Tarak the Protector!” they boomed.

END OF BOOK 2

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