



SIXTEEN YEARS AGO

NERIMORIA

Nerimoria stumbled through the undergrowth, clutching the baby to her chest.

Roots gnarled the ground with duplicitous intent, pushing her to the limits of her endurance. Thorny clusters bit into the trailing end of the blanket and made prickly nests in her frost-white hair. She dared not slow to pick them out.

Weak morning light filtered through the canopy, though the sky was still overcast from last night's rain. Nerimoria cursed the muddy ground for its treachery; the signs of her passage were stamped clearly in the forest behind her. She tried to step only on rocks, roots, or the rare patch of dry dirt, but there were often long stretches of sodden terrain that left her no choice but to leave a trail. At least the rain masked her scent. She hadn't heard the dogs in over an hour.

Her clothes clung to her lavender skin and chafed at her wounds as if the fabric were made of sand. Removing even one of the damp layers would let the inner ones dry, but if she stopped, she risked losing what little lead she had.

No, she had to keep going. For her daughter's sake, she had to get away.

As she picked her way over roots and rocks, she reached down to check the pouch at her hip. The wardstone was still warm. Good. As long as its magic held, neither the sorcerers' Aethersight nor the Light Paladins' aura tracing could find them.

The baby stirred, letting out a cry.

Nerimoria gritted her teeth. The cry was barely more than a whimper, but it was enough to carry in the cold, quiet air. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

"Shh. It's alright."

Her voice cracked like brittle glass against the lie. Of course it wasn't alright. None of this had been right for years. Not since the Saphyrum War, when greed consumed the sorcerers' leadership, and masterminds took over Syljia, and *everything* went wrong.

Her eyes swept the trees for signs of movement. When she turned back, she stumbled again, the toe of her boot snagging on a stone.

It should have been easy, recovering from that misstep, but her body was too weak from giving birth only a few days before. She fell in a heap, twisting to avoid landing on the baby. Her shoulder took the brunt of the impact, and another rock sliced a jagged trail across her right arm.

The baby screamed, cutting short her own yelp of pain.

Scrambling to sit up in the mud, Nerimoria tore open her tunic and undershirt to press her daughter's mouth against her breast. Her lacerated hand cupped the back of the girl's head, painting a scarlet smear across her tiny crown of white hair.

"Please, *ru'ennia*. It's alright," she repeated. "Everything's going to be alright."

As the newborn rooted, still whimpering, Nerimoria winced and readjusted her daughter's mouth against her nipple. When the frantic little grunts finally settled into desperate suckling, she did another hasty sweep of the trees. No sign of her pursuers. Yet.

So much for staying on the move. The thought might have drawn a bitter laugh from her if she hadn't been so tired.

"You had other plans, didn't you?" she rasped, looking down at the girl.

She shrugged out of her tunic and wrapped it around her waist. After struggling to tie the sleeves in a knot and balance her daughter on her arm, she drew her legs up around the child as if she could protect her from the world. Bowing her head, she prayed to Shavaan for the strength to stand again.

Wetness seeped through the seat of her trousers. Nerimoria shivered. The smell of blood was thick in the air. She shifted just enough to spot the streaks of red between her thighs. Her breath hitched. It wouldn't be long before the dogs caught wind of *that*.

She lifted herself off the cold patch of mud and onto a dry area between two thick roots. Her back came to rest on a tree several times wider than she was. Its enormous trunk curved inward on this side, as if a giant had kicked it hard enough to cave it in. While the baby nursed, she checked the other pouch at her hip.

"Baosanni take me." She only had five beads left. Her body would demand far more before her journey was through. Five beads would get her a few dozen leagues, perhaps, but only if she stayed ahead of the sorcerers. Only if she could avoid casting spells.

As if she *could* cast spells. She felt sicker now than she had moments ago. Sweat slicked her skin and rolled into dozens of stinging cuts. Her empty stomach twisted, threatening to turn itself out on the ground. The world spun, and her ears rang—

No.

Focus.

She took stock of her symptoms, something her brother would have done if he were here. Fever. Dizziness. Nausea. Between rationing her saphyrum beads and casting from them as heavily as she had last night, it was a wonder she hadn't collapsed already. The early signs of Mage's Folly were upon her.

Giving in was not an option. Not yet. She blinked a dozen times and clenched her shaking hands to stay them. Breathing deeply of the cool spring air, she ignored the copper tang of blood and let the scents of wet soil, green moss, and woody decay ground her.

Off in the distance, a dog howled.

Her heart leaped into her throat. The sound came from behind her tree, perhaps a league to the west. They'd found her trail. She cast a furtive glance down at her daughter.

The baby had fallen asleep, thank Mira. Tiny pink fingers rested against Nerimoria's chest; she tucked them beneath the blanket and wrenched her shirt closed. With a hand on the root beside her, she forced herself upright and leaned against the trunk until her legs stopped trembling.

It took three tries to shove herself off the tree, and the effort triggered a violent wave of nausea. Her stomach cramped and blood trickled down her thighs. She stumbled along the forest floor, mud sucking at her boots like it meant to swallow her whole. Truthfully, that would be a better end than the sorcerers had planned for her.

More ancient trees stood around her like sentinels keeping vigil. Some of their great limbs were already thick with leaves, while others bore large white flowers whose fragrant petals littered the ground like snow. She was careful not to disturb them, silently praying to Caelyn that the heady aroma might disguise her passage. Even better, that she might come upon a stream she could use to break the trail.

Would that I could Rift Bend at a time like this.

The clouds broke open and light poured through the canopy, revealing a gap in the brush ahead. She shuffled toward it. The howling was closer now, but she still had a chance. She could move faster over terrain that wasn't riddled with roots and weeds. Ignoring the accompanying thought that the dogs could do the same, she let her world narrow to that gap in the trees.

Her knees struck the ground when she finally reached it, lungs heaving, her body drenched in fever sweat. She kept one arm locked around the baby, using her other hand to keep herself from collapsing. It was all she could do to lift her head.

The gap opened onto a modest plot of farmland stretched over a sloping valley. A shallow brook cut through the land from northeast to southwest. A wooden bridge arched over the banks, some fifty spans from a one-story farmhouse, and an old stable stood up the rise, its weather-worn door open to the morning air.

Tears sprang to her eyes at the sight of the brook, but a wide-open patch of freshly turned mud lay in front of her. It would be slow going, even more so than her trek through the forest. Worse, smoke twirled out of the farmhouse chimney, and if anyone unfriendly toward Syljians spotted her, she was as good as dead.

She surveyed the rest of the valley. The forest stood close on every side. Spindly trees and evergreen bushes marched into the pasture as if in staunch defiance of the farmer's attempts to tame the land. The overgrowth could provide some cover, and if she circled around to the place where the brook emerged from the forest, she could travel upstream before returning east.

Alternatively, she could traverse the southern perimeter. It was a shorter path to the water, but the stream likely drained into the Falcon River. Following it for any amount of time would take her back toward the capital and the Sorcerers' Guild. No, it was best not to turn south again until she was well away from Ryost.

She attempted to rise, but the trees spun around her so fast that she dropped back to her knees. More wetness flowed from between her legs. Only the weight of the infant on her arm steadied her. That little face. The shock of white-blond hair. Thin white eyebrows. Pink cheeks, not lavender. Perfectly rounded ears, like her father's.

Get up. Get up!

Nerimoria was on her feet and moving, but she couldn't remember standing. North. She went north, then east, around the clearing—

The sound of a dog barking shattered the quiet forest.

She cried out and threw herself to the ground, covering the infant as the shaggy beast burst from the trees. *Stupid*. Why hadn't she run?

As she curled around the baby and braced for the rending bite of vicious teeth, something warm and wet slopped along the side of her cheek. Raspy, eager panting filled her ears. She dared to turn her head to the side, and the dog's tongue lolled out, slavering all over her mouth and nose.

A shaggy dog. Red fur, flecked with brown. Not one of the Guild's sleek, black tracking hounds. Still huddled in a heap on the ground, Nerimoria did her best to muffle a cry that was equal parts relief and hysteria.

The dog's excitable circling didn't disguise the approach of footsteps. "Here, now! Here! Will, leave off now!"

Mira's mercy. She kept her head down, curling tighter into a ball while the dog danced around her, sniffing, not at all mindful of its master's summons. She couldn't reach the pouch with her saphyrum, but she could reach the star pendant with its single bead around her neck. Her fingers closed on it as she readied to defend herself.

"Give her some space, ye damnable mutt. Here!" The man spoke so fast, she could barely identify the language as Eidosinian.

Finally, the dog leaped away, and footfalls shook the ground. Nerimoria's hand tightened on the pendant, her heart racing. She tried to channel its power, tried

to summon Aether, but couldn't. Mage's Folly held her firmly in its grasp. The baby beneath her began to cry.

"Well, ye're the biggest rabbit ol' Will's ever flushed. Are ye alright, lass?" A hand brushed her shoulder, trying to coax her out of her crouch.

Her breath came in labored gasps. Darkness crept into her vision. Her world spun again, and she was suddenly blinking up at a clear patch of morning sky. The young man looked down at her, then toward the baby, his bushy red eyebrows pinched with concern.

Concern.

Gods be good.

He hadn't shied from her, despite the obvious. Her lavender skin, her white hair, her tapered ears. He didn't seem frightened of her at all.

Yes, because I'm so terrifying right now.

Nerimoria tried to move her arms, then her legs, but they refused to obey. The baby still cried, and her heart lurched.

"Please," she attempted in her clearest Eidosinian. "My daughter."

"Aye, the little lass looks hungry." The man's green eyes were set in a friendly, square face and framed by a windswept tangle of red curls. He set his bearded jaw. "But ye don't look like ye've had much to eat yerself. Ye'll come back to the farm with me." As if expecting her to protest, he lifted a string of rabbit carcasses. "We've got plenty to go around. My Ali—she won't mind."

He slung the rabbits over his shoulder and reached down to gather the baby. She looked so small in his enormous hands. He placed the child on Nerimoria's chest and helped cross her arms over the blanket. Then he looked down at the rest of her with a wince. "Ye been runnin' a while, haven't ye?"

"They were nearly on top of us last night." She had nothing left to lose by telling him the truth. If the Guild discovered him aiding her, he'd be strung up right beside her. "I don't want to bring you trouble."

He scoffed, reaching down to scoop an arm under her shoulders. His other arm slid beneath her knees. "Don't worry about that. Best save yer strength, ye *kinnich*."

As he hoisted her up, more howling carried toward them on the wind. He stiffened, and she followed his gaze to the west. They were close. Too close. Her heart fluttered. She should go on. Draw them off. Then she could circle back—

“I’m Angus, by the way.”

“Neri.”

Angus started for the farm. “Ye’re a long way from the border, Neri.”

She tried to snort, but the sound came out more like a sniffle. She’d been thrown so far off-course. “I know.”

“Ach, nothing for it, I suppose. We’ll take good care of ye and the little one. There’s plenty of room for ye until ye feel well again.”

Nerimoria stilled in Angus’s arms, a calm, dreamlike sensation settling over her. Her heartbeat slowed. She might have drifted off.

Angus was still chatting away, his tone growing wistful. “Ali and me, we just lost one of our own a few days past...”

There was something she needed to tell him. The child. Something about the child. She blinked, trying to remember.

He sniffled. “I reckon she can help with the feedin’ if—”

Reaching up an ashen hand, Nerimoria touched his lips. “She is special.”

“Well, I—” Angus paused, brow wrinkling.

She pressed harder with her fingertips. “He’ll be coming for her. She must be ready.”

“Ready for what, lass?” His bewilderment didn’t abate. “Who’s coming?”

She breathed in, then out. Her hand fell like an autumn leaf onto the baby’s back. Focusing on the warmth of her daughter’s body, the tiny heart beating in her chest, Nerimoria let her eyes close. That dreamlike state claimed her once more.

“Chaos.”



CHAPTER ONE

ALAR

Alar ducked into the shadow of an alcove, the hastily scrawled message crumpled in his hand.

Tension knotted his shoulder blades, and his teeth clenched to stifle a groan. Other students shuffled along the corridor, paying no mind to him, but the one person he needed to avoid most sat a dozen paces away, absently twisting a white-blond curl around her finger.

Daeya McVen lounged on a sofa made for straight spines, dusty boots kicked up on a low table. She seemed distracted enough by the tattered book in her lap, but if Alar's mentor caught him sneaking across the second-floor landing and away from his first class, she would have questions. While he often enjoyed their verbal sparring matches, today was not the day for one.

His body itched for motion. The spymaster would only wait so long. Roughly fifty paces separated Alar from the gold-inlaid staircase; he could make it in the span of a dozen breaths.

Stuffing the note in his pocket, he sidled into the stream of blue-and-gray-robed students, his own gray robe snapping at his ankles. The fresh assassin's clay disguising his tapered ears weighed with every step. He swung wide of the sitting area and clung to the mural-bedecked walls, skin tingling as if he could sense Daeya watching him. A ridiculous thought, of course; his psionic skill set didn't include such perception.

Six paces to the stairs. Four, then two. He reached for the handrail, at last allowing the tension in his back to ease—

“Hey Faustus, wait up!”

Cursed Wastelands.

His fingers wilted against the railing. No matter how urgent Val's summons was, Alar couldn't compromise his alias. Initiate Faustus Crex was a Guild-loyal magic adept who adored Daeya, despite her problematic views on authority. He would have never bolted down the stairs and out the front entrance before she could reach him. As tempting as the idea was, Faustus was the linchpin for Alar's mission, and thousands of people depended on his continued success.

Limbs heavy with resignation, he turned and forced a smile. She closed her book, gathered her pack, and rushed to join him.

“Good morning, Daeya.”

“Morning.” Light filtered through the stairwell's enormous stained-glass windows, painting her pale cheeks in shades of lavender and blue. It was hard to cling to his annoyance faced with those mirthful green eyes. “You going to commissary?”

Alar shook himself. She was a senior acolyte in the Sorcerers' Guild, not his friend. “I am,” he said, taking the easy explanation in stride.

“Great. Me too.”

He sincerely doubted that—she never met him before class on Mirasdays—but pointing out the novelty meant prolonging their encounter. Whatever she was up to would have to wait. Alar started down the stairs, saying nothing.

Daeya nudged him with her shoulder, that irritating, endearing, ever-present bounce in her step. “So, did you hear the news?”

He suppressed a sigh. “What news?”

She lowered her voice as a pair of senior acolytes passed them on the stairs. “There's going to be an execution tomorrow.”

Alar glanced at her, brows tensing. He'd spent the last eleven months familiarizing himself with the capital, with eight of those months enrolled in the School of High Sorcery. Still, there were nuances of Ryost's city culture he wasn't well-versed in. "Is that unusual?"

Daeya's nose wrinkled. "Have you been blanked? Of course it's unusual." She rummaged around in her blue, black-trimmed robe and pulled out two oranges. "Want one?"

What he wanted was to extract himself from this conversation and get to Morgan's Inn and back before his first class started. "Sure."

They reached the ground floor, and Daeya's gaze darted around the sun-speckled rotunda as if searching for eavesdroppers. Alar quenched his irritation with a slow, deliberate breath. How and where Daeya got her intel was often suspect, but it was almost always good.

The rotunda was relatively quiet this morning. Its great expanse nestled in the middle of the three Sorcerers' Towers and served as the nexus for the eastern administrative wing, the west wing housing the School of High Sorcery, and the north wing with its libraries and dormitories. Mosaic floors, gem-encrusted tapestries, and gleaming stone arches bespoke the Guild's opulent wealth. All five stories and a dozen curving staircases were visible from balconies encircling the foyer.

The space still made his gut twist. How easy it was for them to bask in such luxury while his people scraped out an existence in the frigid Northlands.

Daeya ripped the skin off her orange, nodded politely to a passing instructor, and dropped the peel into a nearby vase. "There hasn't been an execution like this since I was twelve." With another nudge, she steered Alar toward the east wing and the commissary. "Rumor has it, it's an aethermancer."

His wide eyes snapped back to her. "An aethermancer? In Ryost?" Was that why Val's message had been so urgent?

"And not just any aethermancer." She leaned in conspiratorially. "I heard it's Cheralach himself."

"That's—" *Impossible*. A stone lodged in his chest. Alar floundered, trying to think of something Faustus would say. "That is big news. Where did you hear such a thing?" And what was Cheralach doing outside of Starlight?

One white eyebrow lifted. “I have my sources.” She shook her head and laughed. “It’s crazy, isn’t it? To be that legendary, only to wind up at the end of a rope. It’s almost sacrilege.”

They entered the sunny east wing corridor. Another group of students passed by, carrying sacks of saphyrum and wearing the solid blue robes of junior acolytes. Alar usually noted the way they glared at Daeya—who was easily four years their junior and yet a rank higher—but if something had happened to Cheralach, he couldn’t concern himself with the politics of Guild rank right now. He needed to get to Val.

The commissary was right around the corner, past the switchback staircase. He should stock up on saphyrum after all, just in case. In the meantime, Daeya continued the conversation without him in her usual rambling way.

“Do you think the Alliaansi are as scary as the Guild makes them seem?”

Alar stopped walking. *That* was not a normal thing for a sorceress to say.

She paused too and spun to face him, a familiar air of mischief about her—the same mischief that had nearly gotten her expelled from the School at least once before. If not for Councilor Gregory, Daeya would have faced over a dozen disciplinary actions in the last eight months alone. The last thing Alar needed—the last thing *Faustus* needed—was to be drawn into one of her schemes.

He leveled his sternest expression on her. “Daeya, it’s not our place to question the Guild.”

Her eyes glittered. “Isn’t it?”

“The Alliaansi are made up of cutthroats, deserters, and Syljians.” Alar poured all the incredulity he could muster into the words. “You don’t want to get mixed up with them.”

More students and a few instructors trickled past as they stood there, staring each other down. Sunlight cast her features in stark relief, lending a physical edge to the remark poised on her lips. But a real friendship was rare for the Guild’s child prodigy, and she was more likely to sheathe her cutting wit than slice *Faustus* open with it.

Still, his argument didn’t entirely sway her. As she resumed course, she muttered, “I’m going to meet one someday.”

Alar couldn’t help but smirk. “I wouldn’t advise it.”

The tension between them broke, and Daeya grinned again. “And what better opportunity than—”

A sorcerer stepped out of the stairwell. His black robe billowed behind him like a cloud of ill omens, and he stopped so abruptly in front of Daeya that she ran into him.

“Bleeding Aether, Normos! Watch where you’re going.” Under her breath, she added, “Gods-damned creep.”

There was a time when Alar would have feigned surprise at his mentor’s disrespect toward mages of higher rank. That time had passed. Still, he braced himself.

Normos was in his mid-twenties, not much older than Alar, with the sleek and deadly grace of a viper and a temperament to match. Watching him spar with the other sorcerers, it was no wonder he had become Councilor Gregory’s right hand. However, his place at Gregory’s side was tenuous at best. Once Daeya earned her black robe—the next step for her in the Guild hierarchy—there were rumors Normos would be replaced.

The sorcerer stepped in close, forcing Daeya to crane her neck to meet his icy stare. Slick blond hair accentuated prominent cheekbones and a cleanly shaven jaw. Though Normos appeared calm, Alar’s aura-sense picked up the deep-seated rage shimmering around him like heat from sunbaked stone.

Curiosity piqued, Alar lamented the wards protecting Normos from deeper psionic probing. For most mages, such wards were exceedingly dangerous to construct, but all of Gregory’s strongest sorcerers possessed them. There were techniques Alar could use to break a psionic ward, but such a move might reveal him, and exposure wasn’t an option.

“Senior Acolyte McVen,” Normos said, his voice dripping sickly sweet honey, “the Councilor wants to see you.”

Daeya stiffened. Out of habit, Alar searched for her aura, but his ability to read her was, as always, nonexistent. In addition to her unnatural skill, she somehow resisted his mental touch without discernible wards. Her immunity extended far beyond that of any other psionics-resistant mages, whose auras were at least visible to him. Despite the long days and nights spent with her, he hadn’t figured out why.

“Tell him I’ll be right there.” Daeya drew herself up, all seriousness now. She turned, opening her mouth to excuse herself.

Normos gripped her shoulder with one manicured hand. “Now, McVen.”

A dark look stole across her face, and she shrugged him off. “Don’t bleeding touch me.”

Alar didn’t have time for this. He stepped between them and offered Daeya a dismissive nod. “I’ll see you later.”

Then inspiration struck. Having Daeya’s saphyrum on hand would be useful if Val had to bring in other aethermancers to deal with Cheralach. She would never notice if a few beads went missing. “Would you like me to collect your saphyrum for you?”

After a wary look in Normos’s direction, Daeya slipped a hand into her robe. “Please.” When she pressed her commissary coin into his palm, a spark of her prior humor flared. “By the way, you might stay away from Transmutations today. It seems someone released Master Tershill’s experiment last night, and it made a mess all over the lab.”

Normos bristled.

Alar could hold back his laughter, but he couldn’t help the tightening in his cheeks. “How unfortunate.”

Daeya started for the stairs, white-blond brows pinched with exaggerated disapproval. “I can’t imagine who would do such a thing.”

Normos fell in behind her, scowling. Alar stepped into the space he left to watch them go. Daeya turned at the switchback and winked at him. Then she bounded up to the second floor and disappeared.

He stood there a moment, drumming fingers against his satchel strap. Had their circumstances been different, Alar liked to think they could have been friends. Perhaps if she’d been born in the north, where the Alliaansi had a stronger foothold. Perhaps if her talent hadn’t been discovered by the Guild so soon.

He lingered on what she’d said, the spark of rebellion in her eyes, but it was only a fool’s hope. Her willingness to challenge the reigning authority in Eidosinia was just a product of her youth. If he presented her with the opportunity, she wouldn’t take it.

And if she learned what he was, she was duty-bound to kill him.



Alar joined the short line at commissary and glanced down at the orange Daeya had given him. His stomach grumbled, and with the slightest upturning of his lips, he began to peel it.

Having something in his hands staved off a fraction of his anxiety. Val would forgive the delay for extra saphyrum; they couldn't afford to snub a chance to pilfer more of the arcane metal. Fortunately, the line moved swiftly, and Alar dropped half the orange in his pocket when the stout Cintoshi attendant waved him forward.

Two gold teeth glinted beneath Linnar's braided mustache. "Good morning, Faustus."

"Good morning, Linnar." Alar placed a copper commissary coin on the polished marble.

Linnar claimed the coin in a meaty palm. "Just saphyrum today?" His lips moved as if they worked hard to hold up his enormous brown beard.

"Just saphyrum."

Linnar spun in his seat and reached for the wall full of pre-portioned bags, his short legs swinging into space. "How are your classes treating you, boy? Getting along better?"

"Yes, much better, thank you." In the beginning, Alar had opted to lower the instructors' expectations of him by shooting for just under average. But when Daeya insisted they begin nightly tutoring sessions to address his weaknesses, he'd been forced to show more initiative. Though others might disagree, he'd found her to be a remarkable mentor. If he'd really been an arcanist, capable of casting spells or manipulating elements, he would have excelled under her guidance. "Though Divinations is still giving me trouble."

A gray bag thumped against the counter. "You have Master Ulrich?"

"I do."

Those gold teeth flashed again. "Well, that explains everything. Don't worry, lad. Her exams still inspire nightmares in the lot of us."

Alar didn't have to feign his pained expression. Divination should have been an easy subject for a psionist—or a mastermind-in-training, as Val liked to joke.

He could influence others' thoughts and accurately predict events, but Ulrich emphasized the details of spellcasting over results. His psionic illusions and facsimiles of spells could only go so far.

"I failed the first two," Alar admitted, "but my tutor has been helping me." He made a show of starting and dug out Daeya's silver coin. "Speaking of, she asked me if I could pick up her saphyrum, too."

"Sure." Linnar hesitated. "I just need to see an instructor's permission slip."

Alar let himself shrink and fumbled with his pack strap before pouring a healthy dose of sheepish innocence into his voice. "I don't have one."

The displeasure on Linnar's face took a full three seconds to coalesce amidst all his deep wrinkles. He lifted one bushy eyebrow. "Now, I know you're still fresh blood around here, boy, but Daeya knows better than that."

It might have slipped Daeya's mind, but it hadn't slipped Alar's. Lower-ranking students couldn't turn in higher ranks' commissary coins without prior approval. It was one of many measures put in place to keep students from illegally selling saphyrum. But with the right pressure applied in the right place, Linnar would let it slide. "She was going to pick it up herself, but Sorcerer Beck called her away to meet with her Councilor."

"What did she do this time?"

Alar shrugged, the itch along his spine not entirely feigned. "I'm not sure."

Someone huffed an exasperated sigh behind him. "She's going to get herself expelled."

Junior Instructor Rizzy Tallion's frown was so well-practiced, it left permanent lines flanking his mouth. The skinny, wild-haired human was the last remaining in the commissary line, and he stood holding the strap of a straining pack over one shoulder. He didn't look like much beneath his gold robe, but the Illusions instructor was fast-tracked to take his father Freddick Tallion's seat on the Sorcerers' Council in a few years.

Linnar huffed his agreement. "After that stunt she pulled in Master Keph's lecture hall, I was sure they'd toss her out."

Alar attempted his best impression of a rabbit caught in a trap. He'd heard about the djinni Daeya supposedly summoned during Master Keph's lecture on the theoretical existence of Aetherial beings. Keph's reaction to the harmless prank revealed how cowardly he was in front of over two hundred students.

Rather than keeping a level head and seeing through the illusion, he'd panicked and nearly trampled two of his junior instructors on his way off the stage.

Indeed, the prank almost cost Daeya her place in the School. According to the more reliable cafeteria gossip, Councilor Gregory had transferred Master Keph to a satellite school in Orthovia to keep his prized student close.

"That wasn't even the worst of them this year." Rizzy tipped his chin toward Alar. "Do yourself a favor, Initiate. Ask for a mentorship transfer as soon as you can."

Reaching for his bag of saphyrum, Alar nodded. "I'll keep that in mind, Instructor."

He spared another look at Daeya's silver coin on the counter. With Councilor Tallion's son breathing down their necks, convincing Linnar to break the rules would be harder, but Alar was willing to gamble. His people depended on saphyrum for their very survival, and the Guild consumed it like a child left alone with Aivenosian hard candy.

Besides, not only was Linnar impressionable, but Rizzy also had a secret soft spot for Daeya. More than once, Alar had found her in Rizzy's lecture hall after class, sitting cross-legged on a desk while he explained an advanced spellcasting concept.

Alar held his dispirited look and shifted his gaze to Linnar.

The Cintoshi leaned back in his chair. "Now, lad..." he began, glancing furtively at Rizzy.

Using his aura-sense, Alar studied the instructor in his periphery. Unease flickered about Rizzy's body like a guttering candle flame. Alar reached out to him with his mind, stroking the man's consciousness with a feather-light touch. In lieu of wards, many mages underwent specialized training to recognize and resist psionics, but Rizzy either wasn't one of them, or he was especially bad at it. He didn't notice Alar's subtle intrusion.

As if dipping his feet into a fast-moving stream, it took Alar a moment to find his balance in the flow of the sorcerer's thoughts. He kept Rizzy in his line of sight all the while, alert for signs of discomfort. The jumble of Rizzy's mind was an abstraction right now, but given enough time and practice, Alar would be able to decipher and manipulate it as well as any mastermind. For now, he had to settle for implanting thoughts of his own in Rizzy's head.

He pressed gently into the stream and whispered telepathically, *Faustus is a trustworthy sort.*

Rizzy's aura quieted to little more than a ripple in a pond. His furrowed brows smoothed over, and the thin line of tension in his lips receded.

Keeping his psionic pressure steady, Alar projected his own self-confidence into Rizzy. *He'll make certain McVen doesn't have an excuse for missing another exam.*

Straight-backed as a Councilor, Rizzy stepped forward and slid Daeya's coin toward Linnar. He placed his own gold coin next to it. "Saphyrum for myself and my student, please."

Eyes narrowing in triumph, Alar dipped his chin to disguise the look as gratitude.

Linnar's face sagged with relief as he exchanged both coins. This time, the bags he placed on the counter were larger than Alar's—one blue, one gold.

Rizzy turned to Alar. "I know you are a trustworthy sort, Initiate Crex. Deliver this to Senior Acolyte McVen, please."

"Of course, Instructor." Alar accepted the bag and bowed dutifully. "Thank you."

Rizzy didn't bother to smile back. "She has an exam in my class tomorrow. I expect her to be prepared. No excuses."

"I'll make certain she gets the message."

He bade Rizzy and Linnar farewell and hurried off toward his first class.

Once he was out of sight, he circled back to a side entrance and slipped out the door. After scanning the alley for stray eyes, he stripped off his Guild robe to reveal the commoner's attire beneath it. He shoved the robe in his pack atop the two bags of saphyrum, checked the alley again, and started toward the cobbled street.

Brown leggings and a beige tunic allowed him to blend in with the foot traffic. Early autumn air hung thick with the smells of freshly baked goods, dozens of perfumes, tanned leather, and the musky scent of livestock. Carts of all kinds rumbled through the cobbled market streets. Carriages, too, crowded the roadway, bedecked with velvet curtains and metal scrollwork, their teams of horses driven by coachmen in expertly tailored suits. Every now and then, a young pickpocket moved like a specter through the crowds.

Alar scoffed to himself. Ryost might be the largest and wealthiest city in Eidosinia, but even the shiniest copper had its share of blemishes.

Over a dozen of Laerin's crew—the ragtag group of smugglers Val enlisted to run their saphyrum caches—loitered about the trade district today. Their attention slid off Alar like oiled pigskin. One of them signed in a secret code to another, who signaled to a third farther down the road. Their silent message traveled swiftly, and it would soon alert Val he was coming.

It was odd to see so many thieves clustered near Guild Center. Normally, Laerin cast a wider net. Prickling unease skittered across Alar's skin as he reached out with his mind toward a boy in a steward's uniform, then a red-haired woman, and a middle-aged man at a fruit stand.

His breath caught. Something *had* happened.

Evidence of Daeya's news saturated their auras. Those flickering distortions of the surrounding air somehow made the situation more real. The collective hum of anxiety rattled straight to his bones. And if the smugglers were worried, they should all be worried.

Alar forced himself to maintain a steady pace. Sprinting through the city like a wounded deer would only draw attention. Out of the trade district, past the lofty steeples of the Church of the Enlightened, far from the high-born mansions of the Noblemen's Court, and across the Falcon River Bridge he went.

All the while, an icy hand of dread threatened to close around his heart.



CHAPTER TWO

RAVLOK

By the time Ravlok finished reading the last page of Grandulli Bornen's philosophical dissertation, *The Theory of Arcane Appropriation*, the morning sun was filtering into the restricted archives of the School's library. He leaned back in his chair, muscles stiff from sitting all night, and stretched his arms above his head. Pops echoed through the empty room, and relief flooded him. The nagging pain along his spine settled to a dull, ignorable ache.

His thick-knuckled hands sifted through ear-length black hair. There was something to be said for Bornen; he knew how to make the mysteries of the arcane duller than a blunted butter knife. Yet Ravlok could see why the Guild censored his work. The Cintoshi professor had written over twenty papers about non-adepts and their connection to magic. Bornen believed all beings possessed some ability to harness the gift of the gods—the Aether, as some called it—whether it was through the use of saphyrum or some other means yet to be discovered. With enough practice and patience, Bornen proposed it was possible

to strengthen that ability, like conditioning the body's muscles, to rival the skills of Guild initiates and possibly even acolytes.

If that were true, then it was possible to restore the balance of power between the Sorcerers' Guild and the people it had once promised to serve.

Bornen's assertions also vilified the Council's prohibition of formal teaching of the arcane outside Guild establishments and the Church. Though the Guild backed the decree with a sound argument of safety for those dabbling in dangerous arts, the penalties for violating the decree were much too steep: imprisonment, or even death.

It was just one of a dozen decrees that had made Ravlok nervous recently.

As a member of the Monastic Order of Ordeolas, Ravlok strived to embody the teachings of his deity, but he often found himself at odds with the elders on their interpretations of Ordeolas's will. They all clung to the Book of Order and meditated on the importance of attaining Balance, but they no longer tried to maintain order when things actually fell out of balance in the rest of the world.

With the growing strength of the Guild, its chokehold on all things arcane, and an acute state of fear and unrest among the populace, things had certainly fallen out of balance. This was what brought Ravlok here to the Guild library, rather than the reflection pool. The lackadaisical way his mentor, Yonfé, brushed aside his concerns troubled him. Yonfé didn't tell him to seek fulfillment by performing a kind deed for a stranger. He didn't suggest Ravlok ease his mind by reading to the children in the orphanage. He didn't even hint at discussing his concerns with someone more equipped to address them. His only advice was that he stop running around with Guild acolytes and remain in the monastery where he belonged.

At least here, he had a shot at finding answers.

He looked around the sunlit rows of dusty old texts, idly fingering the key Master Riddleston had entrusted to him. The Guild's librarian had gotten so used to Ravlok's late-night study sessions that he'd provided him with twenty-four-hour access just so he could get some sleep. Riddle's only request was that Ravlok lock up when he left—and, of course, that he stay out of the restricted archives. The last was only a formality, however. Wise old Master Riddle didn't really expect him to heed that directive. How could he, with such a vast wealth of censored knowledge behind an easily defeated lock on an alluring wooden door?

With the ache in his back nearly gone, Ravlok winced at the telling pain in his stomach. He pulled out the orange his study partner had left for him and peeled it. Daeya had helped him track down four of the Borden essays last night. Even if she didn't have any interest in the subject, the senior acolyte enjoyed poking through the restricted texts with him, mostly for the sake of breaking rules.

A door opened somewhere off in the stacks, jolting Ravlok from his thoughts. He listened closely as he slipped the orange peel into his pocket. It must be Riddle coming in a little early to prepare for the last-minute crammers that wrecked the space before midterms.

He rose from his chair, carefully lifting it so the feet didn't squeal on the floor. The librarian's desk was sheltered from view in several places throughout the library. If he could reach one of those places, he could pretend to study a more mundane text for a while before departing.

As he replaced the chair and gathered the essays from the table, the echo of footsteps carried into the room.

Odes of Ordeolas. It wasn't Riddle's shuffled gait interspersed with the tap-tap-tapping of a walking cane. Whoever it was strode purposefully across the library's polished tile.

And they were heading right for him.

The penalty for unauthorized access to the restricted archives was normally a temporary ban from the Guild library, but Ravlok had a history of causing trouble. If the wrong person found him here, he could just as well be imprisoned, and he had no intention of going back to jail.

There was a second entrance to this room, up the narrow stairs to his left. The door at the top led to a hallway in the north wing, between the restricted archives and several little-used mages' rooms. Ten-to-one odds it was locked, but the alcove beside it was dark enough that if he couldn't pick the lock, he would at least find shelter in the shadows. He started that way, only to freeze at the sound of keys rattling against the knob from the outside.

Damn.

No one ever used that entrance. And this time, Daeya wasn't here to save him. With the essays bundled in his arms, he darted down the nearest aisle and pressed himself against the end cap.

Both doors swung open within seconds of each other. From his vantage point, he could see neither entrance, nor the figures passing through them.

“Have you made any progress?” came a male voice. The deep, rolling ‘r’s, aspirated consonants, and gently emphasized vowels made Ravlok stiffen. Lucius Gregory’s Duerwisti accent was unmistakable. Daeya’s mentor was the last person Ravlok wanted to encounter here.

The second voice rang with frustration. “We’ve gotten nothing out of him, Councilor. It’s like his will is made of steel.”

“He’s spent years with the blanker filth,” Gregory said. “He’s undoubtedly learned some of their tricks.”

Ravlok glanced around the corner, trying to glimpse the second speaker. Too many scrolls and stacks of parchment were piled up between them. He leaned over to peer through a gap, only to have that view blocked by the corner of another aisle. Leaning farther still, he caught sight of a deep brown cloak just as the middle pages of the essays in his hands slipped. With a jolt of panic, he made a grab for them, gritting his teeth.

He froze, his grip death-white on the wayward stack of paper. Too much noise. Way too much noise. This was no time to be juggling censored parchment. Ravlok’s heart hammered in his throat.

“Well, what should we do?”

The men’s conversation continued. Neither gave any sign they had heard him. With a centering, meditative breath, Ravlok pressed his back against the end cap once more and contented himself with examining the wall in front of him.

“I suspect he will bend if we break someone he loves,” Gregory mused. “Torture the others, one by one, until you find one that makes an impression on him. Once he tells us what we need, kill them all.”

Ravlok’s eyes widened. The Guild Council had outlawed torture years ago, and an execution without trial violated the most basic of citizens’ rights. Turning one ear toward the men, he strained to hear the second man’s reply.

“Don’t you want to execute them publicly, Councilor?”

“No. They will have allies coming for them. We cannot risk an escape, no matter how unlikely they are to succeed.”

“Yes, Councilor.”

“Tighten your security at the bridge gate and prepare your men. I suspect the Alliaansi’s rescue attempt will be underway by mid-afternoon.”

“Understood.”

The anxiety in the second man’s voice was tangible. Apparently, the thought of facing a team of angry aethermancers and Syljians could put the fear of Chaos in even Gregory’s men. The man’s steps quickened as he attempted to flee the room.

“And Nicolas?”

The footsteps stopped. “Y-yes, Councilor?”

Gregory spoke softly, but the threat behind his words was plain. “I know you enjoy your duties, but there can be no mistakes this time.”

“Of course, Councilor. On my honor.”

Ravlok took a risk and peered around the other side of the end cap. Another flash of that brown cloak, oil-slicked black hair, sickly pale skin, and then the man named Nicolas departed. The door creaked closed behind him.

Silence filled the dusty air. Ravlok waited for signs of the Councilor’s departure for an eternity. He dared not move, focusing instead on calming his mind, envisioning himself seated at the reflection pool, not in what felt like genuine danger. It was a foolish feeling, surely. It wasn’t as if his life were being threatened. After taking a few deep, silent breaths, he finally heard Gregory start for the stairs.

He was just commending himself for keeping his head during the entire ordeal when the Councilor stopped.

For several seconds, Ravlok stared at the wall in front of him, urging himself not to look. However, resisting temptation was one of many devotional exercises he struggled with, and today was not the day to make any progress on his path to Balance. He peered around the end cap and through a gap between books on the neighboring shelf. Gregory stood at the table, examining the spot where Ravlok had been sitting minutes ago.

Puzzled, Ravlok tried to reposition himself to see around the tall, white-robed figure, fearing he might have left some of his research behind. He found a space between two leather-bound tomes with a clear view of the table and relaxed. Any evidence of his nightly endeavor was tucked safely under his arm.

Gregory reached out and swiped at something on the lacquered surface. His finger glistened in the morning light.

The orange peel in Ravlok's pocket turned to lead.

The Councilor surveyed the room. His full head of wavy gray hair was swept back from his forehead, lending to the severity of his sharp nose, square jaw, and close-set eyes. He might have been handsome in his youth, before time had added so many lines to his beardless face.

"You may come out now."

A chill swept down Ravlok's spine. Still, he didn't move. If he waited him out, Gregory might think whoever had been here was already gone. Through the gap in the shelves, Ravlok saw the old man rub his finger and thumb together.

Gregory's expression darkened. "What are you? A ghost?" A flash of violet lit the sorcerer's eyes. "I said, 'Come out.'"

The words carried the weight of powerful enchantment. The seeking spell struck Ravlok like a physical blow, staggering him. A terrifying instant later, the control over his body slipped away like sand through his fingers. It moved of its own accord, obeying Gregory's command.

There were techniques he practiced to combat arcane possessions like this, and he scrambled to remember them, but the damage was already done. Ravlok fought Gregory's dominion even while his bare, callused feet squealed their protests against the polished stone floor. The Councilor turned toward the sound and smiled with cool, collected detachment. By the time Ravlok could work through the mental exercise to break free of Gregory's control, he had traversed the entire length of the aisle down which he'd hidden. He adjusted his grip on the parchment and stared directly into the old sorcerer's face.

"We reserve this room for mages and instructors." Gregory's wintry smile morphed into a sneer as his magic left him. His eyes returned to their natural brown. "But you already knew that."

Outraged by the sorcerer's violation of both his body and the Guild's own constitution, Ravlok struggled to keep his composure. Balance was what he needed. Logic. Sound reasoning. He squared his shoulders and drew himself up to his full height, though he was still shorter than Gregory by several fingerspans.

"Has there been a new decree abolishing the restriction of magic use on non-adepts, Councilor?" He pulled out the gold medallion of Ordeolas he wore around his neck. "Because last I heard, what you just did is a hanging offense."

Ravlok hoped his station would at least give Gregory pause. All monks who practiced in the Orders of Saolanni, Baosanni, and Ordeolas were non-adepts, or else they had so little arcane talent as to be nearly so. Gregory wouldn't dare cross any of the Monastic Orders by possessing or harming him further.

His reaction, however, was not what Ravlok expected.

The Councilor barked a laugh and shook his head. "As if anyone is going to believe you. Tell me, servant of Ordeolas, what is it you seek to learn in my archives?"

"Secrets," Ravlok said, ignoring the cold stone in his belly.

Gregory reached out to take the essays still clutched in Ravlok's hands. Ravlok allowed him to do so; it was pointless to resist. "*The Theory of Arcane Appropriation*, is it? Trying to awaken your own talent?"

"You could say that." It had certainly crossed his mind.

Gregory placed the stack of parchment on the table. "Bornen was a heretic, spreading falsities and rumors with no proof his postulations carried practical merit. You should have been reading Balziver or Criiosh if you wished to learn anything of value."

Ravlok frowned. He turned the two names over in his mind. Both were ancient Duerwisti philosophers, if his memory served him. They were championed throughout Dessos for the creation of arcanology, Duerguard's leading field of study.

"I'll keep that in mind." He wasn't sure what else to say. "Thank you."

The wrinkles on Gregory's forehead deepened. "I wouldn't thank me yet. We still have the matter of your trespassing to settle."

Ravlok smirked, despite the knot of tension between his shoulder blades. "If you don't tell, I won't tell."

"I'm afraid it is not that simple."

"You've condoned the use of torture on multiple prisoners. You've also used magic on me. I think we can both agree my presence here is a nonissue."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Ravlok knew he should stop talking. But this was exactly the sort of abuse of power happening all throughout Eidosinia. Sorcerers like Gregory, who thought they could bully compliance out of the common people, sat at the heart of the Guild's rotten core. If he let him get away with this, Ravlok would only contribute to the problem.

Gregory sighed, examining the floor between them. When he returned his attention to Ravlok, he clasped his hands before him. “These are perilous times in which we live. Every avenue we have available to us must be exploited if we are to protect our people from the blankers.” His eyes hardened. “I expect you will remember nothing of our conversation here.”

With his surprise victory in hand, Ravlok shrugged. “What conversation?”

The Councilor continued to regard him a moment more, the stern set of his brow betraying none of the anger he surely felt. There was nothing a man like Gregory detested more than being bested by a commoner.

When Gregory inclined his head and turned for the stairs, Ravlok turned as well. His legs still shook from the encounter, but his heart was no longer trying to break his ribs. He was halfway to the door to the public stacks when the sorcerer spoke again.

“On second thought—”

Some primal sense of self-preservation urged Ravlok to spin back around. He drew his dagger, but there was nothing cold steel could do against magic. The Councilor’s eyes flashed violet, followed by the single-word incantation that sealed his fate.

“*Caesabd.*”

Ravlok fell to his knees. Crippling pain lanced through his body, causing his stomach to reject the orange. Only vaguely aware of the vomit, he doubled over in his own bile. His dagger slipped from his fingers as he clutched at his torso to keep it from being torn apart.

Gregory strolled toward him and crouched down. “You have a history of being troublesome, young monk. Too full of questions to be left to your own whims.”

Around his swollen tongue, Ravlok managed to gather enough frothy saliva to spit in the Councilor’s face.

Gregory jerked backward, snarling. He swiped at his chin with his pristine white sleeve and seized a fistful of Ravlok’s black hair, wrenching his head upward.

“I hope you enjoyed the sunrise this morning. It will be the last one you ever see.”



CHAPTER THREE

DAEYA

“Let’s go, Normos,” Daeya called over her shoulder. She forced herself to smirk, despite the anxiety fermenting in her stomach. Gods, what did Gregory want this time? “You shouldn’t keep him waiting.”

When she reached the top of the stairs, she sped up, intent upon putting as much distance between them as possible. The wide hallway stretched in front of her, doors and arch-paned windows lined up like soldiers in perfect rows flanking her path. Her robe trailed behind her and her boots snapped against polished tile, pounding out an angry cadence that cleared the way of other students. Daeya ignored their side-eyed glances and focused on the bend at the end of the hall.

She hated when Gregory sent Normos to fetch her. He always had to make a spectacle of it, as if he thought embarrassing her would somehow make up for his own failings in their Councilor’s eyes.

Once, Normos had been like a brother to her, but their days of working side-by-side in the Guild nursery and bonding over lavender tea and strawberry pastries were long past. Their contemptuous rivalry had raged for four years now.

Apparently, it was bad form for a newly promoted mage to have his arse handed to him by an acolyte in a training duel. Normos had only grown more embittered as she neared magehood. He'd even physically assaulted her twice, prompting Daeya to enroll in unarmed combat training with Ravlok at the monastery.

Despite her best efforts, Normos caught up to her easily with his long-legged stride. Daeya stiffened beside him, but he didn't reach for her elbow this time. That was just as well. She might have broken his bleeding fingers if he touched her again.

A bitter taste coated her tongue. She looked up at him. "Why did he send you, anyway? Where's Cam?"

Gregory normally sent Cameron Vika when he needed her. Cam at least had the sense not to bark orders at her or tear out of stairwells like a Nohri blood wraith intent upon its next meal. Daeya preferred Cam's company to that of most others, especially since she was one of her only friends in the Guild. At least, when Cam's brothers weren't around.

"She's busy," Normos snapped.

"What's this about, then?"

His jaw clenched. "You'll find out soon enough."

She didn't have to fake the smirk this time. "He didn't tell you, did he?"

Normos set his teeth, but for once he didn't fire back a retort. Daeya's eyes narrowed. He never turned down a chance to spar with her, verbally or otherwise.

"Or, if he did, it must be good news. For me, anyway." She tilted her head. The increased tension along his brow and the way he kept flexing his hands bespoke a tome's worth of information, but she couldn't decipher any of it. She prodded a little harder. "Maybe that's why you look like the milk soured in your oats this morning."

Still, Normos said nothing. But beneath that poor excuse for a calm façade, a tempest brewed.

Daeya rolled her eyes. Fine. She returned her attention to the meeting ahead. Without an argument to distract her, each step closer to their destination made the void in her gut worse. Whatever this was about, it couldn't be that bad if Normos was so incensed. She fingered the casting bracelet around her wrist. Its warm band and blue-green saphyrum beads provided some comfort.

They reached Gregory's office, only to find it empty. A bottle of wine sat uncorked beside a glass adorned with gold filigree. His inkwell had been left open as well. Its pungent scent nearly masked the peppermint and cedar blend of his cologne. The slightest breeze blew in from a wide window and disturbed the red curtains; their tasseled ends knocked against a bookshelf filled with tomes.

As the door between them and the antechamber swung closed, Daeya swallowed the bile rising in her throat. Rather than let apprehension show, she threw Normos a glare. "Must not have been that important."

"Have a seat," he ground out, nodding to the two finely upholstered red chairs in front of Gregory's desk.

How she loathed that desk.

"I'd rather stand, thanks."

Normos stepped toward her. "That was not a request."

She stood her ground, determined not to be intimidated, even by one of the most adept mages in Ryost. It helped knowing that Normos adhered strictly to the Guild's rules. He wouldn't use magic on her outside of the sparring ring. "If you've a mind to scare me, you're going to have to try harder."

His expression darkened, blue eyes like jagged shards of ice. "You forget your place, Daeya."

"That's alright." She smiled prettily. "I'll have yours soon enough."

Not that she wanted it—gods knew she'd rather not be chained to Gregory's side like Normos was—but she'd never waste a chance to score a perfect blow to his ego. Daeya began to turn, to distance herself again.

Normos's hand locked around her throat.

A sharp yelp escaped her. Her fingers closed around his wrist, waves of frigid panic seizing her muscles as he threw her off-balance.

Bleeding—

He pulled her toward him, his brows and nose pinched with disgust. His breath blew hot against her face. "No. You won't."

Rage thawed her frozen limbs. She remembered her training, got her feet back under her, and shot both fists into his elbow—a move meant to send a painful shockwave up his arm. He flinched backward with a snarl, providing the perfect opening for her to side-sweep his knee and wrap her arm around his neck. Before

she could throw him to the ground, Normos recovered from the blow, twisted out of her chokehold, and shoved her across the room.

Daeya struck the corner of Gregory's desk. White-hot splinters of pain lanced up her lower back, prompting a snarl of her own.

She taunted him through bared teeth, one hand on the polished wood to steady herself. "Come on, Normos. You fight like a graceless fawn."

Normos didn't rise to the bait. Instead, he feinted left and slipped inside her guard, delivering a solid uppercut to her jaw. She bit her tongue with the blow and blood welled in her mouth. Her ears were still ringing when he lunged. Both hands closed around her neck this time. He sent her sprawling into the stack of spell books and stationery on top of the desk.

Terror took root inside her. She clawed at his fingers, but still they tightened, closing off her airway. This was no ordinary assault. Even at his most incensed, Normos was never this aggressive.

He was actually trying to kill her.

The thought pierced the fog around her mind. She brought her left leg up, planted her foot on the wood, and thrust to the right, sending them both off the desk, into the pair of chairs.

Gravity was already working against them when Normos released her to slow his fall. Daeya's momentum carried them into a second roll. Both chairs tipped backward. Wood splintered and crashed to the ground. They rolled away from the wreckage and came to a stop on the plush white rug. She sat astride him, and he tensed to buck her off. Rather than counter it, she wrapped her arm around her shoulder and let him throw her forward. Daeya fell, dropping all her weight into her elbow, and slammed it into his nose.

Normos yelped; blood gushed from the crushed tissue. While he reeled from the blow, Daeya tore away from him and took to her feet. She settled into the balanced, open-handed fighting stance Ravlok had taught her, readying for another round.

The door to Gregory's office swung open.

The Councilor paused in the doorway, lips parting for only a moment before his eyes pinned Daeya to the floor. His unsettling mask of neutrality slid into place.

“Councilor,” she choked out, letting her fighting stance crumble into a subservient bow.

She could scarcely find the words to explain before Gregory’s attention shifted from her to Normos, and then to the wreckage in his room. Daeya followed his gaze, taking in the scattered books, torn letters, spilled ink, and broken chairs. She swallowed hard and scraped together enough courage to open her mouth again.

“Councilor, this isn’t—”

“Silence.” The word held an edge that could have cut diamonds. His attention returned to Normos. “You are bleeding on my carpet.”

The mage—who shoved himself into a seated position and was using his black sleeve to staunch the blood from his broken nose—looked down at the red droplets soaking into the white fibers. “My apologies—”

“Go tend to your face.”

Normos wasted no time accepting the invitation. “Yes, Councilor.” The nasal sound of his voice might have been comical if not for their current predicament. He pushed himself to his feet, bowed to Gregory, and left the room.

Daeya had never been more jealous of him. She clutched her hands together to stop them from shaking, cursing herself for her body’s stupid reaction. Showing fear in any form was unacceptable, and it would come with dire consequences if she didn’t get herself under control.

Gregory waited for the door to close. When he turned back to her, his eyes flickered violet. He spoke a single-word incantation, and the bolt lock slammed home.

Daeya flinched.

Such an insignificant reaction, but the way his chin lowered drove a hot spike between her shoulder blades. He knew. He always knew when her fear threatened to overwhelm her. She held fast against her desire to shrink away from him, keeping her shoulders straight and head high.

He nodded toward the wreckage, his tone calm. “Sit.”

She would have rather leaped into the Aether itself. “Please. He attacked me—”

“I know,” he said. “Sit.”

Slowly, sighing to herself, Daeya turned. She could have attempted to sit on one of the broken chairs, but that wasn’t what he wanted. To help her master her fear, he would place her in the most uncomfortable position he could, and that

gods-damned desk had been the source of all her nightmares for as long as she could remember. Nearly a year had passed since he'd strapped her to it, but ten years of torture were not easily forgotten with the tapestry of reminders carved into her skin.

She stepped forward. Almost a year. There was no reason to believe he would start again today.

Well, perhaps there was. He still didn't know about the half-dozen runes on her hip she'd flayed off. Daeya shuddered at the memory. She'd risked his wrath by stealing that dagger, and if he uncovered her sabotage, it might very well begin her torture anew.

Her hands grew clammy, and the thought threatened to paralyze her where she stood. It was stupid to think she could get away with destroying his work, no matter how sluggish and insensible it made her feel. He would surely punish her for undermining him. He would—

Enough. She swallowed hard and clenched her teeth. Any further down that spiral would lead to ruin. *You have to move.*

He was watching her.

Waiting.

In three quick strides, she reached the ruddy brown surface. The color of old blood. Gods knew enough of it soaked its surface through the years. After pushing aside some stacks of parchment, she turned to haul herself up.

Gregory shrugged out of his white robe. Gooseflesh exploded across Daeya's body in hair-raising waves, like a barn cat doubling its size to ward off a feral dog. Another bad sign. He still wore his white and gold tunic. If he removed the outermost layer to expose the darker one beneath, she would know for sure.

Perched atop the desk, bracing herself on her hands, the memories came back in a rush. Scents of leather, blood, and magic. Hazy images of the mandalas painted on the ceiling. Cold-burning agony searing through muscle and bone.

Gregory smirked. "Your unarmed technique is improving." He gestured to the wreckage on the floor. "I am certain Normos won't be so eager the next time I challenge him to kill you."

"You challenged him—" Her brows furrowed. "This was a test, then?"

"Of course. You have shown you can defend yourself without magic." He draped the robe over one arm and stroked her cheek with his free hand. Icy fingers

teased a lock of hair behind her ear. “And as always, my sweet, you have proven yourself worthy of my gift.”

A test and a gift. Bleeding Aether, she was sick of his games. She knew better than to express her anger, though. She simply waited.

“But first,” he said, making to round the desk—to reach his unbroken chair, she assumed. When he reached for something on the short side of the desk, however, her fear redoubled. Something *dicked* inside the wood. Her eyes fluttered closed against the wave of nausea threatening to douse all coherent thought.

Gregory sighed. “Oh, Daeya. We should be past this by now.”

She didn’t have to see them to know what the secret catches exposed. There were four eyelets—one on each corner. Whether he was still toying with her or not, it took everything she had not to leap off the desk and run. But the door was locked, and she couldn’t open it without his permission.

“My intrepid warrior, undone by a piece of furniture.” His disappointment sent blistering trails of shame down her spine. “What is it you fear, hm?”

“Pain, Councilor.”

“Hm.” He raised an eyebrow. “Try again.”

There was no denying it. She swallowed once more. “You, Councilor.”

Gregory smiled. “Closer.”

Aether take him. “What you’ll do to me.”

He tossed the robe over his chair and opened the nearest drawer. Daeya fought back against the sting in her eyes. Crying was not an option. It never was.

“And what is it you think I will do?”

This was an exercise. Vocalizing her fears was supposed to help her move past them. He would expect her to be thorough, and any parts left out, she risked being reminded of.

Firsthand.

“You’ll bind my hands to the desk,” she began. That was where it always began.

Gregory took out the pair of leather cuffs and set them on the desk. She stared at them for a long moment, flexing her fingers against the phantom pressure.

“Then you’ll choose which part of me to cut.” Even the ghostly memory of his hand sliding across her skin felt like a violation.

He took out his cloth-wrapped dagger and placed it next to the cuffs. When he threw back the fabric, the sight of that shining black blade nearly shattered her

resolve. Her heart hammered up her throat, blocking her airway and darkening her vision.

“Go on,” Gregory prompted.

The bastard was enjoying this. Some of her fear burned into anger, and she blinked furiously. “You always take your time casting the enchantment.”

He picked up the dagger and returned to the front of the desk. Daeya fought to keep her nerves steady. Thank the gods for Ravlok and his lessons on meditative breathing.

Gregory stopped before her, so close she could feel the warmth of his body against her shins. He spoke the incantation she knew by heart, holding her gaze. A hair-thin, black-violet glow sprang to life along the blade’s edge. “And then?”

“Then you make your cuts.” Daeya surprised herself by the growing strength in her voice. “Slowly and deliberately, so there is no error in the runes.”

“Very good.”

He lifted the blade to her throat. Daeya didn’t pull away. Instead, she bit the inside of her lip—the same reflexive bite she always used to stay silent while he worked. She held completely still. Breathing in. And out.

He traced the veins in her neck with the dagger point, perfectly controlling the amount of pressure. His touch with the steel was so light, the blade could have been a feather against her skin.

“And why do I do this?”

Looking him full in the face, she exhaled slowly through her nose, her fear eroded away by quiet fury. She kept biting until her teeth broke through that heavily scarred layer of tissue and she tasted blood. For years, he had done this to her. For years, he had mutilated her body for the sake of wards and spells that should have been beyond even a veteran mage’s limits. But he never gave her anything she couldn’t handle. He always stopped just shy of the moment she would break. There was always something methodical to his malevolence.

“To make me strong.”

“Yes. And what else?”

Her jaw clenched. “To make me fearless.”

“My intrepid warrior.” This time, his smile exuded genuine pleasure. “Now you are ready.” He moved the blade away.

Daeya relaxed, dizzy with relief. As Gregory returned the items to his drawer, she asked, “Ready for what?”

He closed that drawer and opened another. From it, he withdrew a black drawstring bag.

Daeya’s eyes widened. “Is that—”

Fatherly pride brightened his expression as he placed the bag in her hands. “Open it.”

With numb fingertips, she worked the drawstring loose. Inside were several dozen gold commissary coins. Mage’s coins.

She gazed at them for a long moment, disbelieving. Drawing one out, she turned it over and examined the mages’ flame-and-orb symbol on one side. The Guild’s open hands were stamped on the other. Daeya looked back up at Gregory, slack-jawed. “I’m being promoted?”

“Congratulations, Sorceress.”

While she worked through her stupefaction, he crossed the room to a wardrobe. She replaced the coin in the bag, scarcely daring to hope this wasn’t a dream. Her breath caught at the sight of the black mage’s robe he pulled from the ornate cabinet.

“Remove your acolyte’s colors.”

Blue and black fabric rasped against her tunic and pooled around her on his desk. The movements felt sluggish, as if she were underwater.

He held out the new robe. “Come.”

The immense honor he bestowed upon her rendered her speechless. Even though she had completed all the requirements to obtain the rank several months ago, she had done it a full ten years ahead of the Guild’s usual schedule. That left the Council divided on whether to grant her the rank or make her wait a few more years.

Their final decision had just made her the youngest mage in Guild history.

Careful not to ruin the moment by tripping over the broken chairs, she maneuvered her way toward him. There was something surreal about slipping her arms inside that new, silk-lined cloth. Lighter by far than her bulky acolyte blue, it was tailored exactly to her small frame—so exactly, in fact, that she found it fit every subtle curve of her torso. The robe flared at the hip to allow her legs the greatest freedom of movement. The sleeves widened from biceps to fore-

arms—perfect for hiding spell components or small weapons—and were cuffed at the wrists for unarmed combat, should she ever encounter a hostile non-adept. Her only true loss was the ample space the old robe had for storing oranges.

Gregory took her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. He straightened the lapels, smoothed her collar, and cupped her cheek. “Beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Warmth touched her face. “It’s so much more perfect than I imagined.”

“You have earned it.” Gregory’s fingers lingered a moment more. “I know you will not disappoint me.”

Once, that statement might have frightened her. Remnants of the emotion flitted about her stomach before she squashed them with a dutiful nod. “My will is yours, Councilor.”

“As it should be.” Gregory stepped past her and made for the chair behind his desk. Once he seated himself, all traces of warmth in his brown eyes dissolved. “Now, I would have your report on the Crex boy before we discuss your new assignment.”

Daeya trailed him back to the desk and stood before it, hands clasped in front of her. “Faustus took the news with surprise, as anyone would expect. He didn’t show interest in finding the aethermancer. He also made certain I knew it was inappropriate to question the Guild.”

“And you found him sincere?”

Daeya was careful not to hesitate. Her doubts were small and insignificant, and she truly liked Faustus. If she mentioned even the most miniscule of his idiosyncrasies, he would pay the price. “Yes, Councilor.”

“Good. Well done. His instructors tell me your mentorship has been successful. You are henceforth relieved of that duty.”

“He may still need some guidance.” Gods knew the young man had no skill at all with divination or transmutation. “Some of his spellcasting concepts are weaker than I would like.”

“I will find a suitable replacement for him after you depart.” He laced his fingers together on top of the desk. “As to your mission, there are rumors of an Aetherian using magic on non-adepts in Orthovia. He calls himself Vortanis. I want you to find him and take him to the embassy for questioning.”

“An Aetherian?” Daeya’s brows tightened. If there were any true Aetherians left in the world, the last place they would practice magic was here in Eidosinia. Ever since the Schism and the founding of the Sorcerers’ Guild two hundred years ago, neither Aetherians nor aethermancers were welcome inside its borders.

“Self-proclaimed, I understand,” Gregory said with the same level of skepticism. “You will sail out of Keilliad this evening.”

A spark jolted her. She had waited for her promotion, dreamed of it, for as long as she could remember. Her first mission. An opportunity to be on her own, out from under the Guild’s watchful eyes. While her new rank came with the responsibility of protecting Eidosinia’s people, it also came with freedom from her jealous peers and a chance to see the realm beyond Ryost’s walls.

“Sorceress Vika and her brothers will accompany you.”

The statement struck her like a stone.

Blood pulsed through her ears, drowning out the silence that followed. Daeya could scarcely draw breath as a writhing snake of rage twisted around her lungs. Her scowl tensed every muscle in her face. When she finally forced a response, it came out of her bared teeth like a snarl rather than a coherent word. “Why?”

Gregory sat silently, one finger tapping against his desk.

For once, she didn’t back down from that dangerous stare. Her fury only mounted. “No other mages have escorts.”

“No other mages are sixteen years old,” Gregory said. “In order for the Council to grant your rank, this was the concession I had to make.”

Daeya trembled, horrified by the implication that her promotion was contingent upon her every move being watched and reported to the Council. “So, you’re saying you traded my freedom for my rank?”

His patience was wearing thin. She could see it in his rigid spine and the tight set of his jaw. “Their observation is only temporary. A few months, perhaps half a year, and then I will have the Council reassess the need for them.”

Half a *year*? She might welcome Cameron’s company, but any amount of time with Joss or Toby Vika was too much. Daeya clenched her hands into fists. “I don’t need bleeding babysitters.”

That did it.

Faster than any old man should be capable of moving, Gregory shot to his feet and backhanded her across her cheek. The sting hadn’t blossomed fully before he

grabbed her chin and forced her to look him in the eyes. “Swear at me again,” he hissed, “and I will reacquaint you with the end of a switch.” He thrust her away with a flick of his wrist.

Daeya stumbled backward, stunned out of her fury by the smarting blow. More blood welled in her mouth. Gods, had she lost her mind? She knew better than this. “Forgive me, Councilor.” Her voice trembled. “It won’t happen again.”

“For your sake, I should hope not.”

The air between them grew as thick as wool. His gaze held hers briefly before he turned away, upper lip curling. He waved a hand toward the door, uttered a word, and the bolt lock snapped open.

“Get out.”

That rejection was so much worse than any physical blow he could deliver. Daeya knew how much he hated swearing. She was usually so careful around him. After all he had done for her in securing her new rank, this loss of control in his presence was unacceptable.

“I’m sorry, Councilor,” she said in a rush, knowing her forwardness could earn another blow if her contrition wasn’t convincing enough. “I know I shouldn’t question you. I’ll respect the Council’s decision. You do me a great honor by granting me this title, and I can’t thank you enough.”

Gregory’s intensity lessened only as much as torrential rain after a hailstorm. He stalked around his desk and looked down at her for five harrowing seconds. When at last his scowl faded, he caressed the spot where the ache from his knuckles still lingered. “You know I cannot stay mad at you, my sweet,” he purred. “But you must not provoke me so.”

“Forgive me.”

“All is forgiven.”

She leaned into his touch, relishing the feeling of his mercy made manifest. To be scorned by her peers was part of her day-to-day life. But to be scorned by this man—the one man in the Guild who stood up for her, challenged her, believed in her—was something she couldn’t bear. Even if she often lamented his attention, even if his demands of her sometimes seemed insatiable, should she lose his support, she would lose everything.

“I will make you proud,” she promised.

Gregory stroked her hair with such gentle fondness that it sent shivers down her spine. “I know you will.”