


PHILLIP TOMASSO



WIZARD'S
RISE

THE SEVERED EMPIRE BOOK 1

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This book is for my kids. They are everything that is important to me, and they know it.

CHAPTER 1



Light flashed above and behind thick clouds, as if silent war waged in the heavens. Like the cannons discharged by the Voyagers, each electrical surge illuminated the raging sea revealing growing swells. The wind blew from every direction. Harsh gusts swirled, shot upward, and crashed back down against angry black water.

The Isthmian Sea was a natural boundary dividing the two main, remaining kingdoms of the Old Empire. On the west was Grey Ashland, and to the east, the Cordillera Realm. In the center of the sea, just south of the Zenith Mountains and Crimson Falls, were the islands the Voyagers called home.

Captain Sebastian barked orders. Helix, the boatswain repeated them back. Cearl, the captain's lieutenant, worked with the rest of the crew raising black sails and tying them off. Some worked soundlessly, but furiously, doing what needed to be done before the storm crushed, or capsized the vessel. Others shouted across the deck over the sound of crashing waves.

Cearl had sailed all his life. This storm was unlike any he'd ever seen. When the rain started, its salty drops pricked like bee stings against exposed flesh.

A crack of lightning escaped the clouds and splintered across the sky, igniting the darkness. It sparkled as if backlit by the sun shining illuminating shards of broken glass. A rolling growl fell from the heavens and echoed off the sea before bouncing back up to the clouds. As that thunderous rumbling faded, another blast of lightning froze for a moment in the sky splayed like bony fingers on the hand of a skeleton.

The sea danced as if giant monsters rose from the bottomless depths. Each swell threatened to crush their ship. Cearl feared they'd not survive. He could not ever recall a sea so angry. The shouting across the deck had ceased. Everyone soundlessly concentrated on their job, and perhaps thought about loved ones at home.

The silence didn't last. A sailor, or tar, screamed. It came from above, from the yardarm.

"Man overboard!" Someone shouted.

Captain Sebastian stood at the helm with two spoke handles of the ship's wheel in a death grip. His body bent to the left, using his strength and weight in an effort to hold her straight and steady. "Cearl!"

Even seasoned sea legs couldn't provide balance as the lieutenant crossed port to starboard, searching black seas for the lost man. He held on tight as the ship rose on a wave, and even tighter as she fell. The sea slammed down from above. Holding his breath, eyes closed, he desperately grasped the railing.

He saw no one in the water. It was far too dark a night, and the sea was as black as death.

The storm had erupted from nowhere; there had been no gradual change in climate. Clouds had appeared in an eye blink, and sped across the sky. They darkened, and grew thicker, heavier, as they crossed from the Rames Mountains over the Isthmian. The sun never stood a chance; the blanket of clouds brought darkness. If asked, Cearl would have said; *The storm appeared out of nowhere, as if by magic.* And now, on deck, the captain, the crew, and Cearl scrambled to save the vessel, and themselves.

Wood crunched by the bow. It sounded like a giant tree snapping, and falling over. If the hull was compromised, they'd go down.

ON THE EASTERN shores of the Isthmian Sea, in the Osiris Realm, a massive castle sat wedged into the cliffside, and rose above the summit of the Rames Mountains. Within the center tower, the tallest—from which the Cordillera flag

flew—Ida stood over flames that danced in an iron bowl set on a tripod with polished steel legs. Only the fire and the lightning outside lit the small room. The sleeves from her long black cloak hung loose off her wrists, and swayed as she moved her hands back and forth above the blue, orange, and yellow flames.

With the hood pulled over her head, the fire created dark shadows making her face seem more alive, animated. Stray clumps of white hair framed a face of sagging grey skin, a long crooked nose, and eyes completely black set inside sockets knuckled like the bark of the tree. King Hermon Cordillera saw what the firelight revealed, and cringed away from it.

King Hermon kept his distance from the witch. She frightened most people, even him, but that was not why he stayed back. He simply did not want to get in her way while she focused her magic. Familiar with her power, her antics, he knew to stay shy of those unpredictable movements.

Watching intent with interest, King Hermon waited quietly, but impatiently. He folded his arms across his chest and stared taking in everything she did. He ground his teeth to keep from groaning when so much time had passed. He needed assurance that everything was going as planned. The storm over the sea had roiled for an hour, and all Ida had told him was that she was the one who manipulated the weather. He already knew as much.

Secretly, he was fascinated by spells, by the implements of magic gathered about the room and the potions stored in bottles stashed on wooden shelves lining the rock walls. Sorcery had captivated him from the time he was young.

He looked at the indistinct contents contained inside small glass jars; the unique cuts and quality of precious stones; and the colored liquids that appeared alive swirling inside those vials. Ida kept her things in cluttered disarray, filling every inch of space on each of the hundreds of mounted planks. Dust and spidery cobwebs covered everything, a sign of long lapsed use or perhaps disinterest. It was how she worked, and she got things done. It bothered him not; results were all that mattered.

Ida backed away from the fire and lowered her head. Her arms dropped to her sides, long sleeves hiding her hands. The fire flickered. With a *whoosh*, the flames rose, and then went out. Only hot embers remained burning and crackling

at the bottom of the iron bowl.

The king could no longer see the witch's face, for that benefit, he did not mind standing in darkness.

He uncrossed his arms and took one tentative step toward her. "Ida? Do you have something for me? Did you see something in the flames? You did, didn't you?"

She was silent.

He cursed. "I can't be patient. Not anymore. Whatever it is, whatever you saw, I need to know. You must tell me, now!"

Ida's hands went to the mouth of her hood and slowly pulled it away from her face, and to her stooped shoulders. She stood by the sole window. On a clear day she could see as far as the sea—but not across it to the Grey Ashland Kingdom. "She heard what needed hearing. She's on her way out. As soon as she uses her magic, we'll find her."

King Hermon felt his left eye twitch. He knew better than to doubt the sorceress. She had made predictions, shared prophetic visions. He needed events to align perfectly. This was the beginning. He didn't simply want to wage war, he wanted assurances that he would win. It's what Ida promised. "She is out, then?"

"She is."

King Hermon, The Mountain King as he was often called, fought the urge to smile. It was far too early to celebrate, and even too soon to smile. "The storm?"

"It is as I have said. She will sense the magic behind it. She'll tap into me and my strength." Her tone of voice was flat, monotone, annoyed at having to repeat herself. "She will know I am here."

"And which way has she gone?" King Hermon hated getting ahead of himself, yet he couldn't deny the anticipation, the excitement building within. All the time spent preparing *would* pay off. The empire *would* be his. He could taste it like citrus on his tongue.

"That I do not know. *Yet*. Until she uses her magic, I am in the dark. It is just a matter of time, though. I assure you."

He hated her voice, so deep and sounding of gravel grinding gravelly. It

seemed to echo in the small room. No voice should echo without cause, but hers was especially disconcerting. “She will know my plan?”

“As you commanded. Once tapped into my magic, she was able to read my thoughts, because I allowed it.” Ida did not hide her pride very well; she wore it like a sigil. “She knows what you intend, every last detail you wanted shared. She is aware.”

To see her smile was painful. King Hermon did not look away, though. It wasn’t out of respect, but because it demonstrated his fearlessness. She didn’t scare him. No one scared him. “But you will be able to find her?”

Ida sighed, as if answering his questions annoyed her. “When she uses her magic, it will shine like a beacon for me to see. She will track down the other wizards for us. She will feel the need to protect them, to warn them, perhaps to gather them with the hopes of defeating you.”

King Hermon shook his head, delighted. He was going to get the war he wanted. “And the ship under the storm? What of it?”

“It may be an unfortunate loss under the circumstances.” Ida’s arms rose and pointed her hands at the window. Her fingers twitched, and bent back at an unnatural angle while the knuckles cracked in protest. She aimed her magic out of the one window. “Their fate is not yet known. They may sink, or not.”

King Hermon watched the movements silently. There was an electric charge in the room. The hairs on his arm stood. He considered what she said. The Voyagers could prove a powerful ally. Their ships and skilled crews alone were invaluable. No matter. They would either willingly bend a knee before him, or he would break legs forcing them down. In time, the vessels and their crews would acknowledge his command.

They couldn’t know the storm was his doing, yet once they learned of his army of wizards, it wouldn’t be difficult connecting dots. Not worth worrying about now. “If you can save them, save them. If not, so it goes.”

It has been far too long since the surrounding kingdoms were unified under a single emperor. The foolishness of rulers past had all but wiped out the use of magic, killing wizards and magicians with little regard to their usefulness. King Hermon would change all of that. It began with this single wizard.

He'd have his war, and rule the kingdoms without long, drawn out battles. With magic behind him he would rule over more than just the old empire. His power would be limitless. The lands he'd conquer countless.

The idea of being unstoppable and invincible had occupied his thoughts and dreams long before his head was adorned by the royal crown. "I will have my men ready to go where directed. When you have any indication of the wizard's whereabouts, I want you to tell the guard at your door. Immediately!"

CHAPTER 2



M ykal didn't like the idea of leaving his grandfather alone. Although he'd had time to milk the cows, feed the livestock, and clean a few stalls in the barn, there was always more to do.

Their parcel of land was outlined by a rickety wooden fence that always begged repair. The animals grazed separately in sectioned off areas. Lush green grass grew outside the fenced perimeter. Dirt with patches of thin blades of grass, but mostly weeds, covered Mykal's land within. The cattle, sheep, and horses ate dandelions, and anything green. Occasionally, he let them graze beyond the fences. It was dangerous, because that land belonged to the king, but at times necessary.

Though Mykal wanted to stay home and finish the chores, Grandfather insisted he go. Clearing the breakfast table, Mykal decided to protest one last time. "I think I should stay here. There's too much to do. If we jump every time the king says jump—"

"If you *don't* jump every time the king says jump you could very well find yourself next in line to be hung." Grandfather was seventy-two years old, and except for bushy white eyebrows over deer-hide brown eyes, he was bald. Heavy around the middle, the loss of abdominal muscle was not grandfather's fault. His left leg was missing from above the knee. He'd been grievously injured when he raised a pitchfork fighting alongside King Nabal's army. The battle had been against an enemy that encroached from the northwest trying to increase the size of their kingdom's footprint. King Nabal claimed an easy victory, with minimal

Grey Ashland lives lost. Grandfather received nothing in return for his patriotism, for his volunteering to join the fight, and nothing for the loss of a limb. The only thanks came in the way of higher taxes to afford more knights in the king's army. "Besides, I want to know the names of the men being hung this morning."

Grandfather always wanted the names of those sentenced to death.

"I don't know why King Nabal demands villagers attend hangings." Mykal set the wooden dishes and spoons inside a bucket of water on the counter under the kitchen window. He stared out of the single pane of glass. On the right was the barn, and fenced property. The cows chomped at the few remaining patches of long green grass. Above, a blue, cloudless sky showed no sign of last night's storm.

"Hangings serve layered purposes, Mykal." Grandfather pushed away from the table. Mykal had replaced the legs on an oversized chair with four wheels; two big wheels in the center of the arms, and two smaller ones by his feet, for balance. Grandfather kept a blanket in his lap and over his legs, regardless of the temperature. It was as if the stump didn't exist if he couldn't see it.

Mykal turned around and leaned against the counter, his arms folded. They were muscular from long days spent working the farm, and continually repairing sections of fence. His hair was copper-colored, like the king's coin, and too long for summer weather. When not pulled back and tied off in a tail, it hung just past his shoulders. Grandfather threatened taking a knife to it while he slept if it weren't trimmed soon. "It shows the people they have a just king, a ruler who will not tolerate crime?"

Grandfather nodded. "That's right. Don't you think that's important?"

"I do. It is important. When he hangs these men for their crimes, word will spread. No doubt. I just don't see the need to demand we *all* attend. I don't need to see men hung to obey laws." Mykal sighed and turned back to the bucket. He quickly scrubbed a dish with a brush. "If I stayed home, no one would be the wiser."

"If you stayed home and someone, for some reason, told someone else, you'd risk spending time in the stockade. If that happened, I'd be prone to wheel

myself down to the keep and through the gates just for the pleasure of throwing rotted cabbage at your head,” he said, and *humphed*.

Mykal set the clean bowl aside, and laughed. “You would not! Besides we don’t grow cabbage.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t? You don’t want to find out. Trust me. And for you, I’d buy old cabbage just for throwing. Now go get changed,” Grandfather said.

“Changed? I just put these clothes on.” Mykal pulled at the waist of his tunic. Dirt and grimy handprints spotted the otherwise white fabric.

“You smell like pig.”

“I work with pigs, Grandfather.” Mykal sniffed the air around him, as he waved his hand wafting the scent toward his nostrils. “And I believe it is more of a cow patty aroma than pig that I detect.”

Grandfather pointed toward the bedchamber. “Do not make me ask again.”

Mykal knew his grandfather was serious, but also having fun. “Grandfather?” Mykal pulled off his shirt. “What are the king’s other reasons for forcing his people to witness hangings.”

“There is just one other.”

“Fear?”

Grandfather nodded, his lips pursed. “Fear. A king wants to be both respected and feared by his people. Combined, these tend to keep uprisings to a bare minimum.”

Mykal stuck his arms and head into a fresh tunic, but left on the same pants. They were the only *cleanish* ones left. He would wash laundry when he returned from the hangings. “I’m going, Grandfather. Depending on how long I’m gone, I will fix a meal as soon as I return. Or would you like me to mix something up quick?”

“I think if I get hungry while you’re gone, I can make something to eat,” Grandfather said, the smile gone. “I’ll be fine, Mykal. But the names, don’t forget the names,” he said.

Grandfather was excused from attending the hangings. His missing leg the reason. Regardless, Mykal didn’t think his grandfather wanted to witness the executions. “I won’t forget.”

The old man nodded. “Thank you, Mykal. Thank you.”

UNRAVELING wisps of near-transparent white shredded the blue sky. The strips of clouds sat suspended and seemingly motionless. For the end of autumn it was an unseasonably hot few weeks. Today was no different. The day’s heat already apparent; it caused a mirage that resembled smears of shimmering oil on the ground further down the path. The sun was barely over the eastern horizon and the air already felt stifling and almost too hot to breathe. Mykal stopped by his favorite tree on his way to the castle. It wasn’t the tallest by any means, and neither was it the strongest. Mossy growths on the bark and branches suggested the tree might be sick and dying. His grandfather had planted the tree when he first married Mykal’s grandmother and they settled the land given to them by the king.

He often thought about climbing to the top, imagining the view would be spectacular. He bet from up there he’d be able to see the Isthmian Sea to the east, and Nabal’s castle to the west. Getting even a few feet off the ground stopped him cold. His body broke into a sweat. He’d look down and the ground would become unfocused immediately, forcing him to climb back down. Heights troubled Mykal.

The tree was his favorite because natural holes and folds in the bark let him hide his sword, dagger, bow and arrows. He removed his dagger from his belt and placed it safely inside the tree with his other things. He looked around, making sure no one saw. He wasn’t anywhere near the Cicade Forest, so he wasn’t worried about tree dwellers stealing his things. Those Archers couldn’t be trusted.

The dirt path he followed fed into the main road leading to the center of Grey Ashland, where King Nabal’s castle was located. His feet kicked up small plumes. The brown cloud and stones settled onto the top of his boots. Few travelers were on the path. He did his best to blend in, walking behind a group adorned in green and red cloaks, men who used large walking sticks and carried

empty wicker baskets. They reminded him of his friend, Blodwyn.

Behind him came a wagon pulled by two horses spotted white and brown. Mykal, and those in front of him, stepped aside to let the wagon pass. The previous night's storm must not have stretched this far West. Dust swirled over them in the aftermath. Mykal covered his mouth and nose, and coughed, fanning the air in front of his face with a few waves of his arm. He jumped back as the dirt settled. A large spider had tried to blend in with the ground and done a fine job of it, until it moved front legs and mandibles, as if also annoyed by the dust. The body of the arachnid was half the size of Mykal's palm, the spread of its eight legs made it larger than his hand. Mykal held his breath. He could not think of a thing he feared more than spiders. He'd rather climb a tree than face a spider. He didn't even have the courage to step on it. He gave the multi-eyed thing wide berth, and hurried to catch up to the group ahead, wanting to get as far away from the spider as quickly as possible.

A falcon soared overhead. Its presence made known by a screech and caw as it circled before making its way toward the sea, in search of rodents, or any fish it could pluck from the water.

Maybe after lunch he would escape for a quick swim in the Isthmian. It offered the only true relief from the heat. Moist armpits already dampened his fresh tunic. Rumors of monsters living in the sea didn't frighten him. He never out swam out far, or gone too deep, though. He also fished the sea, another taboo. He caught bass or pike—which he cooked on an open flame, and ate with relish—but had yet to hook any monster.

The rock wall of the keep loomed just ahead. The Cicade Forest had once stretched this far south many, many years ago; long before he'd even been thought of, no doubt. Hundreds of tree stumps yet remained. Grandfather said no one removed the stumps because they served as a minor form of protection. Those attempting a siege had to contend with them as a first obstacle. There was no clear path to run at the castle walls. The only better, more defensible location might have been along a mountain face—where *impenetrable* was an understatement, such as the legendary castle of the Osiris Realm.

Two armed guards stood at either side of the barbican, about thirty yards in

front of the lowered drawbridge and raised wrought iron gate, while several marched back and forth above on the wooden walkway between crenellations within the compound.

Only two of the eight bastions were visible from the main road. Far to the east a third could be made out. Multiple loophole breaks in the brick and rock faced in three directions, south, west and east. The other bastions also had loophole breaks, facing three directions accordingly, as well. It took over an hour, but he'd walked the wall many times, and had seen them all. The rock structure seemed to stretch on and on without end. When standing on the outside of the keep, the walls towered above him. He had to

The moat prevented enemies from running ladders up the castle walls, and rumors ran rampant about a bottom-dwelling beast swimming in circles around the castle. The monster supposedly captured from the Isthmian and dumped into the moat. Mykal never saw signs of anything under the surface, not even bass or pike.

As the group neared the lowered bridge, Mykal hurried his steps to approach with the men in cloaks. The king's guards made him apprehensive. If he weren't already sweating from the morning heat, the sight of them with steel swords at their sides, dressed in helmets and chainmail, and holding large badge-shaped shields bearing the Grey Ashland crest would have started him perspiring.

His footfalls echoed off the wooden bridge, and he wrinkled his nose at the stench from below where the staleness of stagnant water wafted upward. Scum and purple thistles littered the placid surface. Water-spiders skimmed across the top dodging dragonflies set on morning meals. Mosquito swarms huddled in areas behind the flowered weeds creating a loud buzzing noise. If a monster lived below the ripple-less surface, any visible current would give such a creature's whereabouts away. There was no such indication.

Entering under the spikes of the raised portcullis was uneventful, thankfully, and once inside, Mykal distanced himself from the cloaked men, and made his way toward the market square. The marketplace was active, bustling with merchants, traveling vendors, and peasants begging for handouts. The encircling aisles in the middle of the fortress, and surrounding the tower, was lined with

umbrella-covered carts where fresh produce and slaughtered meats were sold. The other farmers, like Mykal and his grandfather, worked on small parcels of land all across the Grey Ashland Kingdom. Mykal and his grandfather rarely had surplus for sale. Not to mention that prime selections of meat, dairy, and produce were paid as tax to the king.

Mykal wove his way toward the center of the outer keep's town. A crowd was already gathering around the stained wood of the gallows. It looked out of place as everything else was cut from stone. There were stairs leading to a raised platform, a rectangle made of beams standing at either end, with one across the top of the two pillars. From that top beam dangled four nooses.

Today, four men would hang for their crimes.

Mykal made the mistake of walking to the back side of the gallows. The men waiting to die were shackled together, one in front of the other, foot to foot, and hand to hand. Their clothing was tattered, torn, and their faces marred with jagged cuts and bruises.

There was no mistaking who they were. These were not men from Grey Ashland. Their green tunics and brown pants were natural camouflage for living among the treetops. These criminals were bandits from the Cicade Forest.

CHAPTER 3



Seven musicians lined stone steps along the southwest castle wall. A row of black horses galloped into the square. The horseshoes clapped on cobblestone, and the sound bounced off the high walls. The musicians raised trumpets; blaring horns signaled the beginning of the execution.

Mykal winced, wanting to look away. Instead he found himself craning his neck to catch sight of the king. Nabal was not a terrible ruler. He seemed to care about the people. It reminded Mykal of the earlier conversation with his grandfather. Nabal wanted respect and fear from his subjects. His methods seemed harsh at times, but not overly so. Rumors about dangerous thieves living in treetops throughout the Cicade Forest became common stories, tales told to frighten children at bedtime cautioning them to behave.

Dressed in a white tunic, and earth brown vest under his crimson royal cape, the king rode a powerful white stallion. Footmen rushed to help him from the saddle. The crown he wore had been crafted by a goldsmith who lived long ago, and had originally made the crown for King Grandeer, Nabal's grandfather. It was then passed to King Stilson, and finally to Nabal. The circlet held four white diamonds, and imbedded within the triangular gold plate at the forehead sat a large square of cut, black diamond- a rare gem mined from the depths of Gorge Caves, beneath the Zenith Mountains to the north.

King Nabal, escorted by the knights of his personal guard, proudly climbed the steps to the top of the gallows platform. He waved to the people. The people called in return. His boots thudded distinctly on wood as he strode across the

impromptu stage with thumbs hooked behind a wide, tooled leather belt of deep brown. His cape billowed mildly behind with each step taken until he stopped at the front edge of the platform, and raised an arm for a final salutation.

The crowd cheered in reply.

Mykal saw a young woman clothed in deep blue velvet with a dark purple shawl wrapped about her shoulders and pinned to her throat by a large opal brooch. Under a thickly laced headband, her blond hair was pulled back, and braided.

Their eyes met. Mykal looked away. The king had no daughter, yet the striking young woman possessed the air of royalty. She was poised and dignified. Beautiful as well. He had no business holding her stare, but chanced another glance.

She looked at him still, her eyes wide.

He shook his head, lowered it, and allowed his eyes only the dirt around his feet. He'd offended her. The last thing he wanted or needed was trouble. He debated leaving the court. He could always lie to his grandfather, claiming the king never gave the names of those hung.

That wouldn't work. His grandfather would know something was amiss.

The king spoke, breaking Mykal's chain of thoughts.

"My people, we are gathered here this morning to see justice delivered." Nabal stood with fists on his hips. His voice projected across the court as if he were a lion rumbling. The crowd was silent, staring up at their royal leader, waiting for his next words.

"The select knights of my army, my Watch, apprehended thieves attempting to scale our castle walls in the darkness of a moonless night." He moved about on stage, his speech a part of the entire show. "For the creatures to have reached our very keep means they *first* had crossed into Grey Ashland borders, slinking past the guard patrols, and watch posts. How many of you slept unaware that animals were on your land? How many of you slept under the pretense of safety, unaware just how close to death you might have been?"

Mykal knew the people from the forest were more than woods' people. His grandfather had alluded to the fact many were once knights, or had served the

king in some way. However, the king had a valid point. He did not like the idea of these renegades sneaking into the kingdom. It was an unnerving thought.

King Nabal raised a fist into the air. “Countless times I warned the people of the Cicade Forest *not* to venture outside the safety of their haunted woods. I don’t fault them for coming to Grey Ashland. That, in and of itself, is no crime. The wrongness of their actions arises with the time of their arrival.

Why wait until the cover of night to approach our walls? Why attempt scaling the rock, when the front gate would be lowered in the morning?” He paused and looked over his people as if expecting an answer. No one spoke. The king gave a dismissive wave of his hand.

Mykal heard a rustling among those gathered, whispers, a shifting in the crowd, and then feet on the timber steps. He watched as the four criminals were led onto the platform. He stared at the slow sway of the empty nooses in the light breeze. Mykal raised a hand to his neck, thumb lightly stroked skin.

From the corner of his eye he saw the blond woman staring at him. She stood a few feet behind the king. It seemed like she wouldn’t, or couldn’t look away.

Next to Mykal, several ladies huddled close wearing dirt brown pleated dresses, stained white aprons, and all were already crying with arms around each other for support. Two looked like they wanted to rush the gallows and hug the criminals from the forest. Perhaps they knew the men sentenced?

The others in the crowd moved in tight around him, everyone fretful for the best view of the hanging. Shoulder to shoulder he stood among the other commoners, feeling self-conscious because he knew he was being watched, and claustrophobic because he could not move.

He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth. It was difficult to swallow. He should have brought water with him. How he’d forgotten a canteen was a mystery. The walk home under an afternoon sun would prove brutal. His grandfather told him he was always going too fast, and didn’t spend enough time thinking and preparing. Responsibility was oftentimes learned through mistakes.

“My people,” the king said, “these men were not coming to Grey Ashland to purchase meat, cheese, or ale from the marketplace. Not in the middle of *our* night. They were not coming to Grey Ashland to see friends or family. Their

intent was far more sinister. We are thankful to have caught them before vicious acts were committed. We are thankful to have caught them before harm was done, before any thefts were carried out. While they were each given every chance, every opportunity, to explain their purpose for the late night visit, they have elected to give their names, but otherwise held their tongues, and remained silent about their true and sinister plans. Such silence is admission of guilt. My warnings were ignored. I have judged each one guilty. Their punishment, for what I declare a strike in cowardice against our peaceful kingdom, is death by hanging.”

A few gasps rose from the crowd, though it couldn't have been a surprise.

Mykal kept his eyes on the king. He felt the weight of the woman's attention. He knew she was still looking at him. It made small bumps rise on his skin. He wasn't going to check, though. Nope. He refused to give reign to his curiosity seeking to avoid further embarrassment and potential trouble.

Two knights in chainmail under breastplates unshackled the four criminals, secured their hands behind their backs, and led them each to a noose. They placed loops over the Cicade men's heads and pulled the knots tight to the back of their necks. Each of the intruders looked terrified, eyes wide, looking furiously left and right, desperate for impossible rescue. Chapped lips were barely visible beneath overgrown beards. The man on the far right urinated, the stain spreading down the front of his pants before pooling around his feet.

“Gary Slocum, Louis Styman, Haddy Wonderfraust, and Thomas Blacksmith, I find you guilty of malicious intent to raid and pillage the Grey Ashland Kingdom. For your crimes I sentence each of you to death by hanging. Because you elected to hold your tongues during questioning, I forbid any last words.” King Nabal nodded toward the executioner on the far right, beside the man who'd loosed his bladder.

In a black hood, with leather weapons belts crisscrossing his bare and muscular chest, the executioner gripped a lever, and pulled it toward him.

A trap door on the platform fell away. The four men dropped.

Women cried out at the horror of the sight, and continued crying perhaps from the loss of four lives.

The ropes snapped tight. The solid crossbeam barely moaned under the weight.

The men's legs kicked. Eyes bulged from sockets. The first man, Gary Slocum, was lucky. His spinal cord snapped instantly. His lifeless form dangled in the air. The acrid odor of urine was joined with that of liquefied feces that streamed from released bowels. Shit dripped off the toe of his shoe. The other three fought dying, bucking and straining for air. Their battle lasted minutes. One by one their skin turned blue, their faces became engorged. Blood rolled like tears from eyes and ears. And then, one by one, lost the fight.

The spectators became silent, and remained long after the fourth man died. Everyone, that is, except the small group of gathered women. They bellowed, and two of them dropped to their knees. The others attempted helping them up, standing in front of them either blocking the women from a view of the bodies, or keeping them hidden from the King's eyes.

Mykal noticed that the blond woman who was with the king was watching the women, and him, curiously, but when their eyes met he looked away.

The knight who pulled the lever drew his sword. Mykal expected the knight to sever the ropes and drop the bodies to the ground. Instead, the swords were driven into the right side of each hung man. The broadsword sawed through flesh and bone with a single thrust. Blood did not spray from the stabbings, it *poured* out of the wounds; fell between the boards and onto the dirt below the stage.

The bodies swayed like skinned cow on hooks at the butcher's.

Mykal had completed his duty. He'd traveled to the court for the hanging as the king demanded, he'd learned the names of the men hung, as his grandfather wanted, and now, parched and uneasy due to the woman with blond hair's regard, he turned to start home.

Peripherally, he saw her watching him still as he cut a path through the crowd. He walked quickly through the courtyard. His heart was a hammer inside his chest. He could not shake the feeling that something was amiss.

No, that wasn't it.

He wasn't sure how he knew, but his unease was not because something was

wrong, it was because something was about to change. It was the only way he could describe it.

Something was about to change.

CHAPTER 4



Mykal's grandfather rest in his chair on the front porch, his blanket still draped over his lap, his hands folded on top.

Mykal perched on the step in front. Silence filled the space between them for several moments.

"It's going to rain," his grandfather said.

"Was a pretty good storm over the sea last night. Thought for sure it would have made land. Don't think it even reached the beach. The thunder and lightning kept me awake, so I watched the sky from my room. Wasn't going to sleep, so figured, why not? It was an angry storm. One of the worst I'd seen in a while." Mykal looked at the sky. "But not again today, I don't think."

"Another storm is coming."

Mykal knew the old man's leg was better at predicting weather than changes in pressure in the air, but sometimes he still opted to disagree. He stood up and clapped his hands on his thighs to pat the dust off his clothing. "There's not one cloud. In fact, I'm going down to the sea to do some fishing. Catch us some dinner."

"You be careful." His grandfather nodded. "Oh, and Mykal, the names?"

Mykal sat back down. "They were men from the Cicade Forest."

"Their names?" Grandfather said, his tone sharp.

Mykal closed his eyes for a moment. He pictured the king reciting the names. It refreshed his memory. "Gary Slocum, Louis Styman, Haddly Wonderfraust, and Thomas Blacksmith. Those were the men the king hung

today. Their deaths were horrible. One died fast. The others refused to let go for as long as they could. I wasn't sure they'd ever pass. It wasn't anything I'd ever care to witness again. Grandfather?"

Grandfather didn't seem to be listening. His mouth worked like a man chewing rough steak carefully before swallowing. "Catch us a few fish. I am feeling hungry."

"Are you okay?"

The old man smiled. "I'm fine, Mykal."

Mykal stood and went into their house. He scooped water out of a bucket and drank from the ladle. He wiped his mouth with the back of his tunic. His fishing gear stood in the corner. He gathered his bow and tackle box and, before going back outside, snatched a green apple out of the wooden bowl on the center of the kitchen table.

Outside he set his things down and knelt beside his grandfather. "Why do you always want to know the names of the men put to death?"

"They deserve to be remembered." Grandfather stared absently toward town.

"The king said they were caught trying to climb the castle walls. He believes they were going to steal, rape, and kill his people. How is that deserving of a memorial, Grandfather?"

"Did the men confess this to the king as their plan?"

Mykal shook his head. "The king said the men refused to talk."

"It is possible then that the men from the forest were trying to enter Grey Ashland for another reason entirely."

"In the middle of the night?"

"It is possible, though. Isn't it, Mykal?"

He shrugged. "I suppose, but—"

"If it is possible, then it can also be likely. Neither of us were present when the men were caught. Do we know for a fact that they were captured trying to sneak in? Were we there when they were questioned? We don't know what was asked, nor do we know what answers were given. Repeating, and perhaps remembering the names of those hung is not such an extraordinary memorial then, is it?"

Mykal shook his head. He was missing something. His grandfather had other reasons for wanting the names of men executed. He simply couldn't figure it out. The old man was suspicious like that at times, mysterious. He thought about telling his grandfather about the young woman with the king, the way she kept staring at him. He then thought better of it as doing so might worry the old man. He was apprehensive enough about the encounter himself. There was no need for both of them to be preoccupied with something that would likely prove to be nothing. "I'll be back soon," he said, lifted the tackle box and slung the fishing bow over his shoulder.

"Be back before the storm," Grandfather said.

Mykal was tempted to scoff, but, sensing the old man's mood, refrained. "Yes, sir."

SALTY SEA AIR mingled with the flavor of sweet apple as he hiked to the Isthmian. After splashing around in the shallows to cool off, he dressed and then sat perched on the end of a jutting, natural pier of flat rocks. Mykal pulled the bowstring back until the knuckle of his thumb rested against his cheek, and concentrated on the water; the thought of a hearty dinner sharpening his focus. With one eye closed, he lined up his shot, and waited.

The gulls remembered him. They circled, squawking and *chawwwking* their insistent chatter overhead. Though he usually struck true, occasionally the arrow would only wound a little swimmer and the gulls would swoop in and snag the injured as a reward for their attentiveness. In order to retrieve a fish cleanly, the arrow needed to pass through the meaty part of the body. That way, when reeling the arrow in on his roll of string, he wouldn't need to worry about it tearing free from the flesh. He needed to be quick about it, as the gulls had no issues with stealing his catch.

Waves crashed on the rocks around him; their white caps formed like massive fingers curling into fists before striking. The spray soaked his tunic, refreshing against his once-again heated and sweaty skin.

When he saw a large fish between waves, Mykal relaxed his fingers and loosed the arrow. It flew through air and pierced water. The string was coiled beside him, one end tied around his ankle. He fit the bow over his shoulder and pulled in the slack quickly, hand over hand, until the arrow popped up out of the water without his potential prize. The shaft, made from wood of the wayfaring tree, floated despite its steel broadhead. He knocked the arrow, pulled back the bowstring, and waited for another target.

There was a good chance his last arrow made skittish fish scatter. He practiced patience. They'd return. With brains the size of a pebble, their memories must be swept clean every few seconds.

He kept his eyes on the water and ignored the cloudless blue sky and the sun's blinding rays. Grandfather would be wrong today. There was no chance it would rain, much less storm.

When another fish stopped to graze on seaweed and plankton just below the surface, Mykal aimed, thumb by his cheek; the feathers from the fletching tickled skin. As he released, and the arrow launched, he gasped in surprise.

Something quite large gobbled the fish that had been his targets. The arrow pierced the creature and it was gone. Mykal quickly looked at the coiled string. Before he had a moment to react, the string was pulled taut and completely disappeared into the water. Mykal was yanked from his feet. He thought he might strike his head on a rock, but was shockingly pulled through the air, over a cresting wave, and into the sea.

Mykal sucked in as much air as his lungs could hold before being dragged under. His thoughts went wild. He conjured up childhood images of grisly monsters from bedtime tales; frightening stories told of creatures that swam the murky depths of the Isthmian Sea.

Always discounted as legend, Mykal found himself forced to face facts. The head of this thing resembled nothing he had ever before seen. He had not seen its full shape, nor could he gauge the length or bulk of the body, the head alone was enough to scare him. It was triangular, like a snake's head, but much bigger — like it would fit the body of a cow. The eyes were large and black like coal. He'd seen enormous teeth, like fangs, on either side of the mouth when it had

consumed his intended dinner. The large scales were purple and green, and iridescent when sun rays struck them.

With his knife safely with his things on the rocks, Mykal had no way of cutting the string around his ankle. The speed with which the creature swam made it impossible to reach his leg. He was being dragged too fast through the sea. He was too disoriented and surprised to even think to reach for the knife at his belt. Bubbles intermittently blinded him. They surrounded him, exploding as he passed through them. The sea water stung his eyes. He could not tell if they were diving deep, or if they remained near the surface. His lungs burned. His heartbeat hammered like heavy knocks on a wood door behind his ribs, and pulsed at his temples.

And, all at once, movement stopped. He felt suspended in midair. Somewhat overcoming his confusion, he looked for the direction of bubbles rising.

Mykal brought his knee up, his fingers fumbling with the knot at his ankle. Using both hands, he pulled at the loop. The string was strong like wire. He had previously wheeled in fighting, twenty-pound fish without the string snapping. Unfortunately, the knot was now pulled far too tight from the strength at which the creature had dragged him through the sea. He refused to give up, though.

His lungs felt like they might explode. He desperately needed air.

He managed to wedge a finger between the string and his leg, creating a small gap, and began untying the knot. Once finally, blessedly free, he followed the bubbles toward the surface. Kicking, and sweeping his arms down, he swam as hard, and as fast as he ever had. Above he saw the clear wavy veil of the surface. The water resembled moving glass. He saw through the water, though; and in the distorted view of the once-clear blue sky, saw a lone dark cloud.

His head broke through the surface, and *unmuffled* sound filled his ears. Waves crashed on rocks to his left as he pulled air into his lungs. That familiar chatter of the gulls came from overhead, and a new terror gripped him. He feared the gulls remembered the beast better than they did him.

He did not want to wind up scraps for the birds to feed on.

Mykal tried to stop gasping for air. He wanted to breathe as normally as possible. Panicking was the last thing he needed to do. Swimming was the first.

Five dorsal fins appeared. Twenty, thirty yards out. Like a winding snake, the fins made their way toward him. Slowly at first. Then picking up speed. Was it one creature, or five? He had no idea.

The dorsal fins disappeared. The creature had gone below the surface.

Mykal took a deep breath, held it, and sank under. With his eyes open, ignoring searing pain from the stinging salt, he saw it.

One saving grace was immediately apparent. The arrow had impaled the creature's mouth, forcing it mostly closed. The thing opened its mouth a bit, but clearly not as wide as it could. Regardless, row upon row of jagged teeth were visible and just as sharp and deadly looking as the fangs that lined the sides of its mouth.

Mykal braced for the attack—knowing that there was no time to escape. He'd seen how fast it had snatched up the fish he'd targeted. The creature possessed lightning speed.

The idea, good or bad, was to wrangle the head. Maybe he could use the arrow as a handhold. He'd never make it to shore. He wasn't that strong of a swimmer.

Wrangle the head. That was the idea.

Instead, just before the thing was close enough to bite him in two—if not for the arrow—it dove, the last fin slicing through his tunic, cutting his chest. The water turned a milky red around him.

Bleeding in the water was not going to help the situation, not at all.

Mykal understood exactly what was happening, and thought he felt his heart skip a beat in fear.

The wounded creature could not eat him, but it could dice him up like chum. The blood, no doubt, was like a ringing triangle that signaled meal time to other vicious sea creatures.

His situation seemed hopeless. Looking down, his lungs beginning to burn again, he saw the creature coming up at him. Fast. In the darkness of the deeper water, he saw the swishing back and forth of its body which efficiently powered and propelled the creature toward him.

Then it rotated 180 degrees, so that the hooked, triangular dorsals lined up

with Mykal. The five fins were on the length of the one serpent. Each fin was the size of both of his hands put together.

The tail swished propelling the body of the beast.

Yes, it meant to flay him; slice him up into people fillets and steaks.

As the first dorsal cut into his thigh, Mykal kicked out with his left leg trying to move out of the way.

Pushing off of the massive creature, he once again breached the surface, filled his lungs with air, and looked for land. Seeing the sand of the beach, he immediately raced towards the shore – his one chance at surviving this horror.

He kicked his legs, his arms pin-wheeled through the water, and he turned his head from side to side occasionally to take in breaths.

Ahead were groups of more fins above the water, at least twenty. He was swimming directly toward them, and worse, they were headed towards him. The fins were not just from one creature. There were maybe five different monsters in the sea.

His blood had attracted more beasts. These would have no arrows impeding their maws. Nightmare images flooded his mind, keeping him from focusing his little energy left on swimming.

Each kick, each stroke, brought him closer to the beach as he futilely angled away from the creatures ahead.

He was tired, injured, and weak. The salt water fiercely stinging the deep lacerations. He screamed as he swam; screamed from the pain, screamed hoping someone heard, screamed because it was the only thing he could still do other than swim for his life.

There were too many of them. They were too fast. He would never make it.

He felt the rise of a big wave pick him up. The beach suddenly looked obtainable. Survival seemed suddenly possible. The wave white-capped at one end as it rolled faster and faster toward shore. He flattened his body out like a board. It was all he could think to do. He pictured himself as driftwood and hoped he'd ride the top to safety. He did not want the wave to crash over him, force him under, pin him. If that happened, the beasts (now somewhat off to his right and behind him) would have him, and tear at his flesh with their rows and

rows of teeth.

Lying on the wave, he floated on top of the water and raced toward shore. As fast as those creatures were, he felt like a seagull flying through the air, like a ship sailing a hundred knots across the sea.

The last thing he remembered, just before the wave broke and rolled, was the barely-heard snapping of teeth just behind his feet and legs, and then everything went black.

CHAPTER 5



Mykal opened his eyes. He was on the beach, his face down in the sand. Water lapped at his feet. He jumped to his knees and, on all fours, scurried as far from the sea as he possibly could before dropping back down to the ground on his chest. He coughed water from his lungs. He gagged and choked on its saltiness salt, and spat it from of his mouth. Breathing heavily, he lifted himself onto his forearms.

He was alive. That much he knew.

He wasn't sure if he was in one piece. One of the creatures had been at his heels.

A young girl stood there, staring at him. He recognized the blond hair, the opal broach.

He closed his eyes. He must be hallucinating.

He tried to sit up, and winced.

His chest and thigh hurt. The dorsal fins had sliced him deeply. He didn't want an infection.

The young woman he had hoped was a hallucination, did not vanish. She still stood a hundred yards away, staring at him.

She didn't walk toward him, or run away.

Mykal got to his feet, staggering before catching his balance. Turning around and looking at the sea. Washed up on the sand was a serpent. It easily could have been one that attacked him. It had not been there before he'd been pulled into the sea.

Its scaled flesh looked burnt black, as if it had been roasting on an open fire. It was dead, *and* cooked. He had no idea what happened to that serpent. He turned and looked at the sea, running his hands over his legs to brush away sand.

They'd been real. His wound from the serpents was proof.

When he turned to face the young woman, he realized how out of place she looked. The blue velvet dress was bunched around her feet and covered in dirt and wet sand.

He walked toward her. Part of him expected she'd back away, or float backwards, unreachable, as happens in dreams.

Yet each step brought him closer. Her hands were folded at her belly.

The lone, dark cloud he now remembered seeing through the distorted-glass view below the water had multiplied many times in size and/or spawned others. The near-blackness threatened to occlude the sun. Grandfather was right. Again.

He wasn't sure what he'd say to the young lady. Did he just introduce himself? Ask if she was lost? Ask why she was here? Or why she might be following him? Did she save him? Or had she witnessed him get nearly eaten by a mammoth sea monster?

She broke the silence. "Are you alright?"

Mykal brushed sand from his pants, and hands. "I will be."

"Did you do that to that Serpent?" She pointed at the remains behind him.

Mykal looked back at charred carcass. He shook his head. "Wasn't me. I have no idea what happened to that one. I didn't even believe they existed. I have been fishing here for years, and have never encountered anything like that. I always thought they were silly bedtime stories. Not anymore. I did tag one with my arrow, though. It was accidental. It pulled me into the water. I thought that was going to be it for me."

He had been terrified, actually. He did not see a need to share just how afraid he had been, not with her. If anything, he hoped to impress her somehow.

"And you lived." She sounded surprised.

"Just barely," he said, maybe twenty yards from her. He stopped walking. "I saw you in the courtyard with the king this morning."

She nodded.

“Am I in trouble?”

“Have you done something wrong?”

“Not that I’m aware of,” he said.

She shook her head. “I’m not here because you’re in trouble.”

Somewhat relieved, he continued toward her. He moved slowly, each step calculated. He didn’t want to frighten her, though it was her presence that scared him. Her beauty captivated him. Her golden hair, red lips and bright blue eyes mesmerized. Perhaps it was from this that his apprehension stemmed. “I know it sounds presumptuous, but are you following me?”

“Yes,” she said. “It does sound presumptuous. I have no need to follow you, Mykal.”

That stopped him. “You know my name?”

“I didn’t. Until I saw you today. I dreamt of you many times,” she said.

He almost laughed, but bit down on his tongue. “You dreamt of me?”

She blushed. “I didn’t know at the time it was you I was dreaming of.”

She walked toward him, closing the distance until they stood almost toe to toe, and face to face.

“I was drawn to you,” she said. It came out in a whisper.

“I don’t understand.”

She shook her head. “Something I can’t see clearly is coming. I don’t understand any of it, but I know one thing for certain.”

“And what is that?”

“*You* must stop it.”

Mykal pointed to himself. This time he let out a snicker. “I raise livestock. I’m a horrible fisherman. What can I stop? You were with the king. Have you told him this? His knights train for battle. Surely they’re more prepared to defend against your premonition. Besides, I’ve never even held a sword.”

“That’s not true,” she said.

It *wasn’t* true. Blodwyn had been working with him since he was old enough to walk. The man taught him how to fight with a sword, with knives, and with his hands. He’d instructed him to never advertise his skill. It was better leaving people unaware. “Who are you?”

“I am the king’s ward. I was promised to him at the time of my birth as a declaration of peace. I was daughter of King Aslom of the Evidanus Realm.”

The Evidanus Realm was gone, attacked by an unknown enemy and burned out of existence nearly ten years ago. No one knew what had happened. It was rumored that riders were sent from the realm in search of allies and reinforcements were never heard from. The kingdom perished alone. Mykal was speaking to the last of the Evidanus people. “Your highness,” he said, kneeling.

“Stand,” she said. “I am no longer royalty. There is no kingdom. No crown to inherit. I am heir to nothing.”

He stood, eyes closed in an attempt at warding off pain shooting up his side.

“You *are* injured. I can help you,” she said, reaching out a hand.

He stopped her, taking her hand in his.

“I’ll live,” he said. “What can you possibly want from me, princess? I still don’t understand.”

“You will call me Karyn. I am no longer a princess,” she said, the bite in her words evident. It contained flavors of both bitterness, and more strongly, sorrow. She barely suppressed her pain. Her lineage wiped out, her family and subjects slaughtered while she lived in the shadows of a foreign kingdom. “I don’t have an answer to your question. Not yet.”

Mykal wondered if she’d ever visited the ruins. “Won’t the king be looking for you?”

She nodded. “There is a feast this evening. There is always a feast after a hanging. I’ll be back long before he realizes my absence.”

Mykal didn’t know anything about feasts. His dinner had already been eaten by the Isthmian Serpent. “I need to be getting home. I have to check on my grandfather.”

“I just needed to meet you.” Her eyes said something different. They sparkled, even in the darkly greying skies. She could have waited, but for whatever unsaid reason, had felt compelled to do so on this day. Was that significant?

He had more questions, and felt he deserved answers. He also just wanted to keep her talking. He didn’t want her to leave. Not yet. It was getting late. A

storm was coming. If it was like the night before and reached land this time, it could be brutal.

The road from his house to the kingdom was straightforward, but that didn't mean it was always safe. He had no idea what the Cicade people were really doing inside Grey Ashland's borders. More could be about. "Let me stop back to the house and drop off my fishing gear, then I will escort you home."

"There is no need. Just beyond the dunes I have two armed knights on horseback. They are men I trust with my life, and with this secret."

"What secret?"

"You." She sighed. "We will meet again, Mykal. I felt it important for us to meet before then, so when I come to you, you will not be frightened."

Frightened? The king's ward knew who he was, and expected him to do ... something? Why would he be frightened? Surprised, certainly. Curious, absolutely.

Still wet from the sea, it masked the beads of sweat forming on his brow. How was he considered a secret? Who was the secret from? Who else knew the truth? "When will we meet again?"

The wind picked up loose sand and blew it around.

"I'm not exactly sure, but soon, I suspect."

Soon, he hoped. "And when you find me the second time, I'm to help you?"

"No. You've got it backwards. I'm here to help you. You may be the only one who can save the old empire," she said, as she turned and walked up the dune, and beyond. Though Mykal could not take his eyes off of her, she had continued on without looking back once.

Wait. Save the old empire?

MYKAL RUSHED HOME, his gear banging against his leg, his wounds throbbing. The loose items inside the tackle box rattled and bounced. He wore his bow on his back, the string across his shoulder. The bleeding on his legs and chest had slowed. The bleeding wouldn't stop until the wounds had a chance to close.

Moving around prevented that. The areas were sore, and gross to see. He wanted to get home fast and fetch fresh water from the well. He worried even a thorough cleaning of his wounds wouldn't stop an infection.

It appeared his grandfather still sat in his chair on the front porch. As Mykal got closer he realized that it wasn't his grandfather. He quickened his pace, excited. The man on the front porch wore a tan tunic under a dark green cloak, the hood down. Long, thin black hair hung to just above the center of his chest. His matching facial hair consisted of bushy, overgrown eyebrows, the arms of a mustache that fell past the corners of his chin, and were tied at the ends with little bits of string; the chin hair was also long and thick, and braided.

Blodwyn's cedar staff shod with iron was six feet long, and leaning against the porch railing. He grabbed it as he got to his feet. "Mykal? You've been hurt," he said.

"It's nothing. We need to talk," Mykal said.

Blodwyn furrowed his brow. "Have you been fishing?"

Mykal set down his tackle box, and removed the bow from his back. "If you want to call it that. Listen—"

"We need to clean those wounds. Right away," Blodwyn said. He spent a moment eyeing every inch of Mykal, searching for additional cuts not clearly visible. He spun Mykal around and lifted the back of his tunic.

"Stop that. I'm okay, I tell you." Mykal set down his bow by the box. He knew the cuts were bad. It was perfect timing Blodwyn was here. He'd planned to call on him after dinner. Now he didn't have to track the man down.

"These look quite serious," he said.

"Can it wait? Just a few moments? I really need to talk to you. There was this young woman I met today. I am not sure I know exactly who she is, or what she wants. Or why she followed me, but she told me—"

"Fetch water from the well," he said. "We'll talk about this *mysterious* woman after. Right now, you grab the water and I'll get prepared inside."

"Prepared? What are we preparing for?"

"I've seen those type of cuts before. You were in the Isthmian, weren't you? How many times have I told you not to swim that water?"

No one swam in the sea. “I was. But not by choice... this time.”

“There are copious amounts of poison inside your body, Mykal.”

“Copious? Big word.”

Not at all amused, Blodwyn said, “I hope for your sake this just happened. If too much time has lapsed, the consequences could be irreversible.”

Blodwyn always made everything sound desperate and dire. Fire and brimstone. The man thrived on imaginary danger. A good man, perhaps even a great man, but he’s always been a little over dramatic.

“I don’t know how much time has passed, Blodwyn, but it couldn’t have happened too long ago,” he said. He closed his eyes for a moment. It felt like his brain had become dislodged inside his skull. Despite the ever-increasing clouds, what little natural light remained hurt his eyes.

“Go and lie down. I’ll fetch the well water.” He held out a hand.

There was a sudden sharp pain behind his eyes. Rubbing his temples didn’t help. His clothing reeked of the sea. All he smelled was salt and fish. He wanted out of his clothing. He didn’t think he could remove them without tipping over. He moved his hands away from his head and held them out to keep from falling. “I’m okay, Wyn, I—”

“Really? Because you don’t look okay,” he said. His hand grabbed Mykal’s forearm, catching him before he toppled forward.

The door opened. Grandfather was at the threshold. “What’s going on? Mykal, what’s wrong?”

“He’s been cut, multiple times. The dorsal fins of an Isthmian Serpent are deadly. It is meant to incapacitate prey much larger than the beats so they can devour it without wasting energy fighting. How he’s still alive right now is beyond me. It isn’t like a serpent to carve up its meal and then allow it to escape. Let me get him to his bed. We have to act quickly. Isolating the poison is all but impossible now. The best we can hope to do is counter the negative effects and neutralize it from doing damage.”

“I’m okay, Grandfather. I’m just numb,” Mykal mumbled. He touched his hand to his face. “But, I can’t feel my tongue. Or my lips.”

Grandfather looked at Blodwyn and cocked his head to the side. “What did

he say?”

“I’m not positive. We need to get him inside,” Blodwyn said.

“It’s going to be okay, Mykal,” Grandfather said.

I can’t feel my arms, Mykal thought he said, yet hadn’t heard his voice. *I can’t feel my arms*. He realized he wasn’t actually talking. The words formed inside his mind. He couldn’t get his tongue to move, or his mouth to open.

CHAPTER 6



The Mountain King sat at the end of a twenty-foot-long table; clawed feet at the end of thick legs gripped the floor; pointed arches along the undersides ran its length. His high-backed chair was solid mahogany, kiln-dried, and finished with a dull brown polish. The king's sigil was carved into the back frame above the burgundy leather cushion, and spires rose like castle towers to either side. Queen Chorazin sat across from him, a matching chair for comfort and prestige, and his princesses at their mother's sides.

He felt an outsider in his own castle. He watched them eat and whisper. Unable to hear a single word of their hushed conversation. They weren't whispering to exclude him. They whispered because they all sat close together and there was little reason to talk *above* a whisper. Long ago he'd thought of ordering all three to sit closer to him. Then he considered having just his daughters near him. Instead, he did nothing. He was not going to force his family to be next to him. If they wanted to sit at the opposite end of the table and ignore him, so be it.

His irritated feelings did nothing more than ripen, fester, and spoil, becoming a diverticulitis of the mind and soul. The temptation to throw grapes and pieces of sliced turkey at them grew as they giggled, especially when they didn't show the common courtesy of including him. He refrained if only because he was hungry and the cook's gravy coated the meat so evenly. Throwing food across the room would be a waste; the meal was so good he didn't even want leftovers scraped into bowls for the royal hounds.

Tall stained-glass windows graced the western wall of his dining hall. Sunlight filtered in through the array of sectioned colors, playing across the room and giving everything a patchwork reddish-orange and greenish-blue glow, except during storms. When the sky was black, the palace was so dark that often torches seemed useless against the shadows. King Hermon Cordillera preferred the grey. The drab blocks of the stone walls, and slabs on the floor, were color enough. The outside of the castle was lighter grey than the charcoal rock of the mountain. Even the banners hanging everywhere inside the castle—the Cordillera sigil displayed on tightly woven silk cloth—detracted from the peace he found in the solidarity of grey surrounding him.

The king held up his chalice. The cup-bearer stepped forward, poured more wine. “Sire,” he said, and stepped back, away from the table.

King Cordillera drank the vintage in gulps, leaned back in his chair, and never looked away from his family. Was there a time he cared for his wife? In her youth she was pretty, he supposed, with long auburn hair, and small waist. Her breasts had been full, and her legs shapely and long. She had never lost the weight gained during each pregnancy, however, and there had been more than the two. There had been a miscarriage after the birth of Raaheel, and a stillborn after Sarah. That had been his boy and heir to the throne.

The weight gain wouldn’t matter so much if he didn’t also loathe her as a person. Not a single redeeming quality remained once the lusciousness of her form had passed. He wasn’t sure why she was such a bitter woman. She came from a kingdom of nothingness. In his Osiris Realm, he’d showered her in wealth. Her largest complaint was isolation. It didn’t matter to her that the Rames Mountains were a natural and nigh impenetrable barrier. An enemy could attempt to scale the jagged cliffs, but his guards would spot them long before any damage could be inflicted, before any breach assayed, and they’d be knocked from the face as easily as a stone could be nudged from the ramparts. The Rames were perhaps the sole reason the kingdom had never been under siege, never mind the strength of the fortress itself. Other nations easily understood the folly of any attack, just not his wife.

The chamberlain entered the hall. “Sire, forgive me for disrupting your

meal.”

Cordillera set his cup down, snapped his fingers at the cup-bearer. He wanted more wine. “The disruption is most welcome.”

The chamberlain stood aside and waited while the cup-bearer refilled the chalice. He cleared his throat. “The knight guarding Ida’s tower. He indicates that she has summoned you.”

“She summoned *me*?” Hermon Cordillera poked a finger at his chest, ready to yell, and knock things off the table, but stopped himself. In all the years Ida’s been in the tower, she had never once sent for him.

She had found something.

He had been patient. He didn’t want to get his hopes up. The wizard must have used magic. “Did she give an indication what this was in relation to?”

The chamberlain shook his head. He held a red velvet hat in his hands, and turned it over. “Just that you were the only one she would talk to, sire. She refused to answer a single question. I came for you immediately. I did not want to disturb your dinner, but neither did I want to wait. I knew this must be important, sire.”

Cordillera drank the wine. He held the cup in one hand, and picked at food in his teeth with the pinkie on his other. Pushing away from the table, he slapped a hand on the wood. The queen and his two princesses looked up. It was as if they had forgotten anyone else was in the hall. Their meals, and whispering, were momentarily halted.

“I regret to inform you that I must attend to urgent matters and that you will be forced to enjoy the rest of your meal without me.” Sarcasm was wasted on the queen. The children were ten and eight. Unfortunately, they were spitting images of their mother after the weight gain. Like her they spent the days grazing. Food was her priority, and now it was theirs as well. If they understood the wit thrown at them, they gave no sign. It seemed his vitriol was also wasted on his offspring.

He wanted a son desperately, but was torn. Coupling with the fat queen repulsed him. He felt no guilt in wishing that she suffer some dangerously unavoidable fate. Accidentally, of course. The only thing that prevented him from ensuring such was the princesses. They did seem to love their mother,

though he couldn't imagine why.

He snatched a large hunk of white meat from his plate, and stormed out of the dining hall, chamberlain in tow. He walked proudly, chest puffed, head held high. He cherished the halls, and loved the echo his footfalls produced as he strode across the stone floors.

With his palace having been built on the side of a mountain, he didn't have the luxury of spreading out over acres of land. His castle went into the sky, and was often in with low hanging clouds. It also went down into the belly of the mountain. Many of the halls were actually caves covered over with cinder walls. Import and export of supplies and goods was straight forward. The shipments were received and sent out of the Fjord Range, where the king kept a fleet of vessels, despite the Voyagers claim on the sea. However, he rarely sailed his ships. There hadn't been a need in the past.

There may be a need in the near future, though.

The foundation was constructed on the plateau of one mountain top, and backed up directly into the rise of another peak. From a distance the castle blended with the rocky terrain. If you didn't know the castle was there, you might never spot it amidst the rocks. Once you recognized it, you couldn't look away. It was magnificent.

The castle was sleek, narrow and tall with six towers, each fit with its own bartizan that contained machicolated floors, designed to allow rocks or boiling oil to be cast upon enemies foolish enough to climb the mountain with malicious intent. There were additional such defenses along the parapets that led from tower, to tower, to tower.

Ignoring the salutations of those he passed, Cordillera tore into the hunk of turkey, gravy dripping to his chin. He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, and then ate the remaining meat in a bite. All the while his mind ran wild with possibilities. At his behest, Ida focused her energy on tracking down wizards. They existed, but where? He knew the stories. During Emperor Henry Rye's rule, King Grandeer had unleashed his Watch; warriors specifically trained to hunt and destroy those that wielded witchcraft. The large numbers over powered even the most skilled wizard. Their magic proved to have limits. The

spells and incantations were oftentimes too little, too late against a charging army. An arrow in the heart, or a chopping swing of a sword that left a head decapitated from the body was as deadly to someone using magic, as it was to a mortal. The ensuing slaughter had been perceived as justified and right and reached across all kingdoms under the empire. To the Mountain King, fear of the unknown and blind ignorance was what it had actually been. Destroy what you don't understand. During dark times dark things were often handled darkly. That was simple truth, and a shameful waste.

There had been books in his library penned by fools who claimed to know where wizards hid, and the number that still walked the lands. Cordillera had sent knights not to the locations outlined, but to track down the authors of these works. Under questioning, with very little ... persuasion, the writers admitted to crafting fiction published as fact. Disgusted by their ruse, he had each individual summarily executed. Who had time for made up stories? They did not educate, or entertain. The volumes were removed and burned along with the bodies of their authors.

There were no windows inside the towers, only slits from which archers could fire if needed. An Iron bowl with burning coals sat on every third step of the spiraling staircase. The flames within these braziers created flickering shadows that grew, shrank, and multiplied like childhood nightmares dancing along the walls.

Cordillera despised this particular tower most of all. He didn't consider why he had chosen it for Ida, if he even knew. Climbing the stairs was never easy. His thoughts always took him back in time. When his father was alive, he used the chamber at the top of the tower to punish him. Usually the king's majordomo carried him up the stairs by the scruff of his neck, Hermon's feet kicking in lame attempt to find purchase. He would never forget the mechanical click of the king's key turning tumblers in the door's lock, and the protest of rusted hinges whining as the door was opened.

His father never beat him, but without word would lock him away for days in the tower. In the tower he received no food, and not even a bucket to use as privy. There was just the one window out of which he could watch the sun and

moon battle for placement in the sky. He would relieve himself out of it as well. The crisscrossing iron bars prevented him from doing anything more. This was the only room in all of the towers without a machicolated floor. Before being released the head of household would drop off a bucket filled with soapy water. He was expected to collect feces, and scrub the floors clean *finally* able to escape the horrid stench in which he had been forced to live.

A beating would have been better. He would rather a few good swats for sins committed, and then be able to move forward. Initially there would be pain, the king's hands had been big, strong, as if he'd spent his days with steel smiths hammering out imperfections in swords, instead of sitting behind mahogany desks and barking commands.

The silence and isolation of the solitary confinement extended beyond the days spent locked in the tower. That emotional pain, always present, ruined his entire childhood, but (in his mind) he refused to let it sour the rest of his life.

King Cordillera carried the same ring of keys his father had carried. They were tied to his belt, but wrapped in thin cloth which kept them from rattling as he walked. He didn't need to search through the keys for the one to the tower door. It didn't look any different from the others. He knew it by touch.

The king always assigned a knight to guard the room, who acknowledged the king and stepped aside as the king unlocked and pulled open the door.

"Sire?" the Chamberlain said.

He knew the man craved praise, or at the very least, approval. It was as obvious on the man's face as it is the royal hounds' when they begged for scraps. Just like the hounds wouldn't get a morsel of turkey with gravy tonight, neither would this man get a *thank you* for meeting his responsibilities as Chamberlain. "You can return," Cordillera said.

Ida stood near the bars across the window. Thankfully, her hood was covering her hideous head, and keeping her face where it belonged, in shadow. A putrid aroma filled the room. Cordillera knew it came from a mixture of the herbs and ingredients Ida kept for her magic, as well as from the witch's flesh. She disliked water, bathed infrequently, and was going to force him to command that she cleanse the stench from her body.

Thick black candles sat on flat plates set around the room. The sun was, thankfully, setting on a relentlessly hot day. As long as the clouds thinned, the heat could escape and the breeze of the sea might provide a reprieve from the humidity. Autumn was ending soon. Winter would fall on the kingdoms fast. Then the cold would be what they were forced to deal with. There was no winning when it came to weather.

King Cordillera stood still, and did not announce his presence. She had summoned him. Surely she'd heard the heavy door open when the hinges squeaked. It didn't take magic for ears to work.

It did take insolence to ignore royalty. He knew she thought she was different than his other subjects, that her magic made her better than most. But she was no queen.

He allowed her silence for a moment longer. Her power did frighten him; he just didn't want her to know how much. It was also important letting her believe she was more than a prisoner, more than the tool he'd use to get the things he wanted. In preparing for the war, her role was essential. She knew as much, and it was where her insolence stemmed from, unfortunately.

Did she know she was a prisoner? Of course she did. The locked door was more than proof enough. Even his half-witted wife would know she was being held against her will if locked inside a room. He had never mentioned to Ida the extent of her captivity, and she never questioned it. The arrangement was transparent. He was king, and she served him under lock and key. Quite simple, actually.

Quite simple, and yet he sometimes wondered how he'd respond if she ever demanded freedom, or worse, threatened it.

Her magic was strong, even though she was a lone witch.

He knew the room was enchanted. The spell cast was straightforward, but unbreakable. It sealed the entire room, keeping a wizard locked inside; a dungeon amidst the clouds. When he'd brought Ida to his keep, and led her up the winding tower staircase, he thought for sure she'd recognize the magic. The promise of her own room where she was free to work her spells, potions, and live mostly undisturbed apparently appealed to her. The enchantment, the lock,

the key, she had not seemed to anticipate. Or had she?

He'd not lied. She was encouraged to work on spells and potions. Just not as freely as she might have originally thought. The magic created was dictated by him. He had a library of books on magic. His collection had become extensive, and had taken time to acquire. The plans made would require many things to happen. Everything needed to fall perfectly in place if he expected to succeed. And he did expect success. They talked through what he expected a potion to do; expressed what he hoped, and wanted the magic to accomplish, and she worked to make it happen. Her trials weren't always fruitful, or quick. Getting things right took time. Patience and time.

When Ida spoke, it was softly. Her words lightly bounced off the rock walls. "There has been a disturbance. Magic has been used."

"And the potions?" He wrung his hands together. It was the first small taste of victory to reach his tongue, and he salivated at its possibilities.

She waved a hand in the air. "They're ready. They've been ready."

"And do you have a location?" he said.

"Not specifically. I am thinking it happened on the west bank. But I am not yet positive. More magic will be used. And when it is, I will have more accurate information. I simply wanted you made aware. We're getting closer."

"Keep me posted. Night or day. Any time you have something new, I want to know," he said, before turning to leave.

CHAPTER 7



M ykal lay on the bed, his eyes open, but seemed to stare at nothing. “Is he breathing?” Grandfather said. His chair was parked beside the bed. He held his grandson’s hand in his own.

Blodwyn quickly cleared items off the nightstand, and set down his small leather bag. He loosened the purse strings and dug inside. “He’s breathing. It’s shallow, but he is breathing. His body has slipped into shock. We need more blankets. He must be kept warm.”

Grandfather wheeled himself out of the room in search of blankets.

Someone knocked on the front door.

“We can’t be disturbed,” Blodwyn shouted. He lifted a clear jar from the bag and held it up to the candlelight. It had a piece of leather tied over the mouth as a lid, and was filled with bugs, like tiny creatures that resembled insect-sized lobster tails. “Send whoever it is away!”

“He needs to heal himself.” It was a woman’s voice.

Blodwyn glanced over his shoulder, ready to order the intruder out of the house. Her presence caught him off guard. Before him stood a woman, and aside from a purple gem hanging from a silver necklace, she was naked and stunningly beautiful. Her hair was green like blades of grass, curly, and hung just below her breasts. Her flawless skin was creamy pale, but it was her violet eyes with sapphire rims and black irises that held his stare.

Grandfather sat behind her at the bedchamber threshold, blankets piled atop his lap. “I tried to tell her to leave.”

“We’ve no time to argue. The blankets, quickly,” Blodwyn said. His eyes on the woman, as he held out his hand.

The woman took the blankets from Grandfather, walked into the room, and handed them over. “He needs to heal himself.”

“You must be the mysterious woman Mykal met this afternoon.” Blodwyn unfolded the blankets over Mykal’s body, and then untied the string removing the leather lid from the jar.

“What are those?” Grandfather said. He tucked the blankets around his grandson’s feet.

Blodwyn scooped bugs from the jar and hovered over Mykal for a moment before dropping a few of the insects into Mykal’s mouth. “These are cymothoa. Tongue biters. You most often find them living inside the mouths of fish. They’re parasites. They attach themselves to a fish’s tongue and suck blood from their host. They can grow quite large. The ones in this jar are an inch long, or less. In the sea they can grow several feet. They are most difficult to remove. Eventually the host’s tongue will die and fall away, and the cymothoa will act as the new tongue for the fish.”

Grandfather grunted, then groaned, “Why on earth are you putting them in my grandson’s mouth?”

“The poison from the cuts is traveling through his body. The more poison that reaches his brain, the more dangerous his infection becomes. These tongue biters will interfere with the blood flow and ingest the poison,” Blodwyn said.

“He needs to heal himself,” the naked woman said.

“Please, I have no idea who you are. I am not sure why you are here. This young boy needs medical attention. His life is in serious danger. Serious danger! You’re not helping the situation at all. I am going to have to ask you to leave,” Blodwyn said. He’d raised his voice, and seemed uncomfortable with having done so. He was unable to keep eye contact, but looking anywhere else seemed inappropriate. “Now please, let us be. I am trying to save my friend’s life.”

“How long will it take to work?” Grandfather pointed at Blodwyn’s jar.

“We may have to wait until morning before we notice much of a change.” Blodwyn rested a hand on Mykal’s shoulder. “One way or the other, we will

know something by morning.”

“Mykal,” the woman said. “You must heal yourself. I know you hear me. You can rid your body of the poison inside your blood. You do not need parasites to cleanse you. You can just as easily—”

“That is enough!” Blodwyn put out his hands. He spun the woman around. “You must leave.”

“But what if she’s right?” It was grandfather.

Blodwyn bit down on his upper lip. “Who are you?” he said to the woman.

“My name’s Galatia.”

Blodwyn’s brow furrowed. He eyed the naked woman suspiciously. She was either lying, or cared nothing for Grey Ashland law. King Grandeer had launched a war against magic, executing wizards across the empire—back when there was a united empire. The decree held sway from king to king continuing the outlaw of magic, with substantial rewards offered for information that led to the capture of anyone caught using magic or claiming to be a wizard.

“Galatia, the *Wizard*?” he said.

She cocked her head to one side. “You’ve heard of me?”

He had heard of one named Galatia. “I know of her. Most do. She perished nearly two centuries ago at the hands of King Grandeer.”

The woman winced as though Blodwyn’s words had cut her with sharpened-steel edges. “That man cannot still be on the throne?”

Blodwyn slowly shook his head. “He’s not. His grandson is king. You want us to believe you’re the same Galatia from two hundred years ago?”

“In the flesh.” She held her arms out, palms up, as if announcing, *here I am*. “Now, unless you feel a pressing need to ask more questions, I would like to return to Mykal’s room. I need to speak with him some more.”

“But he can’t hear you,” Grandfather said.

“Yes, he can. He can hear everything we’ve said. Blodwyn was correct in assessing the danger of the Isthmian Serpent’s dorsal. The poison, even in small doses, can be lethal. What the poison does is paralyze prey. They become like a log, unable to move limbs, and muscles. His eyes are open, so trust me, he can see. He can also hear, which is why I need to continue speaking to him. Do I

have your permission to do so?”

Blodwyn saw conflict in Grandfather’s eyes. If word got out Galatia was inside his house, the king would send knights and have the old man arrested. In the dungeons Grandfather would be tortured. The dungeon master would force a confession that both he and Mykal were *also* using magic. They would be put to death in the courtyard for all of Grey Ashland to witness.

“You already know you can trust me in this. You have my word, no one will know,” Blodwyn said to grandfather. “What happens tonight will stay between us.”

“You remain a good friend, Wyn. You have always been loyal to this family. I thought for sure when my daughter-in-law was...taken, and my son ran off, I’d have seen the last of you. Instead you’ve remained a part of Mykal’s life as though a blood relative. For that, I have always felt gratitude,” Grandfather said.

Blodwyn kept too many secrets to be completely truthful with the old man. It was expedient to accept the compliment, and move forward. “Thank you, sir. Being a part of your lives has been a blessing to me.”

“And the boy? May I?” Galatia said. “I do not think we’ve much time before his life is too far gone to save.”

Blodwyn nodded his approval.

“How is he going to heal himself?” Grandfather said. He looked shaken, his head wobbled and lips trembled. “Why do she keep saying that? I don’t understand. I don’t know what she’s talking about.”

Blodwyn sat in the main room with Grandfather. Galatia was with Mykal in his room. While he’d rather be in there, a witness to whatever happened, he knew Grandfather needed him more at the moment. The man deserved answers.

“You know something, Blodwyn. There’s no need in denying it. I saw it in your eyes tonight. More than once.” Grandfather sat rigid in his chair. His fingers laced, knuckles white. His mouth kept working even after he stopped speaking, as if there was more he wanted to say.

Outside, thunder rumbled over the Isthmian. The storm would strike soon. As the rain began to fall, the intermittent drops sounded like a box of carpenter nails being erratically emptied onto the cabin’s tin roof. It then transitioned into a

steadier din.

“It’s really coming down now,” Blodwyn said.

“Please,” Grandfather said. “My grandson is all I have left. He is my only family. I can’t lose him. I can’t. There’s only so much an old man’s heart can take.”

Blodwyn sat on a chair facing the old man, gripping with both hands the staff between his legs. He kept an ear focused on the woman’s voice, her words just barely audible to his attuned hearing. “I knew your daughter-in-law before she fell in love with your son.”

“You did? You knew Anna before my son?” Mykal’s grandfather looked uneasy. He shifted his weight in his chair. His hands unclasped and fidgeted with the blanket over his legs. He lifted it, and replaced it on his lap, tucking one end around his stump.

“I knew Anna, and Anna’s family quite well.” Blodwyn didn’t want to lie. He knew some things needed revealing. He didn’t want to volunteer more than necessary. He feared it would be near-impossible to keep secrets much longer, though. Getting answers to questions didn’t always makes things better. Ignorance was sometimes preferable to knowledge. The toughest thing was to convince those who didn’t have specific knowledge, that they truly did not want it; that they would be happier left in the dark.

“Were you a part of her family?”

Blodwyn shook his head. “I was not related. I was her teacher.”

He could see Grandfather slowly absorb that bit of information. He knew inside the old man’s brain wheels turned like those on his chair, trying to get from one place to another. There couldn’t be enough pieces in place for Grandfather to get there yet, but it wouldn’t take much more. Mykal and Blodwyn had spent time together nearly every day, rarely missing a single one, since the day Mykal had been born.

“Teacher? I don’t understand.”

Blodwyn leaned forward. He knew that except for Galatia and Mykal they were alone inside the house, and that the steadily falling rain and occasional crash of thunder would drown out the sound of his voice should anyone be

nearby to listen. Still, he felt uncomfortable speaking above a whisper. “There were the rumors,” he said.

“There are always rumors,” Grandfather said.

“Anna, your daughter-in-law, was like Galatia.”

Grandfather, who seemed to have been holding his breath sighed. He sat back in his wheeled chair and laughed. Blodwyn retained his grip on his staff, but never blinked, and never looked away from the other man’s eyes.

It didn’t take long before the weight of his words overwhelmed Grandfather’s mirth. The old man’s shoulders began to shake. The tears brimmed from his bottom eyelids. “Eadric’s Anna? She really did know magic?”

“She ... was a wizard,” Blodwyn said. It somehow still surprised him that such news could bring devastation to some people, although it shouldn’t considering the laws still around against such things. One could choose to practice magic, but such learning was limited. Students of magic focused their studies perfecting one element of the craft. The books provided insight and guidelines. Magic could be learned, and used by those born without the spark, but was not nearly as effective or as dangerous as most suspected, or as King Granddeer once feared.

Wizards were different. Wizards were born. One couldn’t choose to become a wizard.

“Don’t let that diminish your memory of the woman,” Blodwyn said.

Grandfather licked dry lips. “I just don’t know how I was blind to it. I feel like it’s something I should have known, should have been able to detect.”

“She was skilled at keeping her abilities secret. She knew revealing who she was, what she was, endangered everyone she loved and cared about. She rarely used her powers.”

“Eadric?”

“He knew.”

“And you? Are you a wizard?”

Finally, Blodwyn was able to laugh. “I am not a wizard. I know very little about how magic works.” He stood up. “Perhaps I should make some tea. I believe none of us will get any sleep tonight. We might as well have some

caffeine to assist us through the vigil.”

“Yes. That sounds good,” Grandfather said.

Blodwyn didn't need to be told where anything was. He was as comfortable in Grandfather's house as he was his own.

“You said you were Anna's teacher. If it wasn't magic you taught, then what?” Grandfather whispered the word ‘magic’ as if it were part of an evil curse, and saying it out loud would inflict damage on anyone close enough to hear.

“The eradication King Grandeer started may have ended long ago, but the crusade against magic and wizards was an ongoing one, even still to this day. King Grandeer created a special and of the most elite knights and called them the Watch. Their sole purpose was to travel across the kingdom in search of people with powers. They were given full reign over their finds. They could arrest, try, sentence, and carry out an execution. No one would question their actions, unless they wanted trouble. There had been stories of people falsely accused of magic. It became something of an epidemic at one point. Few were safe from the pointing of a finger, or the whisper in a tavern. If the Watch caught wind, either accidentally, or on purpose, their terror over the land was unleashed. Making a spectacle of their proceedings was how they operated. They thrived on fear.

“Grandeer's son, King Stilson hosted many similar hunts, and sent his knights to the other realms under the old empire. Their sole purpose was flushing out magicians and wizards. King Nabal has done the same. Anytime there is even a rumor of magic, Nabal reacts with a show of force to apprehend and eliminate the threat. You won't see wizard's being hung in the court. Nabal doesn't want anything magic inside his kingdom's borders, or anywhere in the old empire at all if he can help it. He doesn't even want people realizing it still exists. He, like his grandfather, declared that anyone who practices magic to even heal illness would be considered as guilty as a murderer. Like I said, the Watch act as judge and executioner on the road, the further away from Grey Ashland, the better. But you know all of this. We're not that different in age. We've seen our share of bloodshed, both justified and otherwise.” Blodwyn lit a flame under the iron rack and set a water-filled kettle above it. “I was hired by

Anna's parents to protect her from such crusaders, and to do more than that."

"More?"

"I taught her to defend herself without the use of magic," Blodwyn said. He removed two mugs from a cupboard and set them by the kettle. "She learned how to handle staff, sword, and knives. She learned how to fight using her hands, her feet, her teeth, and most importantly her mind. How to think her way out of situations that seemed dire. I have done the same these last seventeen years with Mykal. At Anna's request."

Grandfather nodded. Although he didn't yawn, the dark bags under his eyes showed how tired the man was. "That's why Mykal keeps his weapons stashed in some old tree."

"You know about the tree?"

He laughed. "Of course I know about the tree. Figured he's a boy. Who doesn't want a sword, and daggers? Only thing he's ever shown me is that bow of his. Because it's practical, I suppose."

Blodwyn waited. If Grandfather had more questions, required more clarification, he'd ask. Otherwise, enough pieces of the puzzle had been provided.

Filling the mugs with grass tea, Blodwyn offered one to Grandfather.

"Thank you," he said, taking the offered mug. He cupped it in both hands, as if soothing a chill in his bones. "And Mykal, he inherited his mother's...gift?"

"I hadn't seen any sign to indicate it. He's never demonstrated any extraordinary abilities. Everything he's accomplished appears to have been without the use of magic. He's a fine young man. Strong, brave. You should be proud," Blodwyn said.

"But you *think* he is also a wizard?" Grandfather said.

"I am not certain. I have kept a close eye on him. I've watched for any sign that might indicate he possessed such power. I'm being honest with you when I say he has never exhibited so much as magical sneeze in front of me. Nor has he come to me perplexed by something odd that may have happened. Anna, for example, would lose her temper, normal tantrums any teenager might throw, except that when she did, vases would shatter around her, or tables would tip."

He sipped his grass tea, and cringed. It burned his tongue. He blew on the tea as he sat back in his chair across from the older man. “She didn’t willfully destroy things. She just hadn’t yet learned to harness her emotions, or how to control her abilities. The magic was always in her, but like any *talent* she was required to religiously practice and continually hone the skill. It was imperative she do so. Otherwise by the time she reached adulthood she’d have been a danger to, not just herself but, those around her.”

“You said you didn’t think Mykal was a wizard until tonight. Why is tonight different?” Grandfather hadn’t taken a sip of his tea. Blodwyn suspected the tea would go cold, and be left on the table forgotten. It served as a prop, something he could do with his hands.

“Galatia may not be everything she claims. I haven’t decided if I trust her just yet. There is something about her, though. It makes me wonder. I’m inclined to believe most of what she is saying, but I am reserved,” he said. More truths. “I don’t know where she’s been all these years. Hiding, no doubt. Times were different back then. Emperor Rye was in charge of four kingdoms united as one. King Grandeur was Rye’s favorite among the monarchs, and after the death of his son, was sometimes given too much freedom to do as he wished. Everything is different now. Two of the kingdoms are completely gone, and as you know, the Osiris Realm is across the sea, but always a viable threat to our way of life. So, I am not sure why she’s chosen to come out of hiding now, to make herself known to us today. It makes me wonder if she has been close all along, perhaps in the shadows watching events unfold? Has she, like me, been keeping an eye on Mykal for some time?”

“You have questions, too,” Grandfather said. It was a statement.

Blodwyn nodded and allowed himself a thin smile. “I do. And like you, I am somewhat fearful of the truths which might be uncovered. What I do know, without even speaking to Galatia again, is that everything is about to change. There is something unnatural about coincidences. I don’t believe in them.”

It was silent in Mykal’s room. His conversation with Grandfather had been so involved, that he could not recall the last time he’d heard Galatia speaking. Curiosity ate at his insides like a dog gnawing on a bone. He desperately wanted

to join them and see and hear what was taking place.

Giving the sorcerer time alone with Mykal wasn't easy. He walked over to the door and listened, before opening the door. Inside, Galatia stood by the foot of the bed. Mykal's body was covered in a sheen of sweat, but he was safe. He let that be enough for now. He gently closed the door and returned to the table.

He tried to settle down and relax. Anxiety served no purpose, whatever had happened behind the closed door was done, it seemed. All that was left was the waiting. "Something must be coming, but how do we prepare for the unknown? I want to be honest with you, Grandfather," Blodwyn said. Knowing Anna is a wizard, and with the arrival of Galatia, Blodwyn had little doubt. "Mykal is a wizard."

CHAPTER 8



Mykal knew he was dreaming. He was once again sinking into the depths of the Isthmian. He struggled toward the surface arms moving and legs kicking, but his efforts got him nowhere. His lungs burned, demanding air.

Below him the Creature, still with the arrow through its mouth, swam up at him. Only this time, in the dream, the thing was twice as big, with teeth twice as large. He would not escape its attack in the dream. It would get him.

He looked down at it. It opened its mouth so wide that the broadhead on the arrow pulled free. At its current size it would have no problem swallowing him whole.

Only, it wasn't interested in swallowing him whole.

The Creature gnashed its teeth once, and then again, as though letting him know death was going to be painful. It planned on chewing him up.

He still panicked—dream or not—and kicked his legs harder, moved his arms faster, all to no avail. He wasn't any closer to the surface than he had been moments before, not that reaching the surface would offer any true safety. The Creature was inches from his feet, mouth stretched wide, teeth bared...

He wished the serpent dead.

The serpent caught on fire just before closing jaws closed on him.

Despite the salty sea water, the serpent was engulfed in flames.

Mykal lurched awake. He struggled catching his breath, but couldn't fill his lungs with air. He shot forward and yanked away the covers. His body was

dripping in a cold sweat. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. Blood rushed either to his head, or from it. Things became blurry, blinking and shaking his head only made him dizzier. He fell to the floor's oak planks, panting and coughing. He was finally drawing breath, but not normally.

“Mykal! What are you doing out of bed?” It was Blodwyn. “Here, help me get him off the floor.”

“I think I killed that serpent, Wyn. I think I burned it up,” he said.

“I don't know what that means.” Blodwyn reached under Mykal's arms.

“The serpent should have killed me in the sea. I shouldn't be here. I should be dead.”

“You're not dead, Mykal.”

“Because I killed it. I don't know how I did it, but I know I did. I know it was me that killed the serpent. It caught on fire. I burned it alive. I killed the serpent.”

Mykal attempted to right himself. Instead, everything went black.

HIS HEAD FELT COOL, damp.

Mykal opened his eyes and felt the rolled up cloth on his forehead.

While the days were still hot and humid when the sun was out, signs of autumn ending were evident. Outside, it was raining again. Soon, the temperatures would drop and snow would fall instead of rain. The seasons changed fast. There was little overlap when it came to the weather.

He knew better than to sit up too quickly.

Remaining still, he applied pressure to the cloth. The heat under his skin subsided further. He cleared his throat.

Legs from a nearby chair scraped on the floor. “You're awake.”

“Wyn,” he said.

“Don't try to talk. Not just yet. Are you thirsty?”

The room was dark except for a lone, lit candle on the nightstand. “Parched.”

“Don't talk.”

Mykal felt a hand slide under his neck and lift his head off the pillow. A cup was placed to his lips.

“Don’t drink too much. Just tiny sips. I don’t want you getting sick.”

Mykal did as instructed. His stomach growled. “I’m starving.”

“That’s a good sign.” Blodwyn was nodding, and smiling. “I will get you some broth in a moment. I just want to make sure you’re doing better.”

“My mouth feels really funny.” Mykal stuck out his tongue and reached for it with fingertips.

Blodwyn grabbed his arm. “Don’t do that. I’m going to need you to lie still for a minute.”

Mykal spoke with his tongue out garbling his words. He crossed his eyes trying to see. “Why? What’s going on? What’s wrong?”

“This won’t take but a few seconds,” he said.

“What won’t,” Mykal said, gripping the sheets with both hands.

Blodwyn reached in his leather bag, and removed a long stick. He held one end over the candle flame until it caught.

“What are you going to do with that?” Mykal asked.

“Be still now. Don’t move,” Blodwyn said, leaning over Mykal. “Open your mouth wide for me.”

“I don’t like this, Wyn,” Mykal said. He put his tongue back in his mouth and shut his lips as tightly as he could.

Blodwyn placed a hand on Mykal’s forehead. “Stop being a child and open your mouth!”

Mykal wanted to close his eyes, but didn’t. He opened his mouth a little bit, and his eyes wider.

“Open it!”

“I am.”

“Stick out your tongue.” Blodwyn commanded forcefully. Mykal had heard it before, many times, while training. Blodwyn was done playing around; this was serious.

It made no difference to Mykal. They’d been friends far too long for him to be intimidated by the tactic, yet *because* of that friendship, Mykal obeyed,

opening his mouth as wide as possible.

“Now be still.” He kept the one hand on Mykal’s forehead, pressing his head against the pillow.

The stick still on fire, Blodwyn poked it into Mykal’s mouth, touching it to his tongue, only it didn’t burn him. He tried not squirming, that is, until something fell into the back of his throat. He gagged.

Blodwyn removed the stick. “Stay still.”

“I swallowed something.”

“It’ll pass. There are a few more. Open wide.” Blodwyn waved the burning stick.

“What will pass?”

“Shush!”

After several moments, Blodwyn blew out the flame. “There. Good as new.”

“What was inside my mouth?”

“You don’t want to know. Have some more water.”

Mykal took a long draw, then pressed fingertips against his throat. “What did I swallow?”

“How are you feeling?” Blodwyn asked, changing the subject. “You’ve had us quite worried. I almost gave in and went for the curer.”

“Have I been out the entire day?”

Blodwyn wiped the once-lit end of the stick with his tunic, and replaced it in his bag. “The entire *three* days.”

Mykal turned his head. Blodwyn’s staff leaned against the wall, never out of reach. “Three days?”

Blodwyn nodded. “Three and a half, seeing that dawn is just a few hours away.”

Mykal closed his eyes and rubbed his hands over his face. “All because of some snake in the sea.”

“Some snake? Have you *never* heard the stories of the monsters in the sea?”

“I thought they were just stories.”

“And now?”

Mykal laughed. “There are definitely monsters in the sea.”

“Definitely.” Blodwyn smiled and clapped his hands together. “How are you feeling?”

“Very sore. Every muscle and bone in me aches. I would swear one of the horses kicked me in the gut.” He wrapped an arm across his stomach, and sat up unable to get comfortable.

“Here, let me help you.” Blodwyn hoisted Mykal into a better position, situating the pillows behind his back. “And we should probably talk about the mysterious woman you met on the beach.”

“Karyn,” he said, as if talking to himself.

“Who?”

“The girl on the beach,” Mykal said. “I wanted to tell you about her, about our encounter. Seems I fainted before getting the chance.” There was something about Karyn he couldn’t figure out. Blodwyn had nailed it when he called her ‘mysterious’. It was more than just what she’d said to him. There was something exotic about her. Maybe it was the royal bloodline?

“Can you ... describe her?”

Before Mykal could answer, the bedchamber door opened. Galatia walked into the room. “Why didn’t you tell us he was awake?”

“He just woke up,” Blodwyn said.

“Who’s that?” Mykal said. “And why is she wearing my mother’s blouse, and my pants?”

“Because they fit,” Galatia said.

“You didn’t see what she was wearing when she first got here.” Blodwyn looked at Galatia, one eyebrow arched. “Isn’t this the woman you met on the beach?”

“No. She’s not.”

MYKAL HAD NEVER BEFORE SEEN the woman who stood at the foot of his bed wearing his *only* cloak. Her voice was familiar, though. He couldn’t explain how. It reminded him of music when she spoke; the strings of a guitar gently

strummed, or of a flute lightly played with practiced breath. She was beyond lovely, likely the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He thought he could stare into her eyes forever without blinking. And her hair... its green should seem odd, but fell about her shoulders as naturally, as right, as a rose bush's foliage. He felt the need to climb into his last clean pair of pants, toss on his tunic, and, since he wasn't planning on asking for his cloak back, he'd wear the dark leather vest he'd made—the shoulders jettied out, the collar was stiff and rose away from his neck.

Grandfather now sat by the window. He somehow seemed years older since Mykal had last seen him, although only days had passed. Wrinkles creased his forehead more prominently; his cheek's jowls sagged, pulling his lips into a perpetual scowl.

Blodwyn was standing by the nightstand with its candle, hand on his staff.

"I am not sure how much time is left," Galatia said. Her green hair and red lips a sharp contrast against pale skin. "I am here to ask for your help, Mykal."

"My grandson isn't able to help. He's sick," Grandfather said. He looked at Mykal, his eyes silently begging for support.

"Mykal is not sick," she said.

Grandfather raised a defiant hand. "What are you talking about? He's been unconscious for days. He only woke up this night."

"Remove the bandages on your stomach, Mykal."

Her request was simple. Mykal felt the weight of her words. He looked up at Blodwyn as he reached for the tucked end of the wrap and peeled it away. The laceration was gone. There was no sign of the attack whatsoever.

"And your leg," she said. It was not a question.

Mykal pulled the blanket away from his legs. Blodwyn stepped forward and unwound the cloth. Again, there was no sign of an injury. "I don't understand," Mykal said.

"You were cut up pretty badly," Blodwyn said, touching Mykal's leg.

"I remember that," he said. "But you said I was out of it for three days?"

"Nearly four," Blodwyn replied.

Mykal looked from Blodwyn to his grandfather to the woman, then back.

“This doesn’t make sense. I saw and felt the deepness of the wounds. If anything, I should be scarred. I should be bearing the marks from the dorsal fins to my grave. Am I wrong?”

“You healed your body.” Galatia put her hand on Mykal’s foot. “The power you used drained your energy. Using magic is like using muscles. The more it is practiced, the stronger you will get. The fatigue becomes less and less. Then your body will become more adept at spending the energy needed.”

“Power? Magic? I don’t have any idea what you’re talking about.” Mykal almost, instinctively, pulled his leg away. Her touch sent a vibration from his toes up his legs and throughout his body. There was nothing settling about the odd sensation, and yet he felt suddenly calm.

“Breathe slowly. In through your nose and out through your mouth,” she said.

After a moment, Mykal closed his eyes and did as instructed. The rhythmic breathing along with the steady hum inside his body from her touch relaxed every muscle in his once-tense body.

“How is that?” she said.

“It’s better.”

“I don’t like this,” Grandfather said. “This is going to lead to trouble. All of it. They have ways, I’m told. They know when magic is being used inside the kingdom. It’s like a beacon. Someone uses magic, and the king knows. He’s not going to like this. Knights are probably mounting horses as we speak. They’ll be here. Sooner or later they’ll come for you.” Grandfather stared at Galatia as he spoke.

Ignoring the rant, Galatia smiled at Mykal. It appeared genuine. Her eyes squinted kindly. “You healed your own wounds, Mykal.”

He almost laughed, but stopped at a crooked smile. “What does that mean? How did I heal myself?”

“*You*, Mykal, are a wizard,” she said.

And now Mykal did laugh.

CHAPTER 9



Mykal could not sleep. Everyone had left his room; his questions unanswered until morning. Lying awake, he used the slices of moonbeams which passed through the window to stare at moving shadows on the ceiling. The rain from earlier had stopped. Outside, he heard crickets, owls, and the occasional gust of wind that moaned as it ran against and then passed the house.

“A wizard,” he mused. His mind was a jumbled mess of thoughts. It didn’t matter how he tried to align them. They didn’t make sense.

The idea was too peculiar for consideration.

No one would explain to him who Galatia actually was. They obviously believed her claims and accepted that he was a wizard. He then recalled her speaking to him through his delirium. He realized now that this was how he had recognized her voice. He could again hear her telling him in soft, soft words to fix himself, to heal his body. Just because she’d said he should, didn’t mean that he had. If anything, *she* had used magic. *She* was the wizard. For some unknown reason, she had fooled the others leading them to believe that the power had been his, and that he had indeed healed himself. That thought alone was nothing shy of ludicrous.

He was not a wizard. *That* was the truth of the matter. It should be clear and obvious.

Mykal had seen the look in Blodwyn’s eyes, though.

Blodwyn thought Mykal was a wizard. Grandfather looked as scared as a

man prepared to be hung in the king's courtyard. This indicated that he too accepted Galatia's...accusation. Once the king found out about this nonsense—they were going to get him killed.

What did they know that he didn't? What were they not telling him? This was why he didn't sleep. They'd insisted that he rest further. Galatia had insisted. She claimed that morning would be the time for questions and answers. She also said tomorrow morning would be a day for decisions, whatever that meant.

Removing the blankets, Mykal climbed from his bed expecting pain, he cradled his side, yet there was none. There wasn't even the slightest discomfort. The only mild discomfort was the coolness of the floorboards beneath bare feet. Well, that *and* still feeling nauseated at having swallowed the things falling from his tongue. Blodwyn still hadn't told him what those things were, which left Mykal's mind free to conjure crazy images.

Pushing past it as best he could, he walked to his window and looked out on the farm.

The moon was surrounded by a handful of bright stars and lit the night better than a blazing fire. He remembered an occasion, while training with Blodwyn, when they'd seen coiling smoke rise against a darkening, lavender-colored sky. They fetched buckets, saddled horses, and raced toward the Kensington estate; the direction from which the smoke originated. Villagers were already there, and more arriving, battling the flames consuming Old Kendrick's home. The closest water came from a deep stone well three hundred yards away. Mykal and Blodwyn joined the line of people from the well to the inferno. The people all working together, empty buckets made their way toward the well and full buckets went back to the burning house. Before long, night was upon them and only the light from the bright orange flames challenged the sky's blackness. They fought the fire tirelessly, but lost. Mykal watched Blodwyn wrap an arm around the old man and walk him away from the ruins, to a small gazebo by a cluster of cypress trees. It was a side of Blodwyn that Mykal had never experienced. While they talked, Mykal stood in mud by the well, two empty buckets at his feet, and watched the fire as it blackened and ate the last of the

structure. He would never forget the crackling and snapping of wood, or the heat that rolled off the house. Every hair on his arm and eyebrows had been singed from his skin.

He wasn't concerned with the singed hair. It was the feeling of defeat that struck hardest, and seeing Blodwyn console a desolate Kensington for hours beneath the canopy of the gazebo. Everyone had banded together for the greater good, and had failed. The lessons were countless. Blodwyn covered them over the next several weeks, but made what happened sound positive. "People uniting to help one another. There is almost nothing greater," he'd repeated again and again.

Tonight, however, the moon shone more brightly in the late-night sky than the flames had that evening several years ago. It *did* shine more brightly than those treacherous flames had, yet felt more ominous than the danger of any fire.

He thought he saw a lone figure standing under a tree just outside the railings of the fence, and although he could not see face, or eyes, he knew the person was staring directly at him. It was little more than a nondescript shadow, but he somehow knew who it was.

"Karyn." He reached for his tunic, vest, and pants, and quietly left his bedchamber.

"I SNUCK out of the keep. When I went to sleep tonight, I saw you in trouble." Karyn wore a white nightgown under a rich, sea-green cloak, its strings a knot tied at her throat. Through the shadows cast beneath her hooded head, the young lady's blue eyes were illuminated; they glowed.

The earlier rain had not washed away the day's heat. The humidity made his clothing stick to sweat-dampened skin. The air was so thick he drank it with each breath. "I had been cut by the dorsal fins of—"

"That's not what I'm talking about." She spoke softly. "I knew that already. I didn't know at the time that the fins were poisonous. If I had realized that, I would never have left your side."

Mykal smelled manure. It stood stagnate, trapped in the air. He was embarrassed; worried a princess might believe the odor was his and not that of the animals. What did she know about farmers? “I don’t understand you.”

“I *knew* about the serpent that morning. I wanted to warn you while you were still within the keep, not that you would have believed me,” she said. “I wouldn’t have believed me. There was no way I could approach you. Not then. Not there.”

She was right. He might have laughed at her. Not to her face, not even near her, but later on his walk to the sea.

“Besides, with the hangings, it would have been impossible to get away from the king, and the king’s eyes. I got to the beach as soon as I could, but it was already too late. I did my best to ensure that you were alright. I knew before we even spoke that you would survive. Just not about the poison. It wasn’t until that night that I understood why and how you would survive the attack. It’s why I’ve come back,” she said, and turned to retrieve a bag she had stowed behind the tree. “You are in trouble, and I am here to help.”

He thought of Galatia. Several days ago Karyn’s mystical concern would have been hysterical. Even now the idea that she was worried about him was odd. Considering what he’d been through and as little as he actually understood, he couldn’t dismiss her, her concerns. Not any longer. The more he thought about it, the more the timing of her arrival piqued his curiosity. “I’m not sure I understand any of this. I don’t mean to offend you. It just doesn’t make sense to me. You can see things. Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I can.”

“Okay. What am I thinking?” he said.

“It’s not like that. It doesn’t work that way.”

“No. Of course it doesn’t.” He shook his head. “Look, I’m not doubting you, or your... ability. I’m just curious as to why you’re so worried about me? We don’t know each other. You’re the king’s ward. Royalty.”

She used both hands to lower her hood. Her hair was still braided. She stared at him, their eyes locked. “I’ve dreamt of you for years. Ever since I came to Grey Ashland, really. Only, I didn’t know it was you, specifically, in my dreams.”

“That’s what you told me before.” He wasn’t sure how that made him feel. It had the hint of a scam. What did he have worth stealing? A horse? A cow? A small piece of land? It didn’t make sense. Mykal prepared himself for the hook. The young woman must want something from him. He was a farmer, with barely enough to survive. There was nothing to give. “Okay. So you dream of me. What does that mean?”

“When I saw you in the courtyard, I was so surprised. You. The one from my dreams. I almost called out. I didn’t, obviously, but I watched you, and had you followed. The night before, I dreamt the serpents’ attack in the Isthmian as clearly as though it had been myself fishing and then struggling to stay alive,” she said.

Mykal looked back to the cabin, a predawn mist had begun to rise and almost-imperceptibly roll across the land. “You haven’t answered my questions.”

“What is your question?”

“Why me?”

“I don’t have the answer. I wish I knew. To say you’ve haunted the whole of my life is not untrue. I can’t escape my dreams, any more than I can the thoughts that fill my head. It is worse now because I know who you are, where you live. That you are *real*. I can’t help but come here to warn you. You say I’m royalty, like that makes me a bad person. I’m not. I am compassionate and caring. How can I ignore dreams if the consequences of inaction cause bad things to happen? I know two things.”

“And what are they?”

“You are in danger, and only I can save your life.”

Mykal closed his mouth tight. He refused to say the first thing that sprung to mind. She had come a long way to see him and didn’t deserve to be insulted. “But you don’t know what this danger is?”

She shook her head. “I saw you on the ground, struggling for breath. Blood was everywhere. Dead people surrounded you and you were dying.”

“And you save me from this?”

“I will be the only one who can,” she said.

“So how do I avoid it? How can I stay safe if I don’t know what to expect?”

You dreamt of the serpent. You said the vision was so vivid and real that it felt like it happened to you.”

“That’s true,” she said.

“But this imminent danger you dreamed of tonight, it’s not clear to you?”

“What I saw in the dream doesn’t make sense to me. No, I cannot see it clearly. Yet.”

Mykal almost let out a long, loud sigh, but bit it back. It wasn’t her fault. Whether he believed her or not, she was here, trying. “Tell me the dream. Perhaps it will mean something to me.” This was the best he could come up with. Part of him wanted to invite her back to the house. Blodwyn could talk to her. He might get a better reading on whether she was truthful or not. If she was trying to con him, Blodwyn would know. There wouldn’t be much they could do about it, though. What would they do in any event? The only thing he knew for certain was that she had been beside the king at the execution, and that she had knights to escort her. Everything else was to be taken at her word. Or not.

“It is going to sound bizarre.”

Mykal raised his hands. “Nothing about the last few days has been normal. My mind is open to bizarre, trust me.”

She pursed her lips, as if contemplating his words. “I dreamt of a naked woman with bright...*green* hair. This powerful woman is going to come for you for help. What? You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

“I don’t know you well enough to say one way or the other,” Mykal said. Karyn knowing about Galatia either confirmed his suspicions that a major swindle was unfolding, or verified her ability. He didn’t like it. “Please, continue.”

“This woman needs your help. And you are going to agree to help her,” she said.

“Why does she need my help? And why would I agree to help a stranger with green hair?”

“I don’t know why she needs your help. I do know that you will help her because it is the right thing to do. More than just your life depends on helping this woman. Only a selfish person would refuse her. You are not a selfish man.”

“You don’t know me.”

“I do,” she replied with confidence. “I also know that you are going to leave your home and set out with this woman, and another man, and...”

“That’s where you are wrong. I am not going anywhere. I have this land and these animals to care for, and my grandfather to look after.”

“I am more than capable of looking after myself, thank you. Besides, if you go anywhere, I will be going with you.” Grandfather crossed his arms over his chest, and frowned.

“So you, me, some man, and a green haired woman.” He counted the people off on his fingers. “Where are we supposedly going?”

“Toward trouble.”

“Toward trouble? That’s kind of vague, don’t you think?”

“There will be forces against us at nearly every turn. The journey will be long and dangerous. Countless people will lose their lives. The deaths will be bloody and brutal. Those who accompany you, because there will eventually be many, will do so to protect you from harm. But steel and fire will only be able to accomplish so much. There are those who would oppose us while others will aid.” She spoke with her eyes closed, as if recounting words on a document. Or memories from one of her dreams. Karyn’s hands moved while she talked, animatedly punctuating each sentence with fingers.

“And I die on this journey?”

“If I am not beside you, you will. Last night I had *the* dream, for the hundredth time. Sometimes you die in the dream, and I am heartbroken when I awake. It is as you have said; I don’t know you well enough to mourn your death, especially one in a dream, no matter how true I know they be. Regardless, those mornings, I cry.” Even now her eyes brimmed with tears; one such fell down her cheek, streaking through grime from travel that thinly coated her exposed skin. “Other times when I dream of the journey, you live. When I awake *those* mornings, I am grateful.”

“Grateful? What’s different between the two dreams?”

“Whether I am with you, or not,” she said. “The journey you will undertake is of paramount importance. Not only to you, and not only Grey Ashland, but to

all of the old empire.”

This time Mykal shook his head. “Now I do question you. I clean out horse stalls, and slaughter pigs. I milk cows and pick eggs from under chickens. The most notable thing I’ve done with my life is take care of my grandfather. There is no journey in my future. I’m just one person, just me. My fate will not impact Grey Ashland, and will certainly have no bearing on the old empire.”

“Regardless your feelings, it does,” she said.

He did not care for her matter-of-fact tone. It suggested destiny, as if he had no say in his own future. That may have been the way things played out back when wizards...

Wizards. Galatia had claimed... He covered his face with his hands.

“What is it?” Karyn said.

“I will take you back to your knights. You need to return to the keep. The sun will rise soon. I don’t want the king to come looking for you. My grandfather and I can’t afford the trouble. We have little enough as it is,” he said.

“I did not bring knights with me this time.”

“I will take you back to the keep myself, then,” he said. He had little desire to return to the castle. He felt well, but needed to be home when the others rose. His grandfather would worry if he wasn’t here when morning dawned fully. A little worry was better than knights on horseback showing up, he supposed.

“I’m not returning to the castle,” she said.

“You aren’t?” She couldn’t go back to Evidanus. Mykal knew her family’s realm was in ruins. There was nothing to return home to, and no one there to welcome her. She certainly couldn’t stay here. The very notion was absurd. “Karyn—”

“I refuse to remain a ward of the king. I’m beyond the age expected to either marry one of the king’s son’s, or to have been returned to my own father. I have no desire to marry Prince Calah. King Nabal may like to think he still has a claim on my life, however he is mistaken. I would rather spend my life on the run being hunted by his knights than live imprisoned within his keep!”

“Does he treat you so poorly?”

“He expects me to stay. That is enough. I refuse to go back there. I need to

get beyond his reach. I need to be with you. I've been drawn here to protect you. It is the most powerful sensation I have ever felt. The past few days have made my bones shake to be away from you. You think *you* don't understand?!" she implored shaking her head, "I don't understand. I have a purpose here. With you. Regardless, it is too late. I've left a note with my family's seal informing the king it was time that I venture out on my own."

Mykal closed his eyes and bit his lip. He prayed that he'd misheard what she'd said. "Won't the king come looking for you?"

"It is likely," she said.

It was an honest and insightful answer, and it did absolutely nothing to eliminate Mykal's nauseated stomach. He placed a hand to his belly in a futile attempt to calm the roiling nervousness in his gut.

"What's to keep him from coming here?" Mykal waved an arm indicating the land behind him. "If the king suspects you were here, he may take all of this away from my family."

"Out of the entire old empire, why would the king think that I would come here? He doesn't even know you exist," she said.

He suspected she was trying to reassure by expressing the anonymity of this location, and felt no hurtful or demeaning intent. He lowered his eyes. "You met me by the Isthmian mere days ago."

"The king doesn't know that."

"Your escort would."

"They'd never tell."

"Their loyalty might be strong while you were living at the castle, but once you've run off and the king demands answers..."

Now she bit *her* lip. It was not a sight he wanted to see. It suggested she hadn't thought of that until now.

"My grandfather and I work very, very hard," he said. "This small piece of land, it's all we have."

"You will be leaving soon," she said. "And I mean to join you. I suppose even if you tell me I can't, I'll still follow."

"You've got it all wrong. I'm not going anywhere. You've built of me, within

your imagination, something I'm not. You see a grand future that does not exist for me. You're wrong. I don't know how else I explain in a way that you'll fully understand, but I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying here."

Karyn pulled her hood over her head. Eyes no longer illuminated, only darkness where her face had been. "You are going on a journey," she said. "Galatia will see to that. You will be leaving soon. Like it or not, I'm coming with you.

"We are connected. You need me, Mykal." Her voice trembled, again on the verge of tears.

She rose on tip-toes to kiss his cheek. He touched his still warm, damp skin, which tingled where her mouth had been, and wondered how he felt about having been kissed.

CHAPTER 10



Mykal wasn't surprised to see everyone awake and around the kitchen table when he opened the door. Blodwyn leaned back in a chair, balancing using the two back legs, and his staff. Grandfather sat with elbows on the table, fingers laced together in front of his face. The center-piece candle reflected from the sweat spotting his bald head. Galatia was the only one standing, still wrapped in Mykal's cloak. She leaned back against the counter, arms folded beneath her full chest.

"Everyone," Mykal said, acutely aware that all eyes were on him. He stepped aside. "This is Karyn. She is a ward of the king. She was one the princesses of Evidanus."

"Your father was King Aslom," Blodwyn said.

"That's right," she said. "Did you know of him?"

"I knew him, actually. When he was young; when he was just a prince." Blodwyn's eyes locked on Mykal's for a brief moment, before they fell away and looked at the ground. There was something in the look that sent a shiver through Mykal. At some point, he'd ask questions about his friend's relationship with Karyn's father.

Grandfather lowered his hands. His eyes looked like they were about to leap out of the sockets. "She's a what!?"

Blodwyn pushed his chair forward. "Come in, your Highness."

"Just Karyn, please." She didn't appear the least bit uncomfortable wearing only a nightgown while standing in the entrance of a livestock farmer's meager

dwelling.

Grandfather ran a folded linen over the top of his head, before bowing it slightly. “Your highness,” he said. His cheeks were flush. “Forgive my outburst.”

Mykal could not recall ever seeing his grandfather so unnerved. If able, he would have gladly provided answers, or a comforting word. Unfortunately, Mykal was equally flustered.

It suddenly didn’t seem so likely that Karyn and Galatia were working together on some elaborate scam. Even if they were, Blodwyn would expose them. He did not consider himself gullible, but after hearing Karyn’s story, and Galatia’s claim that he was a wizard, he wasn’t sure what to believe.

Grandfather also looked scared. This was another emotion Mykal had not witnessed before. Grandfather knew war. He’d served his king, and paid for his loyalty with one of his legs. The old man never talked about the war. Growing up Mykal asked for stories, but Grandfather never complied.

That wasn’t exactly true. He told Mykal stories, just not tales about the war. Mykal wanted to know how he lost his leg. As he got older, became a man, Mykal stopped asking. While he might never know the truth behind the loss, he knew it was painful enough for Grandfather not to want to share details.

Galatia eyed Karyn. It was like she was trying to figure something out about the young girl. The look made him uneasy. He didn’t know what exactly was going on. Ultimately, Mykal would protect his grandfather and Blodwyn to the death should danger present itself. The energy in the room was charged.

“We should make some tea,” Mykal said. “There is a lot we need to discuss.”

Galatia moved away from the counter, her arms dropped to her side. “Karyn Evidanus,” she said. Walking around the back of the table, behind Grandfather, Galatia stopped. “I knew your great-grandfather. He was a kind man, and was loved by his people.”

“You knew my great-grandfather?” At least ten years and seven, the king’s ward appeared suddenly much younger. Her eyes opened wide, eyebrows arched, and her smile grew bigger. Combined with the way she leaned forward, it was obvious how eager she was to hear more about her family. There was no denying the lost princess missed home.

Galatia nodded, smiling warmly. “And you, your Highness, you are special, aren’t you?”

“I’ve dreamt of you,” Karyn said. “Just as I’ve dreamt of Mykal.”

Blodwyn looked at Mykal, brows scrunched together above his eyes, silently asking, *What does that mean?*

“This is the young lady I met on the beach, Wyn,” Mykal said, the idea of making tea forgotten. He wouldn’t need the caffeine. There was no way he’d fall asleep again tonight.

“Two mysterious ladies showing up around the same time,” Blodwyn said, as if talking to himself. “I believe young Mykal is correct. We need someone to start at the beginning. There is something at work here. I feel it in my bones.”

“It’s what I’ve been telling you. A war is coming,” Galatia said tucking her hands into the arms of the cloak.

Blodwyn’s eyes narrowed. He ground his teeth together. “Forgive me for saying, Galatia, but you’ve not told us a thing, only eluded and inferred.”

“I’ve revealed that I am a wizard,” she said. “That Mykal is also a wizard. I was clear that sinister plans are in the works. Death, famine, and worse are about to erupt across the entire old empire. There is perhaps one chance to thwart the coming evil. One. Even then, I can’t be sure. We need to undertake a journey. Mykal and I. It is the only option any of us has.”

Mykal looked at Karyn. She was staring at him. He saw it in her eyes. They said, *See, I told you are going on a journey.*

“You look no more than, dare I say, thirty years and five? Six?”

“What of it?” Galatia neither denied, nor conceded to Blodwyn’s guess at her age.

“I just heard you tell the princess that you knew her great-grandfather.” He stood up. He held the staff loosely. Mykal knew from his training that it was in preparation. The loose grip gave Blodwyn more freedom to twirl and swing the staff, should it be necessary.

Silence fell over them. Only Galatia’s eyes moved, as if taking in the facial expressions of everyone in the room, processing them, and considering what to say next. “My story is too long to tell before morning. By noon, Mykal and I

must be on our way. By all rights we should have left days ago. I did not foresee the delay—”

“I did.” Karyn’s voice was like a sudden church bell gonging.

Galatia smiled. “Yes, I imagine you did.”

“Mykal’s isn’t going anywhere with you,” Grandfather said.

Galatia’s lips pressed tightly together, going from full, to flat like two lines drawn one over the other. “Mykal?”

Suddenly on the spot, Mykal grinned. “Galatia, thank you. I appreciate you treating me like a man, asking for my opinion. In that, my dear friend Wyn has a lot to learn.”

“Mykal!” Grandfather said.

“Sorry, sir. I was kidding.”

“Now is not the time.” Blodwyn had not moved. He was ready, though. For what, Mykal wasn’t sure.

“My apologies,” Mykal said. “Galatia, I cannot pack up and go with you this morning. I have no idea who you are. I don’t have any clue what’s going on. And as much as I believe that *you* believe I’m a wizard, that’s where I’m going to have to disagree with you. It’s also why I am saying no. No, I will not be going anywhere with you.”

“You’re a wizard. That’s why,” Karyn said. She sounded excited. Her mouth hung open in surprise. It was as if she’d had an epiphany.

Mykal focused on Galatia. He was worried. He had never seen Blodwyn fight, not for real. The inside of the house was tight, cramped, with five people there was hardly room to breathe. Part of him wanted the tension broken. Offering tea a second time seemed pointless. He wasn’t sure why calming everyone down was his responsibility.

Thankfully, Galatia spoke up. “King Grandeer was ten years old when he took to the throne, when there was still an empire,” she said. “His mother truly ruled. There was no denying that. No one complained, at first. The boy was simply too young. When Grandeer was ten years and three, he became more involved as king. I suspected it was still the dowager queen that reigned behind the scenes. I don’t think I was alone thinking that, nor do I think my perceptions

incorrect.”

Mykal knew from history that two hundred and six years ago Grandeer had been crowned king. His math skills had never been very good. Regardless, the woman standing near him did not appear anywhere near two centuries old. Thirty and six, as Blodwyn suggested, maybe. Two hundred and six was highly unlikely, however, who really knew what wizards were capable of? She was still talking, though. He would not interrupt her. Blodwyn gripped his staff more tightly, showing a slight relaxation in his readiness to do violence.

“The dowager queen threw a ball in honor of the king’s birthday. The king spent the evening dancing with princesses from each of the other kingdoms. You should have seen the days before the ball. The princesses entered the Grey Ashland realm in caravans led by warriors; heralded with trumpets. They rode stallions or saddled camels. Coats of arms displayed on banners hung from the trumpets that waved like flags, or were embossed on shields. It was amazing seeing all the different sigils, and colors, and people. One young princess was preceded by a parade of elephants, and giraffes. Each new arrival outshined the last, it seemed. It was not a spectacle I grew tired of watching. I was younger then, though, and impressionable,” Galatia said.

Two hundred years younger, Mykal thought, but didn’t say.

“Grandeer married a lovely princess when he was ten years and six. She was not from this or even bordering kingdoms. In fact, she wasn’t from the empire at all. She hailed from the north, a small realm beyond the Zenith Mountains.” Galatia fell silent. The expression of wonder was evident on her face. She seemed lost in the recollection.

Mykal made eye contact with Blodwyn, who only shrugged at him before returning his gaze to the stunning woman.

“Wizards had a place in society, in those days. Our own special place. For the most part, there weren’t today’s overwhelming prejudices towards and fears of magic. Though there will always be those who take ignorant and intolerant stance against anything they don’t understand, *or* cannot explain, *or* don’t possess themselves.”

Galatia behaved like a *normal* person, Mykal thought. Although their

interaction had been limited, he had not looked at her as simply a woman. It wasn't until she started talking, and explaining, that he *saw* her. The woman. Before, he had just seen the possible wizard, the extraordinary beauty with her green hair. If he was honest, she had scared him. She still did, somewhat. She had yet to do a single thing that even resembled magic in his presence, and yet the idea that she *could* kind of freaked him out. Did that make him guilty of the ignorance of those small-minded individuals just mentioned?

“We were not equal to blacksmiths and ironsmiths, mind you, but you could walk through the villages and see a wizard's shingle hung, pronouncing we also were open for business. But that was then. That was then.”

“What changed?” Karyn said.

“Wait. Wait, I'll be back!” Mykal ran out of the house, and toward the barn. The night was nearly over. The black sky became dark blue, and soft blue along the eastern horizon. Morning was on the way. In the barn was their small woodshop. It was where Mykal had crafted the chair with wheels for his grandfather. He picked up two chairs he'd recently made. While the bark was whittled away, and the wood sanded smooth, he had yet to apply lacquer. He carried them back to the house and set one next to Karyn. “Sit,” he said.

The other he offered to Galatia. She shook her head. “I'll stand for now.”

Blodwyn sat back down, as there were now chairs for everyone and any potential threat had been apparently dismissed.

After a moment, Mykal moved the chair he'd brought for Galatia away from the table and sat down, too. With everyone sitting close, he couldn't comfortably fit between them. He *could*, but if he tried, he'd squirm. Tight places made him uneasy. He found it difficult to breathe normally when confined. “I'm sorry,” he said. “Please. Continue.”

“What was I saying?” Galatia said.

“You said that wizards had their place. That that was then. And then everything changed,” Karyn said.

“Yes,” Galatia said. She hadn't moved, her hands still tucked within the sleeves of Mykal's cloak. “You see, not long after the birth of their third son, the Queen and her newest child fell ill. When the Grey Ashland curer informed the

king that both would die, the king had the curer beheaded. He sent for curers from across the empire. Many responded. He wanted his wife and son diagnosed again, treated *and* healed. No exceptions. He was searching for a curer to give him the answer he sought.

“King Grandeer was only twenty and one, then, but his mind had gone. Perhaps it was from worry over witnessing his wife and child’s suffering? Not two years before his royal mother had passed. It could be he feared being alone. He was willing to do anything to keep his wife alive, it seemed,” Galatia said.

“So how was the king going to make sure they were healed?” Mykal said.

“He only wanted good news. Promising news.”

“I could cut off my fingers and say that I was making a fist. That wouldn’t make it true. I’d still be without fingers, wouldn’t I? When it came time to pick up a tea mug, I wouldn’t be able to. If the curer lies and says the queen and the prince are better, but they’re not...”

“The king didn’t want the truth,” she said.

“I understand, but if they’re still sick, or die, the truth would confront the king like a slap in the face. You can’t deny the truth simply because you don’t want to believe the truth.”

“I’ve already stated that the king was beyond reason.”

Mykal couldn’t let the train of thought go. “And the curer responsible? Did he decapitate that one as well?”

“It wasn’t a curer who agreed to give the king the answers he wanted.” Galatia closed her eyes.

“If it wasn’t a curer,” Karyn said, “then who did?”

Mykal knew the answer.

Galatia stared at Mykal.

Mykal said, “It was a wizard.”

CHAPTER 11



“*T*he king moved his son into the chambers he shared with his queen. The two beds were side by side. At the window, the heavy red drapes remained closed at all times. Sunlight was dangerous to her and her child. It hurt their eyes and blistered their skin. It had nothing to do with the sun’s heat. It was as if the rays themselves were cursed.” Galatia walked around the table while she spoke. The others sat quietly, hanging on her every word. The rooster out back had crowed nearly an hour ago. Soon, sunlight would stream through the cabin’s eastern window. Birds chirped.

“A wizard journeyed across the Isthmian from the Osiris Realm, believing they could help the king using practiced healing magic to cure both queen and prince. Knights met the ship by the Delta Cove, to provide the young wizard a proper escort,” she said. “The king had chambers inside the castle for the wizard, but there wasn’t time for unpacking. Word spread quickly that the Grey Ashland curer was headless, as were two others who had traveled from other lands.”

“Why would the wizard risk their life? Weren’t they worried about the noose?” Karyn said.

Mykal looked over at Blodwyn. He knew his teacher was also listening intently, both weighing the truth, and as enthralled in the telling as Karyn.

Grandfather also went long periods of time without even blinking. He looked enchanted. There were a few moments where Mykal wanted to fetch a looking glass from his bedchamber and hold it under his grandfather’s nose making sure the old man was still breathing. Just before he acted on the impulse, though,

Grandfather would blink.

Sunlight entered the room. The timing couldn't have been better planned. The large, lone candle had finally burned out, its melted remains looking like the open rinds of peeled fruit. As the wax cooled and hardened it coated its iron stand and center of the table in a messy pattern resembling a starfish.

“That wizard believed they could actually help the king. This arrogance led only to death, and heartache. When the queen and the king's son died a night after the wizard's arrival, one would think the entire kingdom was under attack. Because the king would not accept the truth, that their illnesses were terminal, magic was blamed for the prince's death. The king's knights stormed into the bedchamber which housed the wizard and delivered them to the dungeon's master deep below the keep.” Her lower lip quivered, her eyes lowered, and her steps around the table slowed.

Blodwyn set the staff between his legs, and held it with both hands. He pressed his chin against the wood. “If you don't mind my saying,” he said, and without waiting for permission continued, “you know a lot about the trials of this young wizard. I understand how history is passed from generation to generation, and done so with compelling accuracy. Still, the amount of detail you're sharing is profound.”

Mykal shared similar thoughts, but had been less inclined to speak them aloud.

Galatia never made eye contact with Blodwyn. “King Grandeer wanted me dead. Tortured first, then killed slowly. But, he was afraid that if he spent too much time making me suffer I'd use magic to free myself, and curse his kingdom. He didn't want to listen to anything I said. He was beyond distraught. The death of his son snapped the already-frayed remnants of his sanity. This was compounded by the physical toll long days and nights sleepless with worry for his family. No matter what I said, all he desired was my torment and eventual death.”

“How did you escape?” It was Grandfather who spoke. His palms flat on the table, his knuckles white. “If the king wanted you dead, and he had you in the dungeons, you must have used some powerful magic to escape.”

Mykal thought Grandfather's tone was accusatory. The law made the use, and even the study of magic, illegal. Although, this was prior to the laws against sorcery had been set in place. Grandfather followed the letter of the law, whether he agreed or not. He always said it wasn't his place to question decisions made by his king. It was the difference between being a loyal subject, and a rebel.

Though Mykal knew that Grandfather had suffered loss, he somehow held it together and pushed forward, never looking back or dwelling on past travesties.

Mykal had never known his grandmother. She'd died before his birth. He knew from stories that she'd been a strong, fearless woman. A cut on her leg left unattended became infected. A red line traced its way up her thigh, across her belly, and stopped at her heart. Grandfather didn't know about the infection until it was too late.

"I didn't use magic to escape the dungeons," Galatia said.

Mykal watched as she stopped by the counter where the bucket for cleaning dirty dishes sat. She stood with her back to everyone. Her hands gripped the counter while she looked through the window.

The window faced the east. Through the glass was the corral where the horses were kept. To the side was the biggest of three barns. On the right were two smaller barns, and a chicken coop. The pastures stretched further back, behind the corral and barns. The sun rising in the east let rays play over the farm. The view always calmed Mykal.

Mykal thought magic was the sun revolving around the old empire. He often wondered if the sun lost some of its power passing under the known lands, and regained whatever had been lost as it climbed up and across the sky before dropping again in the west. "If you didn't use magic..." Mykal said.

"I lied," Galatia said. "It's not something I'm proud of having done. I told him I now knew what was wrong. I was sorry about his son, but was confident I could save the queen. I couldn't, of course. He didn't know that. Like I've said all along, he was not a rational man. He was broken. There were so many shattered pieces, I knew he'd never mend. I played him, used his emotions and his lack of reason against him. He was desperate to latch onto any scrap of hope. There were no other options available to him, not any longer. It pained me to use

his love for the queen against him, but what other choice did I have? Lying was the only avenue left open to me. That, and it was better than the alternative.”

“The alternative?” Blodwyn said.

“Using magic, of course.”

Karyn shook her head. “I don’t understand.”

Galatia turned around and leaned her backside against the counter, tears in her eyes. This two-hundred-year-old story hadn’t gotten any easier for her to relate, if she’d ever done so before. There was a saying: time heals all wounds. Seeing her tears, Mykal had little confidence in the old adage. It didn’t seem true at all – certainly not in this instance. Two hundred years had passed, after all.

“In Grey Ashland there were dozens of magicians—those who practice a specific, learned skill, always trying to perfect it, but no more than a dozen full wizards, or thereabouts,” Galatia said. “It is rare, but true wizards are born. They are almost always the result of a union in which at least one parent is a true wizard. I say almost, because more often than not children born within such a union, the child was powerless when it came to sorcery. Although uncommon, once in a while it does happen.”

“Am I a magician?” Karyn said.

“I’m not sure what you are yet, dear,” Galatia said. “You seem an oddity. I don’t mean that as an insult. You don’t practice seeing. It just comes to you. It makes me believe you are not a magician. You are not a wizard; that I know with certainty. Only three wizards have been born the last thirty and seven years, at least here in the old empire.”

“I don’t understand how you can be the age you state and yet, appear so youthful still? If I am a wizard like you claim, will I age?” Mykal looked at the backs of his hands, as if seeking the answer on sun-tanned skin.

Galatia smiled. “We are not immortal. Time catches up with us, eventually. You will begin to notice the difference when you cross into your twenties. Others will look, feel, and age normally. The clock inside you will seem to have stopped. You *will* age. It simply will not happen as quickly.”

“You don’t know how many wizards there were?” Blodwyn arched an eyebrow, as if seriously doubting the vague figure.

“There were twelve,” Galatia said. “Including me. Just twelve.”

“But you said you came *to* Grey Ashland,” Karyn said.

“There may be more in other lands, beyond Rye’s Empire, in fact there has to be. There could be hundreds. I didn’t know anyone beyond. There were only twelve across *this* empire, when there had been an empire,” she said. “When king Gandeer’s son died, and the king wanted me put to death, I realized what damage I had done. I was afraid, but when I say that, I don’t mean just for my own safety. I knew that I’d brought the king’s wrath down on all wizards.”

“Were you able to save the queen?” Mykal said.

“She never tried,” Blodwyn said, getting to his feet. He tapped his finger against his chin, thinking something through. “Once the king accepted the claim she could save the queen, he told the dungeon guards to bring her back up to his bedchamber.”

“I escaped their clutches. It hadn’t been easy. The king was looking for me. He had knights at the gates, and patrolling the kingdom. I used an enchantment to cloak my appearance. It was a powerful spell because it affected anyone who looked on me. Weak from casting such a spell, I managed to sneak out of the keep and made my way back to the cove where my ship was docked. The king launched his crusade against all magicians and wizards immediately after the queen’s passing. There were no trials. Known magicians were executed on sight. Terror ensnared the entire empire. Anyone accused of magic was murdered. People grew paranoid. It became an easy way for some to settle disputes or eliminate rivals. They simply needed to point a finger. Hundreds perished during the crusade. Innocent people.” Galatia made no attempt to hide her tears. They streamed down her face; dripped from the sides of her chin. “I cursed the wizards in my pride. Never had I imagined the devastation that I, and I alone, brought down on the empire.”

Galatian ran the back of her hand under nose, and sniffled.

Mykal found a clean cloth and offered it.

Karyn said, “Did the king’s crusade have something to do with the collapse of Henry Rye?”

Mykal recognized the emperor’s name. He knew little about him, though. It

had been almost two centuries since the lands were united under the emperor.

“It did. And it is also why I am here, why I’ve now returned,” Galatia said. “I have spent far too long talking. We need to start moving, Mykal. It is important that you come with me.”

Blodwyn shook his head. “You *have* spent a lot of time talking. The history lesson has been fascinating, simply fascinating. What you have failed to do, Ms. Galatia, is provide a single answer to any of our pressing questions.”

Galatia glared at Mykal’s teacher. “I’ve been open and honest. I have shared with you a story that I’ve only shared with the other wizards.”

“Where are they now?” Blodwyn asked. “The other wizards?”

“Dead. All but three, as I have related,” she said.

“And the ones that are not dead?” Blodwyn sighed. “We get it. You’re uncomfortable disclosing too many facts. Or are unable to reveal the whole truth. But if every question asked is answered with misleading, or incomplete, or plain mysterious answers, we’re done. We are not here to play games. It is you who came to us for help. Not the other way around.”

“I came to him for help.” Galatia pointed at Mykal.

Blodwyn threw his hands in the air.

Galatia ignored the theatrics. “Mykal, please pack some things. You don’t want to see bad things happen to Grey Ashland. How will you be able to live with yourself knowing you could have done something to save so many innocent lives, but chose to do nothing instead? If you do not help me, destruction is all you will be able to count on. You’re a good man, Mykal. I know this. I need you to do the right thing.”

“Ridiculous!” Blodwyn jumped to his feet and pounded the base of his staff on the cabin’s planks. It made a sharp crack like the lash of whip snapping in air. “This family has been kind to you, *stranger*. They’ve brought you into their home for days, fed you, clothed you, and you insult them with guilt? Nothing you’ve said has been proven. You provide nothing specific other than the need to venture out on some mysterious journey to save the world. Mykal has family, and responsibility here. This is his home.”

Galatia’s left arm shot out toward Blodwyn. He flew backwards and smashed

into the wall. Plaster cracked, and crumbled from the impact. He collapsed to the floor.

CHAPTER 12



“*W*hat have you done?” Mykal dropped to his knees beside Blodwyn. It was so surreal seeing magic used. He never expected Galatia to go crazy. Somehow she’d thrown Blodwyn into the wall while standing across the room from him, the table between them, and without ever laying a finger on him. Mykal pushed hair out of Blodwyn’s face and lowered his head, putting his ear to Blodwyn’s mouth and listened for breathing. “He’s alive.”

Galatia stood like a statue. “Of course he’s alive.”

Blodwyn groaned.

“He left me no choice. He wanted proof I’m a wizard. There is his proof,” she said with anger. She cupped her hands together. A ball of blue flames roiled in her palms. “Do you require more?”

“She *is* a wizard,” Karyn said. The declaration obvious, and therefore not necessarily helpful.

Mykal might have harbored doubts. Those were now crushed. “Leave him alone. He was just looking out for me. He spoke truly. You haven’t told us anything. We don’t know why you’re here. We don’t know where you want to lead me. You keep spewing off about the possibilities of countless deaths and immeasurable destruction to Grey Ashland, but you continually fail to explain the whos, the whys and the hows.”

“I don’t have all of those answers!”

“Tell us what you do have. Tell us what you know,” Mykal said. He sat in

front of Blodwyn, protecting him from any further magical attacks. She wasn't alone in her anger. His grew like fire on wood, its heat rising to his head. He could feel how flushed his face had become.

"That's what I've been trying to do. You can't understand what's coming, if you don't understand what's happened."

"So you do know what's coming then?"

"I have an idea. I'm doing my best to explain," she said.

"You're not succeeding," he said, speaking softly. Losing his temper wasn't helping the situation. It did nothing for Blodwyn. Galatia had proven how dangerous she could be. He needed the tension diffused. He would speak his own truth calmly. "I don't want to go with you. In fact, I want you to leave."

"Mykal," Karyn warned.

"Perhaps you should go, too. The king will come looking for you. There's enough trouble inside my grandfather's house to get all of us hung," he said.

Karyn plead, "But, Mykal—"

"Go. Both of you. Please, just leave."

Grandfather sat silent, as if unsure what to do next, and unsure if there were anything he *could* do. Karyn possessed magic, and Galatia demonstrated power only a wizard could control. He was old and confined to a chair with wheels. Mykal felt miserable, knowing that there had been a time when nothing would have given his grandfather pause. Age, however, weathered away more than bone, and youth. It also took its toll of courage, and for that matter, pride. "I want you out of my grandfather's house, and I will not ask again!"

Karyn pushed her chair back from the table, the legs scraping across the floor. She stood and used her hands to smooth the front of her nightgown.

Mykal dropped his eyes. He pretended to be concentrating on Blodwyn's well-being. He couldn't look either woman in the eye. Hospitality had been instilled in him by his grandfather since he'd been a child. They didn't receive many visitors. Throwing people out of their home went against everything grandfather taught him.

Grandfather wasn't agreeing with Mykal, he did not speak at all, but most of all he didn't object. You backed family. Right or wrong, if you are able to count

on only one person to take your side, it should unquestionably be someone with whom you share blood.

Blodwyn wasn't dead. Galatia hadn't killed him. He had no idea what he'd witnessed. How could he kick out the only person who might be able to explain everything, even if she might also be the cause of it all?

"Wait. Just wait," Mykal said, changing his mind. He held up both hands. "Don't go anywhere. I'll meet you outside."

"IS HE ALRIGHT?" Karyn sat next to Galatia on the porch bench.

Mykal said, "Yes, he's awake. I moved him to my bed. He's lying down."

"I'm sorry I had to do that," Galatia said.

"You didn't have to hurt him to make your point. You could have just done that blue fireball thing. It alone convinced me." Mykal's anger was focused on her. This wizard had disrupted the peace and solitude of life as he'd always known it. He liked things the way they were. He didn't mind taking care of the animals, and spending long days repairing the wood fence around the property. Nothing good could come from her appearance.

"I'm sorry, too," Karyn said.

He laughed.

"What's so funny?" she said.

"Any other day, if I brought someone like you into the house, there would have been non-stop questions."

"Someone like me? What is that supposed to mean?" she said.

"You're the king's ward, a princess. You slipped away from the keep and came here. It won't be long before your absence is noticed. The king is going to send at least a platoon in search of you. We both know that's true. The only reason I brought you inside was because I suspected something fishy was taking place."

"Fishy?" she said.

"Between the two of you. A con. A gimmick. I couldn't figure out what, but

knew something wasn't right," he said. "Your being at my house is not being discussed because, as weird as it is having you in our home, your visit is overshadowed by Galatia the wizard from who knows where. This is crazy. All of it is nuts."

"What you're feeling, that sense of unease, Mykal, is part of what I've been trying to explain," Galatia said, standing.

He held up a hand. "Please. Just sit back down."

"We need to go." Galatia said. "We may have days. If we're lucky, weeks. Even if we have months, it will not be enough time to fully prepare."

"Stop. Just stop it. I have no clue what you're talking about. I don't want you flinging me off the porch to make a point. So, do me a favor and stop." She sat down. Mykal faced her. "I want know what happened to the other wizards? I mean, where have you been for two centuries?"

"I can answer those questions."

"No. I want answers. Real answers. The stories, they're great. It's like Blodwyn was trying to say before you zapped him, though. You haven't really told us a thing."

"I'll give you all of the answers."

"I want to know exactly what it is you think I'm capable of doing? What proof do you have that I'm like you, that I'm a wizard?" Mykal said. He wanted to shout, and express his anger. Galatia simply sat next to Karyn, and had agreed to answer all of his questions, so he took a deep breath and did his best to relax.

Resolved, he said, "Before you do so, I'm going back inside to check on Wyn. When I come back out, be ready. Because I'm not going to stop asking questions until I believe that you've been completely upfront and honest with me. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Okay, good." He stared at them for a moment, knowing other than his size, he didn't intimidate them. There wasn't a threatening bone in his body. He went back into the house, and shut the door.

Thoughts flooded his mind. He couldn't begin to sort them out. There was no reason to trust Galatia, or Karyn. They had both recently appeared in his life,

and they both expected him to accept some fantastical truth. None of it made sense. The only reason he'd not dismissed them and their notions was because Blodwyn hadn't dismissed them, and although Grandfather was frightened, he wasn't the one who asked everyone to leave.

Those two facts are what concerned him most.

He had the feeling that everyone knew something, even if only a piece of the puzzle, except him. He intended that to change.

"How is he?" Mykal asked his grandfather.

"I'm fine." It was Blodwyn who replied. He was still on the bed, one hand pressed against his forehead. "I can't believe she did that."

"I think she felt threatened," Mykal said, having no idea why he was defending the wizard's actions. "Wyn, what's going on?"

CHAPTER 13



“We’re going to try this one more time,” Mykal said, taking control of the situation. Blodwyn resigned to that fact. They were outside, on the porch. It was not a large porch so they all sat close together.

The morning was well underway. The sun up, waging a currently silent battle against dark clouds threatening to cover blue skies. The odor of manure filled the air. Mykal knew chores needed doing. The cows would be in pain, waiting for him to milk them. There were eggs to collect from the coop. All the animals would be hungry. And then there was the stretch of fence along the south that remained in dire need of repair. And yet, all of that would have to wait. Getting things done had been put on hold because sitting on the porch was a wizard, and some kind of magician who could see the future.

“The first thing I want you to do, before we go any further, is to prove that I am a wizard.” Mykal folded his arms across his chest. Ultimately, everything hinged on Galatia proving he was a wizard, or a magician, or that he possessed any kind of power at all. Because if he didn’t, if she couldn’t prove it, then everything else didn’t matter. It meant she had the wrong person. She could move on.

Galatia pursed her lips. “How old are you, Mykal?”

“I’m ten years and seven,” he said.

“And what happened to your mother?”

Mykal’s eyes went to Grandfather. He looked uncomfortable. Mykal could tell that it had little to do with the cushion on the chair, or the blanket over his

legs in the heat. It was the piece of the puzzle he held onto. Did he know something about his mother that he had not disclosed?

“She disappeared. She was kidnapped by bandits. It wasn’t long after I was born,” he said. “I don’t remember her.”

“You were two,” Grandfather said.

“I was two.” Mykal didn’t even know what she looked like. Grandfather said that he was a perfect image of both his parents. It only helped some. “My father went after them, promising he’d find her and bring her back home. I never saw either of them again.”

Blodwyn nodded his head, but was looking at the slats on the porch.

“They are not dead. And your mother wasn’t abducted,” Galatia said.

Mykal anger surged once more. “You can’t do that! You can’t come here and say something like that!”

Blodwyn jumped to his feet and wrapped an arm across Mykal’s chest, restraining him. “Let her finish, Mykal. There’s more to the story.”

It was as if he’d been sucker punched. The air escaped his lungs. He couldn’t breathe. He took a step back, away from Blodwyn and off the porch. “What do you know about my parents, Wyn? What do you know?”

Blodwyn cocked his head to the side, looking over at Galatia. She nodded.

“What are you not telling me?” Mykal said.

The sun was quickly losing the war. The storm clouds spread like a disease covering more and more of the sky. It had started over the Isthmian, but more clusters appeared elsewhere.

“When your mother was pregnant, she called for me,” he said. “I told your grandfather the other night. My job was to teach you to defend yourself. The same as I taught your mother to defend herself. It’s what I do.”

“What are you, then? A common sellsword?”

“Mykal!” Grandfather’s voice was as hard as it had been when he’d been scolded as a child. It was still weighted with the same impact. But Mykal refused to apologize.

“I’m not unlike a sellsword.” He stepped off the porch, looked up at the darkening sky. “I’m also a friend. I was your mother’s friend, and I’m your

friend. I've dedicated my life to protecting your family."

"And yet, my mother and father are gone."

"Your mother wasn't abducted, like Galatia said."

"So where is she? What happened to her?"

"The supposed bandits that came to the house were escorts. Friends of mine. I'd sent them to get Anna out of the kingdom." Blodwyn leaned his weight on his staff, and bounced lightly on the balls of his feet. "It was an easy decision to make. I would do it again. The tough part was not telling your father. That she made me promise I would not do."

"My mother made you promise to steal her away from her family and not tell anyone she was safe?" Mykal demanded, his words saturated with venom.

"She did."

Mykal shook his head. His eyes were closed. When he stopped he had to stretch out his arms. His legs wobbled until he locked his knees. It was possible the world was trembling. It wasn't a common phenomenon, but it did happen. "She wouldn't just leave me."

"It was to save you. You, and your father."

"My father's gone," Mykal said.

"She didn't know he was going to come after her," Blodwyn said.

"Of course he went after her. He thought she'd been kidnapped. He saddled a horse the minute he'd found out she was gone, and rode after them." It was Grandfather who shouted. His hands were balled into fists. His one foot was off the chair and planted flat on the porch, as if he were about to leap out of his chair and lunge at Blodwyn.

"King Nabal was looking for Anna. Someone told the Watch she used magic. They were coming for her," Blodwyn said, and shrugged, as if the few statements explained everything.

"That's crazy. If the Watch showed up they'd realize the accusations were false, and they'd leave her alone. We'd *still* be a family. I'd have my parents *still*. I wouldn't have been an orphan all these years."

Blodwyn set a hand on Mykal's shoulder.

Mykal shrugged it off. "Don't."

“The truth is, Mykal, Anna, your mother, is a wizard.”

“That’s not the truth.”

“It is,” Blodwyn said. “And if the Watch caught her, she’d have been put to death. Worse, she knew you’d have been killed as well.”

“What, because I’m a wizard? I was two!” Mykal said. “If any of this is true, then it means she was afraid she might die, so she ran. She abandoned me. That’s not a mother.”

“She must have known you were a wizard, Mykal. Your mother left to protect you. She left because she loved you. Not to get away from you. Not to save her own life. She led the Watch away from your father’s ranch. Not to it.”

“So where is she?” Mykal said.

Blodwyn shook his head. “I told them to never tell me where they were taking her. I didn’t want to know. That could have been just as dangerous.”

A silence fell over them. Not even birds chirped. The only sound heard was the ever growing wind. Branches on the lone tree outside Mykal’s window rustled and swayed. Another storm was coming. Why did rain even matter. “I’m not a wizard.”

“KING GRANDEER’S WATCH WERE BRUTAL,” Galatia said. “They’d run steel through your spine and out of your chest, before bothering to ask if they were slaughtering the right person. Thousands of innocent people were murdered during their hunt for magic users.”

“You said there were only twelve wizards in the empire,” Karyn said.

“Twelve, yes. And possibly as many as a hundred and fifty magicians,” Galatia said. She sat beside Karyn on the bench, knees pressed together. “The Watch had the world to themselves. There was no one to oversee their tirades. They pillaged and raped and murdered, all in honor of their king. Who could stop them? Who was the king more likely to believe?”

Karyn said, “My knowledge of magic is limited. I only know what I’ve heard, or read of in books. It seems to me that even with just twelve wizards you

could have, if not defeated the king, the emperor, you most certainly could have given them a fight that would have been legendary. And yet, I've never heard of a legend like it."

"She's right. Couldn't the wizards stop them?" Grandfather said. He had settled down. Mykal knelt beside him. That seemed to help.

"The kind of magic needed to stop a bloodthirsty army is more than I possessed alone. Together we may have been able to stand against them. There were some that fought, met the armies head on. That was part of the problem. It happened fast. Too fast. We are not violent people. We don't sit around and debate war strategies. However, that was exactly what needed doing. The people feared us even more than they already had and joined in of their own accord to help the king in seeking us out, and participating in our destruction. It became an ambush. There was no one we could truly trust. The king placed prices on our heads. Word spread about rewards to be paid for our capture, dead or alive. We were on the defense, on the run, right from the beginning.

"The king already convinced everyone I was responsible for the death of the queen and their child. I suppose in a way it's true. But I didn't harm them. I just couldn't heal them. It didn't take long for the king to gain support from the emperor. Besides the bounty, this was when the king formed and trained his elite and called them The Watch. Their sole purpose was to seek and destroy magic. Wizards, street magicians, relics, books, charms ... anything that could be used for sorcery. The fear and terror spawned from the king's madness spread like a plague. It seemed like everyone was infected. People turned against one another. No place was safe." She lowered her head.

"What did you do?" Mykal said. He set his anger aside. For whatever reason they'd been drawn together. Sooner or later they would get to the bottom of things. Learning the truth might not make things easier, but at least he would be better equipped to start dealing with reality. Everything buried would be unearthed. He took some solace in that.

"Of the twelve wizards within the empire, there were just four of us left. I was notified by raven that we were to meet at the library in the ancient ruins on the east side of the Isthmian past the Rames Mountains and across the Balefire

River. The journey took several months. I felt as if the Watch were close behind the whole way. Not only did I fear for my life, but worried I was leading the Watch right to them.

“Before finally reaching the ruins, I made certain one last time that I wasn’t followed before going any further. Confident I was alone; I continued on to meet with the others. Last to arrive, I found that many of the decisions on what course of action to take had been determined.” Galatia looked beyond the porch, toward the dirt road that led to Nabal’s castle. She grew quiet then, for a while. No one urged her to speak. In silence, everyone waited. Galatia tried to smile. “The plan was quite simple, really. First, we swore never to talk about the plan. Even now, it is difficult for me to break that rule.”

Mykal began to stand then stopped. He was prepared to remind her of his demand to tell them everything, but changed his mind. He waited patiently, giving her a chance to first volunteer the information.

“We were to go into hiding,” she said. “No one would know where the other hid. That way, should one of us get caught, we could never betray any of the others. Except...”

“Except what?” Blodwyn said.

“There was one way to call everyone, should the need arise to meet again. And that is why I am here, Mykal. I have a need to call the four wizards. We can remain hiding no longer,” Galatia said.

“Why? I don’t understand,” he said.

“The other wizards blamed me for everything that happened. They were a little shocked when I appeared at the ruins. To say they weren’t happy to see me would be an understatement,” she said.

If everything she said was true, she might be the sole reason for the dark times wizards faced. “You can call the wizards?”

“I can. You are the only other wizard in the old empire that I know.” She held up a finger. “Let me rephrase that. You are the only wizard in the old empire that I trust. I am here to get you first. Together we will call the other three. We need to do this before King Cordillera does.”

“You trust me,” Mykal said. “You don’t even know me! Wait, hold on. You

mean there are other wizards here? In Grey Ashland? Karyn? Is she the other one? You don't trust her?"

"Slow down," Galatia said. "Karyn has magic. She is an Unfamiliar."

Karyn said, "Unfamiliar?"

"You can see things. You see the future in dreams. No one taught you to do this. It is natural for you. You just never knew it was magic. Thankfully, you knew enough not to share your ability with anyone else," Galatia said.

"How do you know I haven't told anyone?"

"Because, dear," she said. "You're still alive."

"Who is the other?" Mykal still suspected Blodwyn, but kept his guess to himself.

"In the Osiris Realm, King Cordillera does not view magic and sorcery as evil. Just the opposite. From what I've been able to learn, he wishes he had been born a wizard, or that he had magic. The best he can do is mild potions and spells recorded by scribes and found in books written by the ancients. Left wanting more, he tracked down an heir to one of the twelve. Her name is Ida. She lives inside his castle, and is never far from the king. I believe he considers himself something of an apprentice." She laughed mockingly, a clear insult directed at the king of the east. "Ida is why I've come out of hiding," Galatia said. "King Cordillera is plotting a takeover. No longer content with his stake in Osiris alone, he plans on attacking Grey Ashland, rebuilding Castle Deep, and becoming the new emperor."

"There have been wars in the past," Blodwyn said.

"Yes. Where men in armor fought one another with honor and binding rules of warfare. I've seen enemies line up against each other and then charge, bloody battles fought on grassy plains. Green stalks like seaweed beneath pools of blood always all that remained. Brave warriors, without doubt. It seems ridiculous to me, but I have no proper military training. King Cordillera intends to use magic to accomplish his goals. The opposition will never know what is coming."

Blodwyn said, "You'd indicated with twelve wizards there wasn't enough magic to win a war against king's steel. What's changed?"

"You misunderstood. King Grandeer had already launched his attack. There

wasn't time to prepare. We didn't plan. We never acted in concert; each having different ideas about what course of action to take until it was too late. We were forced to always react. King Cordillera is using Ida to plan his attacks carefully, using magic as his main weapon," Galatia said. "And once he has what he's looking for, there will be no stopping him."

"And what is he looking for?" Karyn said.

Galatia said, "Me. The other three wizards. And Mykal. King Cordillera won't kill him; he will enslave him."

CHAPTER 14



The morning had passed quickly. The sky aggressively becoming darker and darker. Mykal forgot about neglected chores until his stomach rumbled. While everyone went inside, Mykal accomplished a few tasks. From the coop he gathered two dozen fresh eggs before heading to the barn. When the cows saw him they mooed loudly, eager to be milked.

In the kitchen, Mykal poured fresh milk for everyone, set a saucer in front of each person and filled it with virgin olive oil. It was a luxury, the oil. Fresh churned butter from cow's milk was the price. Merchants loved Grandfather's butter. He added garlic to it. Not too much, but just enough to give the butter special taste. The recipe was perfected by him. Other farmers often tried imitating it, but with little success. He seasoned the oil with herbs and some spices from the garden. He broke the few loaves of bread they had into hunks. "Dip these in the oil while I scramble up some eggs," he said.

They ate in silence. Mykal was the last to sit down and eat, the others having already finished. He couldn't hide his anxiousness to get back to Galatia's story. Her words painted a picture. Everything she said had begun to make sense. There was no way he could understand every detail, but he finally felt that he was hearing the truth.

Leaving the plates on the table, Mykal urged Galatia to continue.

"Where was I?" she said.

"Kind Cordillera is using Ida in his plan to become emperor," Karyn said.

"It's more complicated than that," Galatia said. "He doesn't want to go to

war with only one wizard on his side. He wants all of us.”

“Like me?” Mykal said.

“Yes. He knows of you. So far, he has not been successful in finding you. Trust me, if he had you, he would persuade you to fight on his side.”

Mykal laughed. “I would never fight for such a man.”

“Even if he captured your grandfather and was keeping him locked away in a dungeon?” Galatia said.

Mykal stared at his grandfather. “I’d never let that happen.”

“You’re not talking about Mykal, though, are you?” Blodwyn said.

She shook her head. “No. I’m not. Mykal hasn’t had any training. He doesn’t even know he’s a wizard. He has not unleashed more than a trace amount of magic. Cordillera wants someone who can wield power like a knight swinging a sword. He wants a wizard than can inflict damage, and instill fear.”

“He knows about you and the other three wizards,” Blodwyn said.

“Yes. And right now, Ida is trying to figure out how to call us all together.”

Thunder boomed and rain fell fast and hard rattling on the dwelling’s tin roof. Lightning flashed in the blackness lighting the kitchen as bright as if the sun sat in the room with them, but lasted only a fraction of a moment.

“Get more candles, Mykal,” Grandfather said.

Lit candles were placed around the room, and their flames danced on the end of wicks.

“Where were you, Galatia? When all of this was going on, all of these elaborate plans being made... where were you?” Blodwyn asked the green-haired beauty. Mykal detected blatant suspicion, barely masked with curiosity.

“In hiding,” she said. “Where I was is unimportant. What *is* important, is that I remained so. It was when I felt a sorceress stirring the sea a few nights ago that I knew something was amiss. I tapped into the magic and traced the source back to a strong wizard.”

“You can do that?” Mykal asked.

Galatian nodded, smiling. “I can. And I did. It’s a good thing, too. I didn’t let myself get too close. I didn’t want the sorceress knowing that I was listening to her thoughts. There was a lot going on in her mind. She is a torn and angry

women, but not broken. I saw that she and the king planned to attack the surrounding kingdoms. He aspires to be the next emperor, is what she was thinking, and was going to make her his advisor and second in command. Before she could catch me eavesdropping I backed off, certain I knew enough to know it was time to come out of hiding. Only this time, I don't plan on doing the fighting alone, or on running away.

"It's why I keep repeating that I don't know how much time we have. It's why I keep desperately trying to get Mykal to come and help me call the other three wizards. If King Cordillera can't convince them to help him, I am certain that he will kill them to prevent their potential opposition to his plans. They are my family. They are vulnerable. If they are called to meet, they will assume it is legitimate and show up. They aren't fools who would walk blindly into any such meeting, but King Cordillera does not play fair. He'll have a trap set and waiting. Before they even know what is happening, he'll have sprung it. I can't let that happen. We have to call the other three first."

Mykal set his fingertips on the edge of the table drumming them rhythmically. "I just want to make sure I have this right. You need me to go with you to call the wizards? There are three more wizards out there as old as you?"

"Excuse me?" Galatia arched an eyebrow.

"I don't mean old. I meant to say, there are three other wizards out there who were alive back when Emperor Rye ruled the lands?"

"Not that much better," Blodwyn muttered, smiling.

Karyn drove an elbow into his ribs. "I think what Mykal meant to say—"

Galatia dismissed their discomfort with a radiant smile. "I know what he means. I was attempting to lighten the mood. It was starting to feel as gloomy in here as it is outside. The answer is yes."

"But you don't know where they're hiding?" Mykal said.

"The only thing I can surmise is that they are not anywhere in the old empire. If they were, I would have known. I think..." she stopped.

"You think what?" Blodwyn asked.

"It's nothing," Galatia said.

"You think you're the only wizard to have stayed in the old empire,"

Blodwyn said. It wasn't a question. It was like he knew the answer.

"Of our group from those days?" She nodded. "Yes."

"But where? How could you have stayed undetected for so long? Surely the king's Watch checked under every rock and up every tree," Mykal said. Galatia had mentioned only three new wizards had been born. He assumed he was one of the three, his mother the other, and this *Ida* was the third.

"I am certain that they did," Galatia said.

Blodwyn grunted. The chair he sat on creaked under his shifting weight. "You weren't up a tree, or under a rock, though, were you?"

"I was not."

"Plenty of places to hide in the mountains. There are the Zenith, the Muye, the Rames, and the Fjord Range," Karyn said.

"You, young lady, know your geography," Blodwyn said. "The learning one receives living with a king has its advantages. Nicely done."

Karyn smiled, pleased by the compliment. "Thank you."

"She wasn't in the mountains though, were you, Galatia?"

"I was not, no," she said.

"It's the hair." Blodwyn snapped his fingers. "I couldn't put my finger on it before. I just knew it had to do with the hair." Blodwyn wore a smile like a man who'd fasted for weeks and was finally sitting down to a steak dinner, with unlimited ale to keep his mug full. "So then, it's true?"

Green hair *was* unusual, but Mykal couldn't see how it revealed anything when it came to this mysterious, lovely woman. "What's true?"

Galatia nodded. It was slow, forced, as if a puppeteer controlled her head with a stick and strings. "I lived under the Isthmian with the mermaids."

CHAPTER 15



“*T*he seer mentioned some noteworthy places to hide. All good places, mind you, but not good enough. Not for me,” Galatia said. “The king was not going to rest until he had my head. He was after *all* users of magic, but it was obviously me he wanted most.

“When it came time to hide, I wanted to go somewhere I’d never have to worry; where I wouldn’t have to spend my days and nights looking over my shoulder, therefore I went to live with the mermaids.”

Blodwyn said, “My questions are: How were you able to survive living underwater? How did you communicate with them? How did you ask permission to live with them? I can’t imagine it was as simple as swimming up to them and asking if there were vacancies at the local inn.”

“My question is,” Mykal said, “are we really talking about mermaids?”

“Yesterday you didn’t believe in wizards, or magic,” Blodwyn said.

“I’m afraid the serpent attack may have been my fault, Mykal,” Galatia said. “When I left the network of underwater caverns, I agitated them. They normally protect the cave entrances, and the mermaids. I hope you can forgive me.”

A bit overwhelmed by everything, Mykal closed his mouth, puffed out his cheeks, and shook his head. “No. Forget about it. There’s nothing at all to forgive.”

“Will you be telling us how you came to live with the mermaids, or will the story have to be plucked like feathers off a chicken, one at a time?” Blodwyn saw no reason to hide his irritation. Mykal shared his anxiety.

“I entered the sea by the Fjord Range,” she said.

“At the base of the Rames Mountains?” Karyn said. “Inside Osiris’s Realm?” Galatia merely smiled at Karyn. “The Isthmian is—”

“Weren’t you worried about the Voyagers?” Mykal said. That motley crew sailed the sea rarely, if ever, coming to shore; stalking the sea lanes. No one ever knew exactly where they’d be. Legends cast them evil as pirates patrolling the water. Few ships ever made it across the Isthmian without encountering them, and even fewer made it across at all. They also ran trade routes along the river. The potential loss was rarely worth the reward such a venture would inevitably bring. However, those were the only way to get goods from the east to the west, and vice versa.

“As I was saying, I went into the Isthmian and swam out to a sandbar. I called to them with my mind. I stayed on the sandbar for nearly three full days and nights before I finally caught sight of one of them. It was at first nothing more than a ripple in the sea. It could have been anything, really, but I knew. I saw eventually its scaled body under the moon’s bright glow. There was no mistaking the tail as it emerged for just a moment before it once again slipped beneath the ocean’s surface. I was apprehensive. In my mind I had prepared everything I’d say, how I’d ask permission to live with them. But none came. Not that night. I was so hungry, and thirsty. I didn’t bring enough provisions, because honestly, I never expected contact to take so long. Two things prevented my leaving. If I went back to land for food or water, I would miss the mermaid answering my call. The other was that, I wasn’t sure I had the strength to swim back to shore, and I’d drown.

“My shoulders and face were burnt red from standing under the relentless sun. I kept dipping under the water’s surface to cool off. It was so terribly hot. Without water, my lips had chapped. There was no relief for my eventual hunger and thirst. I can’t tell you how tempted I was to drink from the sea. I knew by the end of the fifth day that I was going to die,” Galatia said.

“You couldn’t just zap yourself back onto shore?” Karyn said. “Or conjure up a cup of water to drink?”

“At one point, I could have used my powers to get back safely. But the

longer I stayed submerged on the sandbar, the weaker my body became. Magic requires strength, and rest. Using it takes a toll on the wizard. It is powerful, but not without limits. This was one thing Grandeer never fully understood, or refused to believe. I suppose if it was between dying out there or dying on land, I would have at least given, what did you call it? ‘Zapping’? I would have at least made the attempt to zap myself back to the shore,” Galatia said. “But I didn’t have to.”

“They finally responded to your call?” Mykal couldn’t remember the last time his grandfather had spoken. He thought the man asleep with his eyes open.

Galatia nodded. “A single mermaid swam up to me. There is no point in lying, I was frightened. I’d never seen one before. I had only heard stories. The few Voyagers I had met were full of them. It was difficult to sort truth from fiction. Fishermen tell tales that exceed truth, and yet I discerned truth to much of what I’d heard, or overheard as the case may be.

“She bobbed in the water, not far from me. If I had reached out an arm I could almost have touched her. Like I have now, her hair was green. Her face and facial features were smooth. It’s hard to explain, really. It was almost like she didn’t have cheekbones, or they were so thin and high set they were nearly undetectable. Her eyes were large. Too big for such a small face. She didn’t blink. Ever. Her nose was narrow and pointed at the end. Not long, not big, but narrow, and pointy.” Galatia touched the tip of her own nose. “Below her breasts the scales started. They were green and white and pink. Beautifully blended.

“I’d been calling out to the mermaids with my mind, summoning them to come to me. Now that one was in front of me, I wasn’t sure how to proceed. It would be foolish and naive to think we spoke the same language. Still, I tried. My words made her face wrinkle, and she tilted her head to the side. For whatever reason, they had heard and responded to my summons. Therefore, I tried using my mind to communicate with her. I didn’t realize how truly weak I had become. It took the last of my energy to tell her I needed a place to hide. And then, I just dropped, sinking into the sea. I remember thinking I was going to die, that the confused mermaid was just going to watch me drown.

“When I woke up, I was inside a cave inside the Fjord Mountains. It looked

like a small island surrounded by placid sea water. At times there were cracks of sunlight that streamed through crevices during the day and some moonbeams at night, but not always. I was lying down on a bench of seashells. There were smooth stalactites that littered the cave ceiling, water dripped from their ends and splashed into the sea. The drops echoed inside the cave, and the ripples slowly made their way to the shore. Tiny waves caused by the droplets that fell. Stalagmites grew like giant cones from the ground. They were thick, and rigid, and sat like stone guardians. At the time I didn't know where it came from, but there was a purple glow that permeated the entire space." Galatia lifted her necklace, and turned the violet gem in her fingers. When she held it up to her face, her eyes matched the color of the stone. "Below the Isthmian, inside the cave there were many smaller caverns. One is filled with amethysts. The gems glow so brightly, entering the cavern is almost impossible without risk to your eyesight. The entrances allow the light to illuminate everything under water."

"Well, I'll be. You actually lived with the mermaids. They took you in," Blodwyn said.

"Not sure I would describe it as *taking me in*. They left me on that shore for months without much interaction. Once in a while I'd see them looking up at me from beneath the water. A few seemed rather taken by me. I suppose I was as alien to them as they were to me? And when those particular mermaids came around, I'd meet them by the water and toss in stones that they'd retrieve and toss back. It passed the time, and I made it so I didn't feel so all alone.

"When they knew I'd seen them, they'd swim away. Mornings, or what I took as mornings—without a sunrise or sunset, and only the glowing amethysts for illumination, I lost track of the world's cycles—they regularly left fish for me to eat in a small pile by the water, and collected rain water in seashells for me to drink, but it took a long time before they actually made any significant contact."

"Mermaids." Mykal shook his head. There had always been stories of the merfolk, just as he'd heard stories about the sea serpents, and of magic. "In time you became friends with them?"

"We became friends, but that's a story I'll have to share another time. The point is, that's where I was. That's where I've been. For all of the centuries that

have gone by I've been beneath the surface, living inside a cave.”

It wasn't clear from Galatia's tone of voice how she felt; she had masked any emotion, keeping it flat and without infliction. It might have contained a bit of regret mixed with gratitude, as if surviving the king's wrath was counterbalanced by the lack of contact with her own people.

“You could have returned once the king died,” Karyn said.

“I didn't know when the king died.”

Blodwyn said, “The Watch are *still* in existence. King Nabal shares a good portion of Grandeer's feelings towards magic users. If word of your existence spread, they'd be after you, of this I have no doubt.”

“I'd be on the run again. And I am certain the mermaids would not allow me to live among them a second time. I am still unsure why they allowed me into their caves at all. Except, as I've said, I'm not running. Not this time.”

A silence fell over the room. It lasted several minutes, until it became obvious Galatia had finished her rendition of events.

Grandfather said, “Like you, we're peaceful people. You're talking about King Cordillera, and wizards, and war. You don't need my grandson to help you find the other wizards. You found him. You can find them. We don't want any trouble. There's been no proof he's a wizard, no reason for anyone else to come here looking for him.”

Trouble was unavoidable. Mykal either thought it, or Galatia said it out loud. One way or the other, the phrase swam inside his head as if echoing of the sides of his skull.

Galatia leaned onto the kitchen table. She spoke in a whisper. “This is what I know. King Cordillera has a wizard. Her name is Ida. She is roughly the same age as your mother, Mykal. She was born in the Osiris Realm. I am not sure who *her* mother is. Her father is one of the three wizards in hiding. You and she either share a bloodline, or Osuald is her father.”

“*Share* a bloodline?” Mykal said.

“How do you know this?” Blodwyn said.

“Mykal's grandmother was pregnant with Anna when the wizards went into hiding. Your grandfather, Matteo, is one of the wizard's in hiding. The only other

male wizard is Oswald. Pendora was not pregnant, and neither was I. That means Ida's father is either Matteo or Oswald.”

“Wait,” Mykal said, and set one hand to his forehead. “My mother was born about the time you went into hiding? And so was this *Ida* wizard?”

“That’s right.”

“That makes my mom, what? Like two hundred years old?”

Grandfather’s mouth opened wide, and then he shook his head violently. “That’s preposterous. All of this is crazy. I think we’ve heard enough. I’ve been a gracious host. I’ve allowed you into my house. Everything you have said has been upsetting. You have no proof, no evidence to give us. You might be a wizard. What you did with the blue fire was impressive, but as you’ve said, magic is simple. Though I don’t like to admit it, I’ve seen magicians do similar tricks. And that’s all they are. Tricks. Parlor tricks. That’s all, just parlor tricks. My grandson was right before when he asked you to leave—”

“Grandfather,” Mykal said.

“Silence!” Grandfather shouted. Mykal could not recall a time when his grandfather raised his voice. “We’re not going to entertain such nonsense. Her mere presence places our entire farm in jeopardy. And for all we know this lady over here is a spy for the king!”

“I assure you, I am not,” Karyn said.

“We don’t know that, though. Do we?”

Blodwyn remained silent for just a moment longer, but continued lightly tapping his staff on the porch. Ignoring Grandfather’s outburst, he said, “We’ve listened to everything you’ve had to say, Galatia. Fantastic as it is, I find myself believing you. That being said, I’m not sure what role you see Mykal playing. If anything, I am more interested in getting him somewhere safe and hiding him from the Mountain King.”

“You want him to hide the next two hundred years in some dark cave? Is that any way for anyone to live? Unless you can guarantee he never uses magic, it won’t work anyway. Ida is something of an unknown. She is clearly a powerful wizard, the way she commanded the storm is proof of her ability, but the king keeps her locked inside a tower. Somehow he’s managed to enchant the room.

She cannot leave. This makes her loyalty less than clear, though while held prisoner she is doing the Mountain King's bidding," Galatia explained.

"How do you know all of this?" Blodwyn said, as he leaned forward, with his jaw set, and brow creased.

"I can feel her at night trying to unweave the web that has her barricaded. She wants out. When she uses her magic, I can reach out and touch her mind. I see thick strings of color. They billow as they stream from her to me. I follow those ribbons and when I am close enough her mind is open to me."

"And you use your magic when you do this?" Blodwyn said. "Then what prevents her from doing the same thing back at you?"

Galatia pursed her lips together, but didn't respond.

Mykal said, "How can she find me?"

"As I did, she must have sensed when you were born, but could not pinpoint your exact location. For ten and seven years she's used her magic to keep the pulse of the land, hoping she'd find you. Until the other day you've never used a shred of magic. *Powerful magic*, I mean. If you had, she would have been able to locate you in a heartbeat. When someone uses magic it creates a ripple. It can possibly be felt by other wizards across continents depending on its size. The size of such a wave is dependent on the strength of the energy wielded just as the size of a stone tossed into water alters the force of the waves it creates. Does that make sense?"

"I guess," Mykal said. "If I used a lot of magic, powerful magic, she'd locate me easy. If I just used a little, the ... ripples wouldn't be as strong?"

"Exactly. We need to travel to the Cicade Forest. Somewhere inside the woodland is a mirror. The object is the only way I can contact Pendora. We are going to need her help battling Ida. Stopping King Cordillera won't be easy. He has been preparing for war for some time. We need more power, more magic. We need the other wizards," Galatia said.

"You can find this mirror?" Blodwyn said. "And then you can use it to summon Pendora, and the two other wizards from hundreds of years ago?"

"That's right," Galatia said.

"And Mykal is a wizard, but he's safe; safe because he's not used magic. So

if he Ida can't find him, why do you need him?"

"Mykal was safe. *Was*. Like I said, up until a few days ago, he'd not used magic."

Mykal shook his head. "Wait a minute. What do you mean, *was*? I haven't used any magic. I don't even know how magic works."

"When you were thrashing for your life in the sea, you unintentionally conjured magic. It was undirected, and wild. It saved your life. How do you think you managed to get away from the sea serpents? The second you did, I knew where you were. It's why I showed up when I did. I was on my way to the forest," she said, and then looked directly at Blodwyn, "on my own. Confident that Mykal's whereabouts were unknown. With that action he revealed his location and changed everything."

"Ida will know where I am?"

Grandfather groaned.

"Correction. Ida already knows where you are."

Mykal said. "And she will be coming for me."

"She will. She'll be coming for you. With King Cordillera and his men. They could be on their way as we speak. It won't be much different from Nabal's Watch. Only when they catch you, when they catch me, they won't kill us. Any of us. We'll be captured instead. Captured and returned to the Osiris Realm as prisoners. It's why I've wanted us to leave. It's why I've been stressing the importance of us getting out of here."

"I NEED YOUR COUNSEL, Wyn. I'm torn about what I should do." Mykal and Blodwyn walked toward the barn. They would saddle horses, and pack supplies. "I mean, here we are getting things ready for this journey across the Old Empire, and I'm not even sure it is the right thing to do."

"Galatia is telling the truth. I think the Mountain King is a dangerous man. Living forever in a castle amongst the clouds, I'm not sure anyone could hold onto sanity for long. Ultimately, however, the choice is yours."

“And you think I’m a wizard?”

“Your mother was.”

“That’s not an answer, Wyn.”

“I don’t have a better answer than that. Not until I see you do something magical.” He shrugged, looking down at his feet while he walked. His boots squished in the wet grass. His staff poked holes in the soft dirt. “You want to know if you should go with Galatia?”

Mykal nodded.

“You should. You won’t be alone.”

“I know. Karyn said she’s not leaving my side. I can’t talk her out of it.”

“Might not be bad company. A wizard, a seer, and me.”

“And you?”

“I promised Anna I would keep you under my wing. I can’t rightly let you go gallivanting across the Old Empire and expect to protect you unless I’m there. Besides, this isn’t just about you. I know it may seem that way. If the Mountain King starts a war, it affects everyone. If we could have done something to prevent countless deaths, then I personally feel obligated to at least try.”

“I can’t ask you to come along, Wyn.”

“Are you listening to me when I speak” Blodwyn stopped walking. He stood tall, one hand on his hip. “You haven’t. Let me get the horses ready. You run off to your tree and get your sword, and dagger. You’ll need to bring your bow and arrows as well.”

“You know about the tree?”

Blodwyn arched an eyebrow. “I know many things. I’ll let you in on a secret though. Everyone knows about your tree.”

“Even my Grandfather?”

“Who do you think it is that told me about it? He wanted me to make sure you didn’t hurt yourself.”

“I just didn’t want Grandfather worrying. The sword you gave me is not something most farmers own. I just wanted to keep it ... safe.”

Blodwyn winked. “Now, go, and hurry back.”

Mykal retrieved his weapons and made it back in time to help Wyn finish

saddling the last two horses. They draped blankets over the backs before tightening saddle straps around the horses' bellies. The bridle and bit were secured over their heads, and reins draped over the saddle horns. "I'll get grandfather's horse from the stall."

"Mykal," Blodwyn said.

Mykal stopped, turned. "What?"

Blodwyn didn't say a word. His meaning clear in his facial expression; lips pursed and brow furrowed.

"I can't leave him. He's my grandfather. He can't take care of himself. He needs me!"

"He is not going to be able to travel with us. When's the last time you saw him on his horse."

Grandfather couldn't ride. Missing the leg made staying in the saddle almost impossible. Mykal remembered a time when he'd tried. They'd brought the horse to the porch, and helped him up. He would have fallen to the ground if Blodwyn hadn't caught him.

"We're going into the Cicade forest. You know as well as I who lives among those trees. It's going to be dangerous. Even if your grandfather could ride we may have to leave the horses ..."

There was no way Grandfather could go with them. Resolved, and deflated, Mykal shook his head. "Then I can't go. I can't leave him."

"If Galatia has been honest, then your life is in danger."

"I'm not worried about my life. If the evil wizard thinks I am here, and King Cordillera's men come looking for me, who will they find? Not me. Because I'm not here. They'll find my grandfather."

Blodwyn set a hand on Mykal's shoulder, as loving a gesture as any father might make to comfort a troubled son. "If you stay, and the king's men capture you, he'll still be alone assuming they don't harm or capture him as well. This way there's a chance you can stop the king before harm befalls him."

"Galatia said they won't kill any of us. That means Grandfather, too. If I'm not here and King Cordillera shows up, he'll take my grandfather prisoner. The king will use my grandfather against me. He'll be able to control everything I do

just by threatening to hurt my family. That's what she meant in the kitchen." Mykal said.

"We'll take your grandfather to my place. He'll be safe there. No one knows where I live, except you."

Mykal shook his head. "He won't go, Wyn."

"He'll have to," he said.

Mykal waved his arm around. "He won't leave, not when someone has to take care of the farm and the animals. It won't be possible for him to do so alone. Not only that, but he won't admit that he can't do it."

Blodwyn held up a hand. "I have friends. On the way, we'll stop off. I'll have a few extra hands come by. They'll help out with chores. They won't ask permission. And they won't let the old man shoo them off the property. When they understand the situation, they'll agree to camp close by and keep an eye on the place, and your grandfather as well. At the first sign of trouble, they'll get him out of here."

"You really think they'll do all of that?"

"Remember when you called me a sellsword? Well, these are the finest around. For the right price, they'll do most anything," Blodwyn said.

"It will cost you coins? I couldn't ask you to do that. I have some saved. It's not much. Let me pay," Mykal said.

Blodwyn smiled. "The way I'll ask, they'll think they've volunteered for the job."

"So, I'm the only one who knows where you live?"

"Have you seen me throw many parties?"

"I didn't even know you had other friends until just now. If you've had parties, I've never been invited."

"I don't have parties, Mykal, but if I did, you'd be first on the guest list."

CHAPTER 16



On horseback there was no reason they couldn't reach the Cicade Forest in half a day's ride. After two hours of riding, the sun began to set. The recent rains had finally stolen the heat from the day. The evening was cool. The few clouds that remained above were spread thinly across a dark pink sky. Blodwyn slowed by a small grove of trees.

"Whoa, Babe," Mykal said, and tugged on the horse's reins. He loved the mare's palomino hide, with its brushed-gold coat and white mane. He had been grooming, walking, and riding her for the last four years. Actually, he'd groomed, walked, and rode all of the horses on the farm. Babe just happened to be his favorite. Feeding her an extra carrot or apple was his little way of letting her know his feelings.

Karyn trotted alongside Mykal on Defiance. The horse's coat was a reddish-brown with a thick black mane. He was a stallion and Babe's father. "We stopping?"

"Why are we stopping?" Galatia pulled on Jiminey's reins, making her gelding walk in place, a beautiful chestnut hide with matching mane.

"We *could* reach the forest," Blodwyn said. He sat leaning forward, his arms crossed over Applejack's saddle horn. "But it's not the kind of place we want to wander into at night. Sandwiched between the Isthmian Sea and the Lantern Lake, the woods have grown so dense that even in sunlight it appears more like dusk beneath that canopy."

"Not really the kind of place we want to enter during daylight, either, then, I

take it,” Mykal said. “I’ve heard stories about the Archers. None of them good.”

Mykal dismounted and held the reins close to Babe’s bit, stroking along her jaw. The saddlebags on each horse were filled with supplies. Babe carried Mykal’s sword and bow attached to the saddle. The quiver of arrows and long dagger were slung over his back, both the quiver and sheath he had made out of leather.

“There are many reasons for legends, though most aren’t accurate, or as true as they sound, legends persist. That’s something to keep in mind. Even now we may be too close,” Blodwyn said.

“I can’t even see the forest,” Karyn said.

“It’s there. Just at the edge of the horizon. Regardless, I’m sure they’ve spotted us, the Archers.” Blodwyn climbed off his saddle. “We should be safe for the night. We’ll take turns on watch. Mykal, keep your sword with you. Belt it around your waist. It won’t do any good strapped to Baby’s saddle.”

“*Babe*,” Mykal said. Blodwyn just stared at him. His eyes said it all. He didn’t want to repeat himself. The horse’s name was irrelevant. “Okay, I will.”

“Your highness, are you any good with a sword?”

Karyn shook her head. “But I’ve seen many used in fights during the king’s tourneys.”

“Wonderful,” Blodwyn said. “If we come upon a spectator’s box we’ll be certain that you have prime seats for the event.”

“Ha, ha,” Karyn said. “I’ll have you that my education is extensive. I often ask plenty of questions to be sure I know that what is said matches what is meant. It may seem foolish, but my mind has served me better than a blade on many occasions.”

Blodwyn’s grin faded. His mouth sagged some. “My apologies, your highness. I did not mean to offend you. My teasing was purely in good fun.”

Karyn locked eyes with Blodwyn for several seconds before she let out a laugh. “I’m not mad. And you haven’t offended me. While it is true my education is the finest, learning to defend myself with a sword would most certainly have been a useful skill to have acquired before now.”

THEY DIDN'T NEED A FIRE; the night hadn't become that cold. Mykal was worried about Archers spotting them, anyway. The stories of their thievery bothered him. He'd never slept with one eye opened before. He hoped it wasn't something difficult to achieve.

In their bags, Grandfather had wrapped bread, cheese, and tomato sandwiches. They ate while they set blankets on the ground. They arranged the blankets as if there *were* a fire between them, though. Bloodwyn suggested Karyn, and then Galatia take first watch. It would be easier for them staying awake, instead of during the night when sleep threatened even the most alert person on watch. He sat away from the horses, in order to not be distracted by them.

Mykal didn't think he'd be able to sleep due to worry for his grandfather. He hoped Bloodwyn's friends were true to their word and that they'd look after him and do the chores while he was away. If he didn't do the work himself, though, he feared it wouldn't get done correctly. He appreciated the amount of time Bloodwyn took talking one on one with his grandfather. The hard exterior hid his deeply kind heart.

Despite Mykal's concerns, sleep soon overtook him.

"Mykal."

The voice was a whisper. Mykal opened his eyes. It felt like he'd only just closed them. The moon was full in the star-strewn sky. "Wyn?"

He squatted beside Mykal. His long hair draped to his knees, and he held his staff in one hand. "There are torches in the distance. Four, maybe five riders."

"From the forest?"

"No. Back from where we came. We need to get everyone up," he said, and used the staff to push himself back up onto his feet.

Mykal woke the others, gathered up their things, and secured them on the horses. He kept looking over his shoulder. The two torches were getting closer. His heartbeat quickened. He felt it in his chest, and neck. This was new to him. There was no way of knowing who approached. He assumed the worst. Taking

care of the farm, he'd never come across a situation where fleeing made the most sense.

"I'm scared," Karyn said, as Mykal helped her into her saddle.

"Stay close to me. I won't let anyone harm you," he said. Thanks to Blodwyn's instruction, he knew how to use the weapons he'd brought well. He would protect her with his life.

Applejack neighed as Blodwyn tugged on the reins. The sound echoed in the silence. Mykal cringed. They could only remain as silent as the horses allowed.

"If we flee, we're going to kick up dust, attracting attention," Galatia said. "I can stop them."

"We don't know who they are, or what they want," Mykal said. He climbed onto Babe's saddle. They were ready to race away, if the need arose.

"I could divert them." Galatia raised her hands.

"No," Mykal said. "No magic. You said the Mountain King's wizard can detect the use of magic. We don't want to let her know that we've moved, nor pinpoint where we currently are. I want to find the mirror for you, and be done with it. The sooner we complete the task, the sooner my life can go back to normal."

"The boy's right," Blodwyn said. "Let's ride toward the forest. I don't think we'll make it to the woods before they reach us, but we'll be closer than we are now. If we have to run for it, the trees should provide sanctuary of sorts. People think the woods are haunted. Maybe they won't chase us inside. We can ride side by side. If they spot four of us, it could make them think twice before doing anything sinister."

"Sinister?" Karyn squeaked.

They started out walking, and worked their way up to a trot. When they could hear the horses behind them galloping, Mykal gave Babe a light kick. The others matched his pace. He knew they all felt it, the need to run for the trees.

"They'll be on us in a few minutes. We're still far from the Cicade. Should we make a break for it?" Mykal didn't want to look afraid in front of the others. There was not a time he could recall ever feeling this apprehensive.

"If they weren't after us before, it seems like they have us in their sights now.

To the forest,” Blodwyn said. He kicked Applejack and snapped the reins. “Eeh-yaw!”

The others followed his lead. The horses galloped hard. Galatia took a slight lead. Mykal wanted to look back. He knew the people with the torches would give chase. Reaching the forest for safety was dubious at best. It was better than being out in the open, but there were the Archers. Because of their reputation they were given wide berth. The Cicade was avoided by most, as best as Mykal knew. Better to cross Lantern Lake than pass through the woods. It was just safer that way.

Chancing a glance over his shoulder, Mykal almost sighed with relief.

He couldn't see the torches. Maybe the riders had gone in a different direction. It was possible they'd run for no reason other than their overactive imaginations. Just because they knew the mission they were on was important, and dangerous, that didn't mean that everyone else knew. Was it possible the four of them had scared the riders with the torches?

“I think we lost them,” Mykal said. He needed to shout to be heard. The horse hoofs pounded hard terrain. It sounded like a thunderstorm.

“Don't stop,” Blodwyn said.

“The torches. They're gone,” Mykal said.

“Because they dropped them to chase us!” Blodwyn kicked Applejack's side again. The gelding picked up speed.

Mykal looked back once more, and saw only darkness. His mind played tricks on his eyes, made him think he saw things, as if the horsemen were almost on them. Ahead the moon bounced in the sky. Up and down, and up and down. If he stared at it, he'd get dizzy. He looked ahead, focusing on the trees ahead, looming more and more.

The horsemen would have no trouble seeing them. They eventually wouldn't need the torchlight to pursue them. Once their eyes adjusted, the moon would provide ample illumination.

Even with the horses rested, they would never make it to the forest before those chasing caught up with them. And what was to say that even if they entered the Cicade those chasing them would stop. Ghosts? Unlikely. They could

very well be Archers headed home. Wouldn't that be perfect? That would mean that Mykal and the others would be rounded up as easily as cattle had been on the farm.

"We need to stop," Mykal said, and pulled on Babe's reins. Her neck twisted as she slowed first to a trot and then to a walk. He turned her around. He pulled his sword from its sheath, and held it in his right hand. All he could hear were horses. In front of him. Behind him. Isolation fell around him like a cloak. He knew he stood alone. It wasn't bravery that drove him. Why run from something unknown? It could be for nothing. He *hoped* it was for nothing. Riding blind into the forest could prove twice as dangerous. This seemed like the lesser of two evils.

"What are you doing?" Blodwyn pulled Applejack alongside Babe. He reached for Mykal's reins. "We need to go!"

The horsemen were close. He saw them under the bright moon. There were four.

"They're in chainmail. They have a banner, but I can't see it clearly." Mykal squinted.

"It's the king's knights," Karyn said. "They might be looking for me."

"Found you is more like it," Blodwyn said.

"Karyn, why did you stop?" Mykal said.

"Because you did."

"We've no time to talk," Blodwyn said. He growled at Mykal.

Galatia charged past them. She rode toward the squad of knights, ready for battle.

"What is she doing?" Karyn said. "Wizard or not, they'll try to kill her! I know how the king's men are. They live for the attack, and can be quite ruthless. I have seen too much barbaric behavior."

"You stay here! If it looks like things are going bad, take off. Head for the forest," Mykal said. "C'mon, Babe, let's go."

Mykal knew that Blodwyn was galloping close behind him. They raced to catch up with Galatia. The woman was either fearless, or crazy. There was another possibility. She could be both; a dangerous combination, no doubt.

Mykal wished he knew the extent of her magic. At the farmhouse she'd exhibit a burst of power like he'd never seen before. Would it be enough to stop trained knights? She might not be confident in her abilities, which could explain why she'd gone into hiding in the first place.

A red ball of flame appeared out of nothing and flew forward, and was quickly followed by another. Mykal heard men scream, and the unmistakable neighing of frightened horses. Part of Mykal wanted to stop, turn around, and flee the scene. He didn't know how Galatia commanded fire, how she could conjure flames with her mind using magic. She and Blodwyn might believe he was a wizard, but he doubted it. There was no way he could do what Galatia had just done.

Galatia jumped off Jiminey in a smooth and fluid motion. She landed on her feet, arms raised, ready to battle swords and trained knights with mystical, and outlawed powers.

The magefire had slammed into the four knights knocking them from their horses, but slowly regained their footing, swords drawn.

Mykal jumped down from Babe, stumbled as he ran, struggled to keep his legs under him, and ended up beside Galatia. He raised his jian sword in his right hand. The hilt was fitted with wings to protect the hand. The blade was straight, about the length of his hip to just past his knee. The double edge was sharp enough to split hairs, Blodwyn had said, when he taught him how to properly sharpen his sword on a long strip of leather.

Mykal's mind was in a whirlwind. These were the king's knights. A confrontation with them might not end well. Eventually the king would hear about Galatia and her magic, never mind the fact that she had announced their location to Ida and, by extension, Cordillera. If they found out what he was, he would lose the farm, leaving grandfather alone, and spend the rest of his life in the castle dungeon, or worse, hung until dead.

He didn't want to hang, and wondered if anyone would come to his hanging to hear his name announced?

Blodwyn joined them wielding only his staff. Mykal never understood why Blodwyn only carried the staff, and not a sword. He'd asked once, but his mentor

never provided an answer other than someday he'd tell him a story. No one spoke. The knights did not advance, awed by what they had experienced.

“Why are you following us?” Blodwyn's deep voice rumbled. He kept a defensive stance, with one leg in front of the other, and shoulders slightly over the forward knee, staff held low.

“We are of King Nabal's Watch. We're here on royal business, tasked with searching the lands for his ward,” one knight said. The four were indistinguishable from one another. They wore polished silver barbute helmets, where the Y from the forehead covered the bridge of their noses. The chainmail protected their limbs under cuirass armor. The dropped banner and the horse blankets bore the king's sigil. He pointed a shaking finger. “You are not the woman we are looking for.”

Mykal almost sighed in relief, but refrained.

“Regardless, we are bringing all of you back to the keep with us,” the knight said. There wasn't much weight to his words. Mykal wondered how he'd take it when told they weren't going anywhere with them?

“Especially her,” another knight said, pointing with the tip of his blade.

Mykal turned around. Karyn sat on Defiance. “I told you to stay where you were,” he chided her.

“All of us?” Blodwyn replied to the knight, as if he were confused. “You just told us we're not the person you are looking for.”

The knights spread out, circling them with swords raised. “She is. The one on the horse. Princess Karyn, the king has been worried sick since you disappeared. He will be relieved to see that you well when we return you to the castle.”

One knight pointed at Galatia. “And you have magic. More than I've ever seen. The practice of the dark arts is illegal in this kingdom. If we were of the Watch, your trial would take place right here, right now.”

Mykal didn't think these knights possessed the courage to execute Galatia, whether part of the Watch or not.

“Practice?” Galatia said, offended as the word suggested she'd not mastered her craft, as opposed to feeling upset by the knight's death threats.

“We’ve ridden past the Delta Cove, if I’m not mistaken,” Blodwyn said. The knights continued to circle. “If my geography is right—please correct me if I am wrong, Princess Karyn—King Nabal’s realm extends as far as the cove, but no further,” Blodwyn said, as if didn’t already know the answer. He tapped a finger against his lips, as if trying to remember something seen on a map.

“Those are old empire boundaries. Our king rules the west side of the Isthmian!” The knight spoke with authority.

Blodwyn shrugged. “I was not aware. Is he calling himself emperor now as well?”

The knights clearly lacked a sense of humor. “You’re coming with us, all four of you!”

“I don’t think so,” Galatia said.

She said something else, too, though Mykal couldn’t understand the words, he *felt* them. Something popped inside his head.

A torrent of color nearly blinded him.

Her hands pushed outward, it was as though she had summoned a specifically localized hurricane from nothing. The knights were thrown backward into the air, and landed hard several feet away. Not one of them moved from where they lay.

Blodwyn arched an eyebrow in Galatia’s direction.

“Are they dead?” Mykal said.

“No,” Galatia said, sounding disappointed.

“Now what do we do? Run?” Karyn said.

Blodwyn said, “We can’t leave them alive. They’ll return to the king. He’ll send a force of actual Watchers after us.”

“We’ll be long gone by the time the knights make it back to the kingdom, and return with the Watch,” Mykal argued. “We should find this mirror and be done with this.”

“Finding the mirror...could take days,” Galatia said.

It sounded as if there was more, something else Galatia wasn’t telling them. Mykal shook his head. “You said you knew where the mirror was.”

“I *do* know where it is. It’s in the forest, yet we have to find *exactly* where in

the forest it is.”

The knights stirred.

“They need to be silenced,” Blodwyn said. He looked at Galatia while he spoke. “It’s the only way we can ensure that others won’t be sent after us. I don’t think there’s a different way of handling this.”

“Silenced? You mean like cut out their tongues?” Mykal thought he might get sick at the thought of such a heinous act.

“No, Mykal. Not cut out their tongues.” Galatia stepped toward him, held out a hand.

Mykal took two steps back, stepping away from her unwilling to accept the truth of their words.

“There *is* a war coming, Mykal. It’s coming whether you like it or not, whether you want to believe it or not. The Mountain King is going to attack the west shores, and he is going to occupy all of the lands, naming himself the new emperor. Death is an inevitable part of war,” Galatia said.

“I don’t know why that should matter to me.”

“It matters because, just like he wants me, King Cordillera wants *you*.”

“He doesn’t know me. If I have magic, I have no idea how to use it. I won’t be an asset to his plans. You need to teach me. I want to learn. If I am a wizard, and I have magic, then I can battle against him. The two of us working together will be tougher to conquer!”

“That is the goal. It is also why we are going to call on the others. This time we will fight as a unified force against an evil force. This time our sorcery will make a difference.” Galatia shook her head. “And, don’t forget, magic is something you have used. Without lessons, yes, you’re more dangerous to others than the armed knights behind you are. And they know where we are, even more so now that I was forced to conjure.”

Mykal looked at his mentor for guidance. “Wyn, What do we do next?”

“Take Karyn and go back to where we were camped,” Blodwyn said. “We’ll be along as fast as we can.”

“You can’t do this,” Mykal protested. Karyn grabbed his arm.

Blodwyn struck the bottom of his staff on the ground. “Go. Now.”

Blodwyn's voice demanded action. Mykal got on his horse, and he and Karyn rode back toward camp. He did so in part because Blodwyn ordered him to, yet also because he couldn't bear witnessing the cold-blooded murders they would commit.

CHAPTER 17



*M*ykal stood beside Karyn, an arm wrapped around her shoulders. She was shivering despite there being no chill in the air. He hugged her even tighter. Behind them was the forest. Beyond that, but visible during the day, or when the moon was bright, were the Zenith Mountains. They faced open land that fell within the Grey Ashland Boundry. To the east was the Isthmian, though they were a long ways from the sea, and the west more open land, and maybe the hint of Lantern Lake.

Blodwyn and Galatia rode toward them.

“I dreamed of death tonight. Before Blodwyn woke us. I didn’t know what it meant, and since you were not in the dream, I didn’t think it was important,” she said.

“We can’t think about that now,” he told her, though it was *all* he could think about. Her ability confused him. What exactly had she dreamt? How specific were the dreams? He knew so little about such things. With laws the way they were, few even dared discuss such things.

He didn’t understand Blodwyn’s change in attitude, either. The man went from skepticism to agreeing to murdering four of the king’s knights? Had Galatia cast a spell over him? Could she cast such spells? As long as he’d known Blodwyn, he’d never seen such ruthlessness. He’d been exposed to so much strangeness, so many things that were outside of any frame of reference he could even imagine, recently he couldn’t keep from questioning everything, and that included wondering who he was and fearing who he might become.

A war might be coming, but it wasn't here yet. He thought the whole point of retrieving this mirror—hidden somewhere inside the forest—was to prevent that war. Had he misunderstood everything said back at the farm? If caught, killing the king's knights was a death sentence.

Bloodwyn stopped 'Jack beside them. "We're not going to stay here. Get back on your horses. We're going to the forest. Now."

Galatia stopped next to Blodwyn. She stared at Mykal. It looked like she might say something. Mykal turned away before she spoke speak, and helped Karyn onto Defiance.

"I am not looking forward to riding into the forest during the night, but I think it beats hanging around here," Mykal said.

"I couldn't agree more. Staying in the open is an even greater risk," Blodwyn explained. "There's no telling how many squads the king has out looking for the princess."

Mykal heard the implied result of such a potential encounter as if they had been words shouted in his head. If there were more knights, there would be more deaths. And the likelihood they'd eventually be captured. He didn't want that either. He wished that the murders hadn't needed to have been committed. The swords used were not his, the blood did not coat his blade, and yet he felt guilty and somehow responsible. He climbed onto Babe's saddle.

Blodwyn held his horse's reins wrapped around white knuckles. He kept looking back to the scene of the killings. "I know you don't approve. We dragged the bodies into higher grass, and scattered the horses. There was no other choice. They saw the princess, Mykal. They saw Galatia throw fireballs, and summon wind. We were all as good as dead at that point. If they reached the king, if they told him what they had witnessed, we'd be on the run for the rest of our lives. Or worse, we would be captured and hung."

Yelling at Blodwyn wouldn't work, not when the man was right. It didn't make accepting those deaths any easier, however. Other than animals on the farm, death was not something he had much experience with, and even though a wolf or a coyote attacking another animal was violent, it was nothing like what he'd witnessed tonight.

THE FULL MOON'S light continued to guide them. Mykal had never been this far north. It wasn't long before the forest came into full view. The trees resembled a dark, black wall. Looking left and right, he could see only the massive forest's edge. A foreboding filled his body. He felt it in his chest, tightening. They'd been away from the farm for not even the full night, and already everything had gone from bad to worse. Karyn's dreams might be filled with visions, his would be nothing but nightmares.

As they drew closer to the forest, the black wall transitioned into actual trees. He recognized cypress, ash, white oak, and hickories. There were those unfamiliar to him, as well. These were different though, taller and with thicker trunks, and rougher bark than any other trees he'd ever seen before. The path they'd been following ended at the trees, or if it did continue it was not well travelled. The canopy towered above them as they crossed the boundary.

They slowed the horses, continuing at little more than a trot. Fallen limbs and a lack of light mixed with the unknown terrain made moving at a faster pace impossible. The moonlight was all but gone. Branches snapped under hooves and echoed weirdly through the forest, loud cracks that ricocheted off trees oddly muffled. The air changed; breathing it in was like tasting sap, needles, and leaves.

Mykal couldn't chase away his uneasiness, but thought they were being watched. He could barely see Babe's head in front of him. The darkness closed further in on them, as if a living entity. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead, rolled into his eyes, stinging. They were outside, and yet he felt confined, like he was trapped inside a coffin. His clothing felt heavy on his body. It made no sense but he wanted to shrug out of his vest and tunic, remove his quiver and dagger. He wanted everything off, and thought he might scream. Breathing became ever more difficult.

Someone screamed.

For a moment, Mykal thought the sound was his, but found he was wrong as he came upon Defiance. The stallion's saddle stood empty.

He pulled on Babe's reins. She stopped, and her front legs pranced in place as if finding a comfortable spot to stand. He jumped from the saddle, held both sets of reins, turned the horse around slowly, and walked back the way they'd come. If Karyn had been thrown, she'd be close. "Karyn?"

He couldn't hear or see Blodwyn or Galatia. They were supposed to have stayed close together. He hadn't realized he'd gotten so far ahead of the others. He didn't think it would have been this dark. They weren't too far in, either. A torch would be ideal. "Karyn?" he called out.

He heard horses approach. "Who screamed? Mykal?"

"Wyn, Karyn might have fallen off her horse," he said.

Blodwyn dismounted. "She didn't fall."

Galatia was beside them, still sitting on her saddle. "I worried this might happen."

"What?"

"They have her," Blodwyn said.

"Who? The Archers? She was right in front of me. You were right in front of her."

"It's too dark to see anything," Galatia said, and chased away the black with blue fire that sat like a lantern in the palm of her hand, the flame as controlled as if on the end of a candle. She moved her arm around, left, right, and up. The flame illuminated an area ten feet around them. "I don't see her."

"Karyn?" Mykal called.

"You must stop doing that," Blodwyn said.

"Doing what?"

"Yelling. It attracts attention."

"Kind of late for that, don't you think? They took Karyn, Galatia's doing her wizard thing, and we just *crashed* through the forest with our horses in the middle of the night. If they can blend in with the woods so completely, I'm guessing we're lucky we're not already dead," Mykal said.

"Crashed? We barely had the horses walking."

"No. The boy's right." A man's voice came from the branches above them.

Mykal looked up and saw nothing.

Blodwyn held his staff loosely. His eyes darted around, searching for the speaker, as well. “We did not plan to enter the forest at night,” he said.

“You’re not even welcome during the day, ol’ man.”

Like the sound of snapping undergrowth swallowed and barely bouncing from trees, the man’s voice did not betray his whereabouts. He could be anywhere outside of the blue glow, just beyond the edge of magical light.

Mykal opened his mouth.

Blodwyn grabbed his arm. “We are searching for something. It is hidden in the forest.”

“Then it is ours,” the man said. “Possession being what it is when it comes to the laws.”

The Archers didn’t follow laws. The comment was ironic. Mykal wasn’t as interested in finding the mirror as he was the princess.

Mykal saw Galatia summons magefire. She could probably incinerate the entire forest with just a few fireballs. He knew why she wasn’t, though. The thing they were searching for was somewhere inside the forest. That put them at a disadvantage; the enemy was perfectly hidden. A single man might be talking, but he knew others surrounded them. He felt their eyes on him. The hairs on his arm, and at the back of his neck stood up. Archers would have arrows nocked, bowstrings drawn, ready to loose. He rolled his shoulder blades back as he imagined a broadhead piercing his spine.

“I doubt the item we seek has been found,” Galatia said. “I am a wizard—”

“Your magic don’t impress us none, *witch*.” His words hissed as the insult rolled off his tongue.

Her magic did impress them, though. Mykal knew the fire in her hands might be the only thing keeping them alive. Despite recent storms, the forest *would* burn. The threat was there, unspoken, but real. Archers might be biding time, waiting for the right moment to loose arrows. He hoped Galatia realized as much. If she extinguished the blue flame, they might never make it out of the trees. The threat was what might be keeping them alive.

“I am here to take back what belongs to me,” Galatia said.

There was no answer.

Mykal looked up, hoping (he knew) in vain to see someone, anyone. There was still nothing but blackness beyond the sphere cast by Galatia's fire. The darkness seemed only to press down further. The weight of black felt like stone blocks on his shoulders. His knees shook. Could his companions sense his fear?

"We want the girl back," Mykal said. He knew enough not to keep her royalty a secret. The Archers were thieves. What better booty could be claimed than a princess' ransom? King Nabal might pay a hefty price for her safe return.

There was no answer.

"They've left us." Blodwyn spun around in a circle. His eyes were lifted to the unseen canopy as well. "They watch us still, they remain close, but they are no longer here."

It sounded like a riddle. Mykal hated riddles. "We have to get her back," he said.

"And we will."

"They live high in the treetops." Blodwyn knew Mykal feared heights, just as he knew Mykal was plagued by an irrational fear of spiders, and claustrophobia.

Mykal removed the bow from Babe's saddle straps and fit it on his back, so that it was secure behind the quiver and sheath. The Archers were masters with the weapon, as their name more than implied. Even with everything Blodwyn taught him, he knew his skill with a bow must pale in comparison. Karyn trusted him to keep her safe. There was no way he could allow the Archers to hold her prisoner. He would climb the tallest tree, and wade through a giant spider's webbing if there were even a chance of getting her back.

"The mirror is why we're here," Galatia said.

Her matter-of-fact attitude irritated him. He didn't think she understood the level of trust and simple acceptance he'd given her. He left his farm to help her. The claim that he was a wizard hadn't been proven. He didn't know for fact the Mountain King was after him, or after Galatia for that matter. She announced some coming war, and against his better judgment, he'd chosen to believe her at her word. Blodwyn seemed convinced, which certainly had some bearing on his decision. "I'm bringing Karyn back," he said.

Mykal picked a tree, stood in front of it, and looked up. He hated the

darkness above him, and knew that the same darkness would prevent him from seeing the ground as he climbed higher. Heights might not cause the trembling if he had no way of knowing how high he'd climbed. He reached for a branch on one side of the tree, and for a branch on the other and, using his feet, pulled himself up.

His boots did little helping him ascend. Upper body strength was required. He hoisted himself up a few feet. And pushed, and pulled.

The darkness *didn't* alter his acrophobia in the slightest. He thought he might only have made it eight feet above the ground. Still, his arms and legs shook with fear. Cold sweat began to coat his skin. He stepped on a branch, and hugged the tree tightly as he moved his way up inch by inch. He couldn't move his head back, because he thought he'd fall, so he let bark scrape across his face.

Closing his eyes only made things worse. It didn't make sense. He couldn't see a thing with them open. Everything spun around him when his were eyes closed. Instead they stared at nothing, nothing at all. Blindly his arms reached overhead for the next branch.

He continued to climb. Hand over hand.

He lost track of time and height. He had no idea how long he'd been climbing, or where on the tree he was. He wished he was near the top, even though reaching the top frightened him, too. His mind begged him to return to the forest floor.

Karyn was what mattered. He couldn't stop. He was going all the way to the top. He wasn't moving with much momentum, but he felt propelled just the same.

Another few branches. A few more feet. Hand over hand.

Each time he managed to inch his way closer to the canopy he waited for an arrow to slam into his body. Training with Blodwyn taught him how to fight. Nothing had prepared him for dying. He had always considered himself immortal. Invincible. His struggles with the serpent forced him to realign that belief somewhat, but not discount it altogether since he had survived.

Another few branches. Hand over hand.

He wasn't surprising the Archers when he reached the top, *if* he reached the

top. His grunts, groans, and loud breathing gave away his position. If anything, they'd been watching him climb the entire time. His lack of tree-climbing skills probably had them laughing at him.

Let them laugh.

He was *not* giving up.

Another few branches.

Hand over hand.

The trunk became thinner and thinner. The branches were clustered more tightly together. He knew he was nearing the top. When large leaves needed to be pushed aside, he began to panic further. His breath quickened further and became shallower. If he didn't get it under control he would pass out. Everything inside him screamed not to look down. All he wanted to do was look down. If he looked down, he'd fall. There was no doubt about it. He refused to look down.

Looking down didn't matter, he told himself.

Karyn mattered. And she was up. Not down.

"Don't stop now."

The voice came from below him, and not far.

"Wyn? What are you doing?" He whispered, gasping. Eyes closed he clung to the tree for life.

"We're getting Karyn back."

"And Galatia?"

"She's keeping the blue flame lit. It is perhaps our only protection right now."

"We must be near the top," Mykal said.

"I agree."

"You know what? I wish you'd have gone first, because I'm not sure what to do next," Mykal said. "I don't think I can go any higher. I'm stuck."

"You're not stuck."

"I can't do any more." He couldn't say he was afraid.

"You're going to keep climbing, Mykal. There's no stopping now. Climb!"

With Blodwyn below him, continuing should have been easier. It wasn't. He held onto the trunk, his face pressed against bark. It was almost as if dried sap

had cemented his feet to the branches.

“Climb, Mykal. Climb!” He was not yelling. Blodwyn tone of voice was powerful, commanding. It didn’t matter if he was whispering.

Mykal chanced a look up, and blinked twice. At first he wasn’t sure what he saw.

Light.

The moon’s rays.

He had reached the canopy.

He sucked in a deep breath and when he exhaled, he reached above his head for a final branch.

His head poked through the canopy. The moon was such a beautiful sight. He sighed, amazed that he’d managed to climb such a tall, tall tree. Don’t think about it, he thought.

Before he could relish his accomplishment, he gasped. In the moonlight he saw more than just the starlit sky.

Half a dozen arrows surrounded him, and were pointed in his face and at his head. The Archers who held the knocked bows looked concerned about hurting him. Maybe they were afraid of Galatia’s magic, as they should be.

“Move it,” Blodwyn said.

“Ah, Wyn ...”

“Climb!” Blodwyn said.

The same Archer who spoke on the forest floor said, “I cannot believe what I am seeing. I can’t. You think you can threaten our homes with wizard fire? You can come here, and threaten to burn our trees to the ground? Then you climb up here like this is your place? Like you live here? Like you belong here? I’ll tell you what. I’ll make this simple. You take another step, and we’ll fill your head full of so many arrows your skull will look like a porcupine.”

CHAPTER 18



“*R*aise your hands,” the man said. “C’mon now. Raise ‘em!”
Mykal didn’t want to let go of the tree. He knew if he did, his feet would wobble, and off-balance, he’d fall. “I can’t.”

“Raise ‘em!”

Mykal raised a hand. He put his palm on the top of his head.

“Both hands. I’m not askin’ again.”

It took physical strength releasing his death grip on the top of the tree. He managed. He placed the second hand on his head. His thighs kept him in place. He squeezed the trunk hard enough for sap to flow, he thought, giddy with fear.

The men that lived in these woods were runaways, military deserters. Most had been knights, and were either banished or had fled their post. Lethally trained, their deadly demeanor demanded attention, respect, and fear.

They rushed forward. He was stripped of his weapons. Arms slipped under his. With a sudden yank he was lifted onto the canopy. He wondered how they stood without falling.

They set him down.

“Kneel!”

It was wood. Planks. With lit lanterns throughout the canopy, Mykal easily saw that they had a network of walkways. Rope-railed bridges were strung from treetop to treetop. Trails covered the canopy. Mykal saw huts and bridges; a community living in the sky.

Silently, he watched as Blodwyn was brought up next, his staff ripped from

his hands. He was forced to kneel beside Mykal. He knew Blodwyn could take these guys. All of them on his own, if necessary. He'd seen the man's ability during training. He wasn't alone, though. If Blodwyn gave a sign to fight, he'd be ready. He believed the two of them together would be unstoppable in a fight. There simply hadn't been the chance.

The men were dressed in brown pants and off-white tunics, and wore dark green cloaks. Mykal understood why they seemed invisible. They blended in with the trees. It was more than just the darkness below, their clothing served as camouflaged, as well. He figured the Archers' eyes were better equipped for seeing in darkness. If the forest was where they lived, they must have adapted. There could be no other explanation.

"Where did you get this bow?" The man turned over Mykal's bow in his hands, inspecting every edge with his eyes, and running his fingers over the smoothed wood.

Mykal was prodded to answer with a jab. "I made it."

The men laughed around him.

The only one not laughing was the man who held the bow. "You made this?"

Mykal nodded.

The man tossed the bow to another Archer, who gave the weapon an even more intense inspection. "Well?"

"It's good work."

"For a kid, or for an artillator?"

"For anyone," the second man said, and threw the bow back to the first.

"Who are you?"

"My name is Blod—"

"Not you. You," he said pointing to Mykal.

With his hands still on his head, Mykal looked over at Blodwyn.

The Archer said, "Me. Look at me. I asked the question. Not him."

"My name is Mykal."

A look passed between the Archers. It was fast, but it was there, though.

"Go. Fetch Quill," the man ordered one of his companions, before turning his attention on his prisoners. "And what are you doing here?"

Mykal didn't think Blodwyn would say anything this time, but waited just in case. He wished Blodwyn would speak, because he wasn't sure how to best answer the question. How much truth did he divulge, how much did he keep secret? If there was a medium, he didn't know where to find it. "We don't mean to intrude—"

The Archer laughed. "Intrude? Is that what you call it? A friend stopping by during a meal might apologize for intruding. The three of you trampled into our forest without an invitation! That is an invasion. There's a difference. Just so we're clear. But I've interrupted you. Please, continue."

Looking at Blodwyn, Mykal said, "We've come to collect something that was hidden in the forest—"

"There is nothing hidden in our home that we don't know about." A cord of veins bulged on his neck, as if it took restraint to keep from attacking. "What item have you come to collect? I'm sure we have it somewhere, and can save you the time of looking for it."

A new archer walked up and stood behind the man talking. "Anthony."

Anthony turned around. "Quill, I hate to disturb you."

"You've caught the men, I see," Quill said. The two looked like brothers. Both stood nearly a head taller than Mykal. Dark beards were trimmed close to their faces. The only difference between them was that Quill wore a hat, with a large, bent brim, which curled on the sides, and was pulled down in front. "I thought there were three?"

"There's a witch below. She has fire in her hands."

"She's not a witch!" Mykal wasn't sure why he said anything, and regretted the outburst immediately.

Quill raised an eyebrow. "I see. And who might the two of you be?"

Anthony didn't let them answer. "This one is Mykal."

Quill stepped forward, and then leaned in close. Mykal noticed his cloak was secured over the shoulder by a large dragonfly pin.

"Who is your father?" Quill narrowed his eyes, as if searching for the truth in Mykal's expression.

"Why does that—"

Mykal never even saw the blade, but felt the cold steel edge as it pressed against his throat. Quill was nose to nose with him. Their eyes locked. “Who is your father, boy?”

Even if he wanted to answer, he couldn't. Warm blood rolled down his skin, and felt like it was pooling in the hollow of his throat. Quill's unblinking eyes were a clear sign now was not the time for taking a stand. Regardless that he feared answering would draw more blood. He mumbled his answer, speaking so as not to have the knife cut further into flesh.

“What was that?” Quill still held the knife in place, but released some of the pressure.

Mykal allowed a shallow sigh. “My father is Eardic.”

Quill stood up, spun around. His cloak whirled. “And your mother?”

Mykal said, “Anna.”

“Stand up,” Quill said. With an unspoken command, the archers with arrows trained on them lowered their bows. “Both of you, on your feet. How do you know the witch?”

Blodwyn stood up. “Sir, I believe we've—”

“No one is talking to you. I know who you are, Blodwyn. You are more recognizable than the king,” Anthony said. He threw a fist which struck Blodwyn in the back of the neck, dropping him to his hands.

“Stop!” Mykal said. They somehow *knew* Blodwyn.

Quill grabbed Blodwyn's arms and held him as Anthony struck again. The punch landed on the side of his head, above the ear. Blodwyn fell flat, unconscious.

“Why did you do that?” Mykal reached for Blodwyn, but Quill stood between them.

Quill said, “How do you know the witch?”

“She is a friend. She's just a friend.” It wasn't exactly the truth, except that he considered Galatia more of a friend after meeting the likes of Quill and the other Archers.

“Your *friend* is down there threatening our forest. Tell me why we shouldn't just kill her. We could do so. Easily.”

Then why haven't you, Mykal almost said. It wasn't easy to talk, though. Too many questions whipped around inside his head, making concentration difficult. Something was up. He desperately needed to understand what was actually taking place. He had seen *it* in Anthony's eyes when Quill was called for. He just couldn't figure out what *it* was. What was with the questions about his parents? There was no mistaking a flavor of familiarity on the tip of his tongue, but couldn't name *it*.

It was there. *It* would come to him.

"I see you don't believe me," Quill said, and raised a hand.

"No," Mykal said. No one else should get hurt. Blodwyn breathed, but had not regained consciousness. He'd just answer questions, and do what was asked. If that was the only way of escaping this situation, it was an easy price to pay. "No. I do believe you. I believe you. There's no reason to harm her."

"Tell her to put out the fire."

Mykal wasn't sure Galatia would listen.

"Tell her to extinguish the flames and climb up here. Now."

He couldn't climb down the tree. How he'd made it up in the first place still baffled him. "How do I tell her?"

"Yell down to her."

Mykal walked across the planks. He looked back, fearful the height and potential plummet to his death. Karyn was not far from his thoughts. He hoped she was okay. He wanted to know where they were keeping her. Getting onto his stomach, he leaned his head over the side and looked down. Although he couldn't see the wizard, he saw her blue flame. It glowed like a living orb floating and spinning around and around. He cupped his hands over his mouth. "Galatia, put out the flame and climb up here."

He felt stupid shouting down to her. He hoped that doing so was not a betrayal. He wasn't sure Quill could kill her. There was a chance he could hurt her, though. That was not something he wished to witness. Having her come to the treetops could be a trap. It probably was. He still didn't see that he had any other options and he hoped that her power would keep her safe... and possibly aid them. For the moment, Quill had all control.

Mykal pushed himself up and stood, brushing off his clothing.

A green smoke appeared and spun in a tight circle by his feet. He stepped back, as the smoke spread and shot further upward. In the center of this glowing whirlwind, Galatia appeared.

The archers were ready once again, with arrows nocked and bowstrings taut. Mykal jumped in front of her, arms out. “She did as you asked, Quill.”

“Richard, bind her,” Quill directed another of his men.

Richard uncoiled a rope held in place by a loop at his belt. He tied one end into a lasso.

Galatia raised her hands, not in surrender.

Mykal hadn't paid attention before, when she created the blue flames, but noticed now. Her mouth moved. He couldn't hear what words were said, but he now knew she spoke her magic into existence.

Before Mykal could warn her, an Archer grabbed her wrists and pulled her arms behind her back. Another archer stepped forward and stuffed a rag into her mouth. Richard draped the lasso over her head, and around her shoulders before pulling the knot tight pinning Galatia's arms against her side. He continued wrapping the rope around her until she was able to do no more than wiggle her fingertips.

Richard had been a simple distraction. His lassoed rope fooled Mykal, and had obviously tricked Galatia as well.

“Who do you think you are?” Quill stood in front of Galatia. “Take her down a notch.”

Anthony punched Galatia in the back. She winced, eyes closed tight, her cry of pain muffled by the gag. Her legs wobbled. She dropped to her knees. Mykal wished there was a way to wipe away her tears. Looking away was not an option. She surrendered because he'd told her to give up. This was his fault.

“Stop this! Stop it. Quill, make him stop!”

“Uncle Quill,” he said.

Mykal's next plea for mercy froze in the back of his mouth. Their eyes met.

“Out of respect, you should call me *Uncle* Quill.”

There were no words. Mykal knew it was a trick. This sinister man had to be

messing with his mind. “You’re not my uncle!”

“How is my father? Without that leg of his, he’s bed ridden, I suppose.”

His father?

Grandfather?

Mykal said, “My father never mentioned a brother.”

“You barely knew your father.”

Galatia’s eyes were open wide, her tears forgotten. She kept looking from Quill to Mykal and back again.

“That’s why he has me get the names,” Mykal said.

“What was that?” Quill said.

He hadn’t realized he’d spoken aloud. Grandfather wanted the names, worried each time it might be his son the king had strung up. “If we’re family, why are you doing this?”

“Have I hurt you? Has anyone here hurt you?”

“You’ve hurt my friends!”

“An old man with a walking stick, and a witch? Those are your friends? What would your father say if he knew you were hanging around with such ... people?”

“My father’s dead! Don’t talk about my father!”

Quill raised a condescending eyebrow. “He is? When did he die? How?”

Quill laughed.

Mykal didn’t know the answers.

“He’s not dead, I assure you.”

If he wasn’t dead, then where was he? Mykal thought. He wasn’t going to ask. Even if Quill knew the answer. He’d rather spend the rest of his life searching for the truth than rely on this man for help.

And he would learn the truth, he decided then. Eventually.

“What would my father say if he knew his brother was nothing more than a two-bit thug, living in a treehouse, beating up, and robbing innocent people?” The words were filled with such venom he couldn’t risk keeping them in his mouth without the poison making him sick.

Anthony delivered an opened hand slap. Mykal felt as though his eyeballs

had been knocked loose in their sockets. He saw specks of light float in front of his face. His tooth cut into his lip. Warm blood coated his tongue.

Blodwyn stirred. Galatia shed fresh tears.

“I want to know what item you’re looking for. What is it the three of you think you’ll find here?”

Mykal hadn’t been able to find a middle ground to what he revealed to their captors. Even so, he knew telling Quill about the mirror was nowhere near it.

An Archer raised his bow. He drew the nocked arrow to his cheek. The Archer kept both eyes open.

The sun was rising. The eastern horizon looked orange, and pink, and red, fringed with light blue.

Quill said. “Kill the old man.”

CHAPTER 19



M ykal screamed as lightning bolts launched from his fingertips. Ten strands of brilliant energy, blinding in the early predawn, merged into one dense crackling beam. The lightning slammed into Carl's chest. He released the bowstring. The arrow flew, but missed its target by a fair margin. The electricity coursed through Carl's body and pinned the Archer in place. His skin bubbled. The putrid odor of burnt flesh permeated the air around them.

Mykal couldn't curl his fingers. The bolts wouldn't stop. He took a step back, and raised his arms. The lightning shot into the trees. Severed branches fell around them. Wood burned. Smoke rose in the air. He saw an opening in the canopy, and aimed his hands toward it. The beam coursed into the sky.

He tried focusing on his breathing. He knew he was having short, rapid breaths. His heart pounded inside his chest.

Inside his head he counted to five, and then to ten. He concentrated on the numbers. He said each one out loud slowly.

There was a loud crackling sound, and the lightning stopped.

Winded, he bent forward. He pressed his palms to his forehead. It throbbed behind his skull.

What just happened? he thought. *What did I just do?*

Carl was stuck where he stood once struck. His mouth was wide open, but no sound passed his lips.

"Carl?" Anthony poked a finger into his shoulder.

Carl fell sideways.

Anthony knelt beside him, lowered his head near Carl's face. "He's not breathing." He immediately began pounding on Carl's chest with a fist attempting to resuscitate his compatriot.

Quill moved toward Mykal.

Mykal didn't know what had happened, or why it had. He could barely keep his thoughts coherent. He raised his hands, aimed his fingers at Quill. "Stop. Stay right there. This is your fault!"

"My fault?" Quill jabbed his thumb at his chest. He grunted out a laugh. "Mine?"

"Untie the woman," Mykal said. "And where is the girl? I want to see her. I want her brought here right now."

"Mykal," Quill said.

"Now!"

Quill waved a hand. Anthony ran off.

Carl abruptly coughed and began breathing again. He rolled onto his side. "Would you stop punching me, man?"

The sun burned away most of the night, rising in the sky as if as restless for the day as Mykal was for the light it brought. He was amazed by what he saw. Along the treetops existed an expansive and elaborate maze of walkways and huts. The revelation made him realize their fear of fire was not even remotely irrational. A single, strong uncontrolled flame could wipe out everything they had built. It made Quill's anger somewhat justified. There was still no reason for the violence and threats. Certainly not the abduction of the princess.

Mykal moved his hands back and forth as if ready to fry the next person who moved. Truth was, he didn't even know how to repeat what he had done. How had the bolts fired from his fingers? He wanted to sit down and just stare at his hands while he tried to figure out what was happening.

He possessed magic.

"Untie the woman," Mykal repeated.

Quill shook his head. He whispered, "No."

"Untie her!"

"We won't be doing that," Quill said.

His hands shook, but he aimed his fingertips at Quill.

Quill shrugged, as if it didn't matter if he lived or died. "We're not having two witches loose in our community, nephew. Between her fire and your lightning, you could destroy all of this and burn away everything, all of it, until there's nothing left but ash."

"Untie her."

"We're getting the girl, *nephew*. You can have her, and you can leave."

There was nothing warm in Quill's use of the familiar nephew. He recognized that it was an attempt to bait him. "You're correct," Mykal said. "The girl, these two, and me. We're leaving."

Quill didn't argue. Getting away would not be simple. Mykal knew a battle was a hair's breadth away. Their weapons were piled together behind Quill. He didn't know how to play this out. They were maybe a hundred to a hundred and fifty feet in the air. A quick way down must exist, but where? How would they all escape back to the forest floor without the archers firing on them? They'd be easy targets on the descent, to say the least.

Blodwyn groaned.

"Wyn? Wyn?"

"We have a medicine person, someone who can check his head, make sure your friend is alright," Quill said.

Mykal almost laughed. He shuffled his feet around, unwilling to stand idle. It was impossible to keep an eye on everyone. They were everywhere. He couldn't count them. More than ten? No, twenty. There could be as many as fifty. They didn't stay still. It was difficult gauging exactly how many men there were. No one advanced, but he remembered how easily they'd captured Galatia and rendered her helpless. He didn't dare look back. If someone was behind him, it would be over soon. They'd be dead. All of this would have been for nothing. "I don't think so. He's okay," Mykal said. "Wyn? Come on, Wyn. Wake up. Untie Galatia."

Blodwyn slowly got to his feet as he regained consciousness. He pressed a hand to the side of his head. Mykal couldn't see any blood. That had to be a good sign.

“Galatia, Wyn, untie her,” Mykal said, hoping Blodwyn was hearing him.

Quill raised his hands. He wasn’t surrendering.

The archers raised their bows.

“You can’t zap all of us. Not at the same time. We’re not afraid of dying. We’re protecting our community, *nephew*. Would you be willing to give up your life for your animal farm? I’ll bet you would.” Quill kept his hands in the air. When he dropped them, the arrows would fly.

Blodwyn made his way over to Galatia and removed the rag shoved into her mouth. He worked at loosening the knot, and pulled the rope away.

Mykal didn’t stop aiming his fingers at as many archers as possible. “We didn’t come here looking for trouble,” he said.

“And the king’s knights? Were they looking for trouble?” Quill did that thing with his eyebrow again.

If there was time, Mykal would hold the man down and shave the brows right off his forehead. “Where is my friend, the one you kidnapped?”

“She’s coming. They’re bringing her.”

“Galatia, are you okay?” Mykal said.

She ran her hands up and down her arms. He noticed how timid she looked, frightened. “I’m okay.”

“We want all of you to leave,” Quill said, lowering his arms, slowly. It wasn’t quite an admission of defeat. It didn’t matter. They were the words Mykal needed to hear.

“Mykal!”

It was Karyn. Anthony followed close behind. He had a hand on her shoulder, and maybe the other pressed a blade to her back? He couldn’t tell. It seemed likely. While the thought of shaving Quill’s eyebrows gave him comfort, the idea of beating Anthony to a pulp was suddenly twice as pleasing.

Blodwyn retrieved his staff. “It’s unfortunate that things played out this way,” he said. It had been a while since he’d said a word. Mykal was thankful. He no longer wanted to be in charge. He’d never wanted to be in charge. His hand had been forced and he stepped up, nothing more.

“I am letting you go. All of you. You have my word,” Quill said.

Your word means nothing, was the insult Mykal almost hurled back. “We appreciate that,” was what he said. Mykal waved Karyn away from Anthony. “Karyn, come here. Behind me.”

Quill held up a hand. “I ask one thing.”

You are in no position to ask for anything. Mykal held his tongue.

“What is the item you were looking for?”

Galatia flexed her fingers. Her eyes darted left and right. These men would not fool her a second time. She looked even more ready for a fight after her mistreatment. It would be anything but fair. Something about the way she stood said she would unleash unspeakable magic if anyone twitched the wrong way. “It’s hidden in the forest.”

“I assure you, there is nothing in these woods that we don’t know about.” Quill’s entire demeanor had changed. The arrogance was somewhat toned down. Indicating they knew every inch of the forest sounded conceited, but in context, perhaps was not. “We’re just as anxious for you to find what you’re looking for so you can leave. Perhaps we can assist you.”

“You want to help us?” Mykal asked incredulously. He tried to regain control of his breathing. Fast, shallow breaths left him winded. Blood raced through his body. His heart had hardly slowed since he began the horrifying climb to the treetops. Lives were in danger, and his magic had kicked in. He’d defended them with powers he never knew he possessed. The power had slumbered for ten years and seven inside him without even hinting at its existence.

“We want you gone,” Quill said. “If that means helping you, then so be it.”

As much as Mykal didn’t want to lead, he thought of the king’s knights. He could only guess what Blodwyn and Galatia thought. Murder was something he wanted no part of; there was a better solution. He just wasn’t sure what it was. He could hear Karyn breathing heavy behind him, her palms on his back. She used him as a shield, thought of him as her protector. Aside from his training with Blodwyn, he’d never fought another person his entire life. He spent most of his time on the farm. When he went to the market he kept to himself. His size helped deter fights. Using the skills he’d learned felt impossible at the moment. Using magic felt even more ludicrous, and yet he’d nearly killed a man with

lightning *from his fingers*.

He counted fifteen archers. More must be watching them, camouflaged in the trees. It only appeared as if he had the upper hand. The one thing that gave him any consolation was Quill's blatant curiosity, and his obvious fear of fire. "If you want to help us find the item—"

Galatia held up a hand. "Mykal, no!"

He glared back at her. She closed her mouth, lips pressed tightly together.

"We're family nephew. A fine uncle I'd be if I didn't at least try to help blood." Quill's arrogance was well placed. They were on his land. He knew every woodland creature and every fallen branch. His confidence demanded trust when there wasn't even reason enough to let him take another breath.

"There is a war coming, uncle," Mykal said. It seemed clear that Quill was interested in finding the artifact and seeing if it had any monetary value. Mykal left the sarcasm out of his tone. Matching fire with fire was not the right choice at the moment. Not if he wanted the plan that had suddenly formed to work. He didn't consider himself stupid. Their hunt for the mirror would be in constant jeopardy. When they searched the woods Archers would follow, ready to kill them all at a wave of Quill's hand. They needed some kind of alliance. The best way to bind the two together was in pointing to a common enemy.

"There is always a war coming." Quill countered.

"Not like this one. The time has come to choose sides," Mykal said. He thought he understood everything Galatia explained. While it had taken convincing, he suspected Quill would be a hundred times more difficult to persuade.

"We've chosen," Quill said. "Long ago. We are on *our* side."

"That's not going to be good enough," Mykal said. "The Mountain King is assembling an army as we speak. He is going to cross the Isthmian in droves, hell-bent on declaring himself emperor! The issues you have with Grey Ashland will pale in comparison to the reign of terror on its way."

Mykal saw it: a flash reflected in Quill's eyes. It was more than a reflection from the rising sun, and then it was gone.

"That's crazy. No one crosses the Isthmian. King Hermon knows his place.

He rules the east. That's plenty of land for any man." Quill sounded defensive, as if he needed to believe his words, his opinion.

"Unless he aspires to more," Mykal said. He locked eyes with his uncle. He waited. Quill seemed smart, and he guessed right now the man was working things out in his mind. He gave him time to do it.

"And the four of you are going to stop King Hermon? How?" He shook his head, snickering. "Not with two wizards, an old man, and a girl." Quill crossed his arms over his chest, resolved. If sides were taken, he wasn't interested in standing with the lot before him. "We've defended this forest so well that no one even enters. They cross south to north on the lake rather than risk facing our wrath."

Mykal sensed doubt in the man's words. Quill tried to maintain his arrogant front, but his confidence had faltered.

"And yet, here we are, in *your* forest." It was acting. Nothing more. Deception. Mykal kept at it, chipping away at the exterior. "Here we are, and we have the upper hand. Think of the bonfire King Hermon will unleash when his archers send flaming arrows into the woods. Kind of tough to defend against that, don't you think?"

They did not have an upper hand. Quill, if he decided, could kill them. There was no doubt other than the seeds Mykal continued planting.

"The thing you have in the forest is so valuable to your cause that you risk coming into the Cicade? Or were you just fleeing from the men you murdered during the night?" Quill dropped his arms to his side. "People are a complicated breed. Lies and stories come easy when they have nothing to lose."

"We're not leaving. Not until we have what we've come for. Your ignorance will not save you, even if you take comfort hiding behind it," Mykal said. He didn't want his words to sound harsh. He thought they'd inflict more threat, sound more passionate, and ring truer if he kept his tone of voice even.

"Ignorance?" He forced out a laugh.

"If you want to accompany us as we search for the item, you are welcome. Just be warned. One wrong move, one flinch that I interpret as threatening, and we will burn this forest to nothing but ash." Mykal hoped his threat was taken

seriously. It wasn't an empty threat. He just wasn't sure how he'd called on his magic before. He was certain he had no idea how to control the power. And, unless they were blind, they saw his flailing earlier. Regardless, they *had* witnessed his power.

He would not underestimate the Archers, and certainly not his uncle. These were clearly dangerous men, but, he realized, so was he.

CHAPTER 20



*K*ing Hermon Cordillera stood on the dock at the Fjord Range. The oblong inlet, enclosed by the tapered, green, grassy hills, and rocky cliffs which stretched into the Rames Mountains, was at the westernmost point of the Osiris Realm. The Isthmian was placid only trapped within this fjord. The dangers beyond, and below still existed. The king paid well for the delicacy of freshly caught fish pulled from its waters. The few ships tied at the dock's slips were unimpressive, but ideal for fishing the inlet. His armadas of ships meant for war have never been tested on the open seas. His favorite was *Shadow*. His sleek beauty was large enough, and the carpenter assured him, strong enough for a sea storm's pounding should it have to brave such weather. More importantly, it was small enough and light enough to out sail any of the Voyagers' ships. It bobbed in the water beside him, as languid as a large cat eyeing its inevitable prey, hungry to set out on its maiden voyage.

He watched his men ready the ship for sailing. He'd been holed up atop his mountains for far too long. Getting directly involved was the only way he could ensure that his plans were fully realized. He looked forward to crossing the sea. Only in his mind had he ever seen the west. And it was glorious. When he was emperor he would go from kingdom to kingdom. His visits would become a regular part of his rule. Random, but regular, and all would recognize him. He would spend less time at home, and more time away from his wife and daughters. No thought pleased him more.

His possessions were already stowed aboard. It was a risk, but once resolved

to taking the journey across the sea, he saw no way of leaving Ida in the castle. He needed her magic close. How else would he find the other wizards? He made promises with some intention of keeping his word. She had demanded the deal be set in writing. She wanted the position as the king/potential emperor's Advisor. Perhaps more importantly, she also demanded a bedchamber somewhere within the castle, not in the tower. After putting ink to paper, and it being signed by them both, he affixed his royal seal. She was on deck watching everyone prepare for the voyage.

He'd already heard grumbling from the crew. Superstition held that a woman on a ship was bad luck. He wasn't sure they'd taken a look at Ida. She was a woman by sex alone. The knowledge that a wizard was on board would likely make things worse.

It was dangerous letting her leave his enchanted tower. There were no other options, however. He knew Ida *wanted* the other wizards, as well, even if finding them was the simple matter of satisfying her curiosity. He imagined that she desired to meet others of her kind.

The sun had risen into a cloudless blue sky. The season's heat might have run its course. Winter was not too far off. The king had an appropriate royal robe for the cool temperature, but left it behind at the palace. The sun and sky fooled him about the briskness of the day. Anyone who didn't realize he was king in his own kingdom by sight, entourage, or the crown upon his head deserved a week in the stockades.

Even without the robe Hermon felt sweat dripping from his armpits, and winced. Sweating was something peasants did, not a king. If only for that reason, he wished he'd brought the robe. He'd sweat more, but no one would see the evidence.

The stockades taught lessons. Thanks to his father he'd learned a thing or two from the stockades. Humiliation and desperation were at the forefront. It was hard not thinking about the past whenever he thought of the stockades. Sometimes they bothered him, those memories. Usually they served as a reminder. Where he had come from? Where he was now?

KING HERMON'S OLDER BROTHER, Jeremiah, was the first prince and heir to King Elroy's throne. Shortly after Jeremiah turned ten years and two, he fell sick with a high fever. Hermon watched his brother collapse on stone stairs. He laughed, thinking Jeremiah had tripped. That would have been perfect, since he was always the one stumbling over his own feet, and walking into objects. Not to mention, at eight, if an older brother stumbles it's just funny. When his brother didn't move, Hermon panicked. Rather than check on his brother's wellbeing, he ran to fetch his father.

King Elroy hated interruptions, especially when in the Long Room. The massive wooden doors were three times his height, maybe four. The only way to get either of the unlatched doors moving was with a running start. Hermon, only half the size of his brother, and thinner, had not stopped running since he had left his fallen brother. His footfalls echoed from the stone floors behind, as if desperate to catch up with the runner. He lowered his shoulder as he slammed into the door on the right. It didn't swing open, but merely budged. That was normal for him. He also didn't have the same strength Jeremiah had, but it was enough for him to fit between and into the Long Room.

Colossal windows shaped like gravestone markers behind pillars of marble lined the walls running east and west. Except at night, light always filtered into the room. Banners with sigils hung between windows. Knights in full armor with giant swords and steel shields stood in front of each pillar. Hermon could not recall ever seeing one move. Jeremiah swore they just shells, like statues. Eyes behind lowered face guards suggested otherwise, as they followed his every step, every time he came to this chamber.

“Father!”

King Elroy slammed fist on the table as he rose to his feet from his seat at the head. “Hermon! What have I told you about coming in here?”

A conundrum. The question sounded rhetorical. Regardless, it had been asked. “Never to disturb you when you are inside the Long Room.”

The eight men seated at the sides of the long rectangular table laughed.

Hermon knew them all. The two lords seated to the king's right and left, as well as the general, colonel, and captains of the Cordillera Knights.

The laughter cut the tension from the room. King Elroy sighed, and waved an impatient hand. "Why are you here?"

Prince Hermon froze in place. Eighteen eyeballs were locked on him. His father, pulled down on his thick red beard, which was never a good sign. It always meant that the king's patience had reached its end. "Hermon! Get your head out of the clouds, boy. Close the door on your way out. I don't want you barging in here like that again. And this isn't over. We will discuss your punishment after we dine tonight. Am I understood?"

Hermon found the strength to nod his head.

King Elroy shooed him away. "Don't forget to close the door. How you managed to open it in the first place is beyond me."

More laughter.

Hermon knew his cheeks were red. He felt the heat warm his face. Turning around, he stopped. It wasn't that he'd forgotten why he'd come; it was simply that the room and its occupants had overwhelmed him. "But father, it's Jeremiah!"

"What of your brother?" King Elroy, having already dismissed his youngest son, had returned to his chair and only absently asked the question. The disruption, in his mind, over.

"He fell. By the stairs." Hermon said. He hated that tears showed up. Crying was weakness. Men didn't cry. He remembered a time when Jeremiah took the blame for broken lantern. A tapestry caught fire, and after the fire had been extinguished, it could only be thrown away. King Elroy delivered the punishment in Jeremiah's bedchamber, but forced Hermon to watch. Jeremiah lay over their father's knees. Using a thick leather belt, he whipped Jeremiah. Six lashes. After each one, new tears pooled in his brother's eyes, but he never cried out. Instead, Hermon had stood there sobbing. The king never took his eyes off Hermon. It was almost as if he knew Hermon had been responsible for the fire.

Hermon hated that memory.

He knew he should have spoken up. He never should have let Jeremiah take the whippings. He had been too scared to say anything.

That night he apologized to Jeremiah for being a coward. Jeremiah told him, “Don’t worry about it. That’s what big brothers do.”

“What do they do?” Hermon had asked.

“They protect little brothers.”

King Elroy looked up from whatever occupied his attention on the table. “Well, lad, is he alright?”

“He’s not moving.”

The eight men jumped to their feet. So many chair legs scraped against the rock floor that it sounded like a thunderstorm inside the castle. They waited for the king to pass by where they stood before moving away from the table and following him and Hermon hurriedly out of the Long Room.

Hermon didn’t look back. He ran ahead, knowing they’d all be on his heels. Part of him hoped Jeremiah was up and okay when they found him. Another part worried that if Jeremiah was up and okay, their father would use the switch. Nothing stung more than course wood on exposed flesh, skin that turned red and raw after one whack. It never stopped after just one whack though. Never.

His fear subsided. Jeremiah had moved, but was not on his feet. He’d crawled to the bottom of the stairs. His hands reached up. “Father?”

King Elroy bent down, cradled his son in his arms, and spirited him up the stairs in a single, fluid motion. After they were out of sight, Hermon heard his father’s voice boom. “Get the Curer!”

Hermon stayed outside the closed bedchamber door for two full, excruciatingly long days. The curer came and went each morning, each evening, and once during the middle of the night. When the curer exited the room, he’d smile at Hermon and muss his hair, silently telling the young prince not to worry.

By dusk of the third day, something had changed. The king, the curer, and a few others Hermon did not recognize stayed in Jeremiah’s bed chamber. He couldn’t be sure, but with his ear pressed to the door he heard someone crying. It couldn’t be his father, but he wasn’t sure who else it might be.

When King Elroy finally exited Jeremiah’s room he sat down on the hard

floor beside Hermon. The king's eyes were red and puffy. He rested his elbows on bent knees, and chewed at the skin on the side of his thumb.

Hermon hated that silence. "Is he getting better, father?"

The king closed his eyes for just a moment, and when he opened them, he smiled. "He's pretty sick, Hermon. Right now he is in a sleep. The curer is unable to wake him, and isn't positive as to what might be causing it. His fever has come down. He is not as hot as he was even this morning. The curer assures me this is a good sign. He says the sleep is the body's way of healing itself."

Hermon wasn't sure he understood what was happening. All he knew was that Jeremiah was in some kind of deep sleep. "And if he doesn't wake up again?"

King Elroy patted Hermon on the head, got to his feet, and walked away.

Had he heard him? Hermon wondered. Should he ask again?

While playing hide and go seek with his brother weeks ago, Hermon had hidden in some cupboards in the kitchen. He'd overheard conversations that he'd paid little mind to, until now. The women cooking talked about magic. Hermon knew even talking about such things could land someone in the gallows. The old Emperor Rye was responsible for that ancient decree. He wouldn't tell on them. At the time, he'd not been that interested. He worried more about his brother finding him.

It was late, but his father had not ordered him to bed. His idea made him smile. If there really was magic, he'd find it, use it, and heal his brother. Their father would be happy to see Jeremiah up and about. He'd welcome Hermon's newfound talents with open arms. There might be a feast in his honor, but that was beside the point. He waited by his brother's door until everyone left. He wasn't supposed to disturb Jeremiah, but that didn't stop him from quietly visiting.

Hermon always expected his brother to appear ... bigger, take up more space in the bed. Instead, Jeremiah looked small and thin under the sheets. Hermon put a hand over his belly, but doing so did not stop its trembling. Standing beside the bed, he stared at his brother for what seemed like a long while. He didn't look any different now than before he became ill.

“I’m going to find a way to heal you, brother. I can’t tell you how. But don’t you worry. I have a plan. I know it will work. I just have to be very, very secretive about it. If I get caught before I am able to cure you, father will whip me something fierce, I’ve no doubt,” he explained to the still form. He whispered, but wasn’t sure why. He should speak loudly; everyone should. No one should whisper. That didn’t make sense. What was the worst thing that could happen, Jeremiah might wake up?

“I’ll be back to see you in the morning. If you wake up before then, please don’t tell anyone,” Hermon said, and then laughed. “Oh, but I haven’t even shared my plan with you, have I? It’s better this way. Then you aren’t forced to lie if anyone asks where I am, or what I’ve been doing.”

He almost reached over and hugged Jeremiah. If his brother had been awake, and not sick, he’d never have thought to hug him. He couldn’t explain the urge, but stopped before acting on it. What if Jeremiah woke up while he was giving him a hug, and got mad? He didn’t ever want to do anything to make his older brother upset with him.

His course of action decided, Hermon made his way through mostly dark and narrow hallways. Every third torch was lit, casting his shadow in animated relief against the castle’s stone walls. He climbed a staircase, his back close against one wall. With so many people living inside the castle, it was likely others were awake. If anyone saw him, they wouldn’t ask him anything directly. They’d be apt to report to his father, or a Lord, and then, eventually, he’d be questioned. It was far easier to not get caught roaming the halls alone at night. Far easier.

The library door was simple to open compared to the heavy doors to the Long Room. Inside, Hermon was always amazed by the amount of books in the room. There were two rows of book shelves, with aisles easy enough to navigate through. Each row had four separate five-shelf bookcases. That wasn’t all. The walls around the room had been fitted with shelves by the palace carpenter. Hermon enjoyed touching the leather spines. On some of the shelves rolled scrolls were stacked like triangles. The paper was yellowed and aged, and he’d been warned more than once never to touch the scrolls. If ruined, the history written on them would be lost forever. Actually, he had been warned never to

touch any of the books, either.

Hermon grabbed a stack of books from the closest shelf. He went back to the hallway and stacked them against the wall. He climbed on top and removed one of the lit torches from its hold. He traded it with an unlit one in the library, and retrieved the stack of books.

He knew in essence how the library worked, the manner in which books were catalogued. The trouble he faced was of a more academic nature. He knew books on magic existed, assumed some were in the Cordillera Library, but didn't know the books by title, or by author. He also knew that having books on magic broke the law. If his father wasn't worried about getting caught, then he wouldn't.

Hermon searched shelf by shelf, and bookcase by bookcase. The daunting task lasted most of the night. He just never realized how many books existed in the library. There were books written on so many topics, he worried he might not recognize a volume on magic even if what he sought was right in front of him. And he was not worried his father would come looking for him. He couldn't recall a single time when the king searched him out. If anything someone on his staff always would come calling.

And then he saw it. Magic Spells & Potions. The book was written by Gunther Crowley. He carefully pulled the book from the shelf nearly dropping it, not expecting its weight. Hugging it to his chest he went back to the front of the library and set it on a table. He replaced the torch in the hallway, and the books he used to stand on back upon their shelf. With his prize under his arm, he made his way back through the castle and rushed to his bedchamber. As best he could tell, not one person had seen him.

Pushing the book under his bed, he climbed onto the mattress, and beneath his covers. He figured he should sleep. He needed rest. The last several days of vigil outside of his brother's sickroom had left him exhausted. Yet lying in the darkness, he tossed and turned. It became impossible for him to ignore the hidden book. His brother needed his help *now*, not later tonight, not in the morning.

Using a wooden match, Hermon lit his bedside lantern, and adjusted the

flame. The small table and chair in the corner were meant for his studies. It was a perfect place for reading. He opened the book and began. There were so many words he'd never seen before; he had no way to know what they meant. A new spell seemingly filled every page. Each chapter began with a list of needed supplies. Most required cooking instruments. Finding a cure would prove more difficult than he had anticipated.

Eventually, his eyes grew too heavy to keep open. Fighting sleep was no longer an option. His head lowered onto the book's pages. They felt as soft as his down pillow. He convinced himself he'd sleep only for a moment, just until the burning of his eyeballs subsided.

He woke up when his father yelled. Startled, his head sprang off the book. "Father," he said. Remnants of sleep were in his voice, crust coated his eyelids. "I must have fallen asleep."

"What is this?" King Elroy snatched up the book. "What is the meaning of this?"

The pride he thought he'd feel was missing; he was filled with fear instead. "I wanted to help Jeremiah."

"Your brother is dead." King Elroy spat the words. He loomed like a giant over the small table.

Hermon pushed back in his chair, putting slight distance between himself and his father. "He's not dead."

"He's dead," King Elroy said. "And when I come to tell you, I find this?"

"I wanted to help him, father. I knew I could heal him."

"With witchcraft?" King Elroy huffed, puffing his chest. "Did you do something to your brother?"

"Did I do something to my brother?" Hermon furrowed his brow, confused by the question. "I was going to heal him, to help him!"

King Elroy ran a hand over his face. "What have you done? What did you do to us? Your brother didn't deserve this curse. He—"

"Curse? Father, I didn't curse him. It wasn't me."

King Elroy wasn't listening. He paced the bedchamber. "It explains why the curer couldn't determine a cause. He wasn't looking for black magic! He wasn't

checking for witchcraft!”

“Father, it wasn’t me! I didn’t curse my brother.” He knew he was crying, felt ashamed of those tears. He refused to wipe them away as that would only serve as an acknowledgement of his weakness. He wasn’t weak.

Other than his father’s footsteps, silence filled the room and stretched.

Eventually, King Elroy leaned in close, and lowered his voice to just above a harsh whisper. “I am going to burn this book. You are never to mention it, ever. Do you understand me?”

His father was never going to believe him, not now; arguing would be pointless.

“There will be further repercussions for what you have wrought, have no doubt! What you’ve done is unforgivable. Unforgivable!”

After Jeremiah’s funeral, Hermon spent a full week in the stockades. The king refused to tell anyone why, but encouraged the throwing of rotten fruit and vegetables at his youngest son. Once a day a squire showed up and doused him with two buckets of water, as he was forced to urinate and defecate where he stood bent over and bound by the unfinished wood.

There was no recovering from that humiliation, and he relived the torment nightly in his dreams. He often awoke screaming and covered in cold sweat. No one ever comforted him. He was left totally alone. The king didn’t share meals in the hall with him. He’d rather eat alone than with his only remaining son. As further and continual punishment he made Hermon serve his meal from the kitchen, wait as he ate, and then clear the table once he finished.

The servants never asked questions. They didn’t look at him with pity in their eyes, either. No. It was suspicion he saw, if they held eye contact for more than a second or two.

Others inside the castle turned away when they saw him. He’d been shunned, ostracized by his father’s attitude and behavior toward him.

Did everyone think he killed his brother? They must suspect he’d done something horrible. If not, wouldn’t they wonder why King Elroy tortured the prince so mercilessly?

Hermon didn’t dare return to the library. He suspected books on magic had

been removed; either hidden, or destroyed, it didn't matter. He didn't need magic anymore. Jeremiah was dead. For what he wanted to do next, all Hermon needed was to collect the poison pellets left in every corner of the castle. He saved them in a jar in his room under his bed. He ground the pellets into a powder, keeping the poison in a cupped hand, and dropped it into the king's meals. He did so every day, adding poison to whatever the king ate.

When the king became ill, he considered stopping. He thought his father might recover had he stopped. At no point did King Elroy show any signs of forgiveness toward Hermon. Even when bedridden, the king had Hermon bring his food, and remove the dirty dishes. That decided it for Hermon. He continued.

When King Elroy could no longer eat, Hermon mixed the poison into whatever broth his father could slurp from a spoon. It didn't matter. The curer explained that the king would pass away soon, and once again patted Hermon on the head.

It was the only physical human contact, the only conversation with anyone, Herman had experienced in a long, long time.

He felt no remorse.

He harbored no guilt when informed that his father had died.

What he knew, but hadn't fully realized, was that he was now the king.

The people proclaimed it at his coronation. They even lied as they cried: "Long live the king!"

They couldn't mean it. Half suspected he'd killed his brother. The other half, the king. With the crown on his head, it didn't matter. At nearly nine years old, he was in charge of the entire realm, and that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 21



The way down from the Archers' canopy was less than impressive. Knotted ropes were lowered. Mykal stayed up top while his friends, followed by Quill and Anthony, shimmied down. He pointed his hands at those nearby as if they were the lethal weapons he guessed they now were, if he knew how to summon his magic at will. The archers had no idea what he'd done had been one of the only times he'd ever used magic. They watched his fingers wide-eyed as if something more dangerous than arrows were aimed at their hearts. They feared him. He supposed he shouldn't enjoy the feeling, but couldn't help it. He liked it. Galatia took over the threat from the ground while Mykal worked his way down the long rope. He was amazed how it dropping below the canopy transformed daylight into darkness. The sunlight only sporadically reached the forest floor. There were slivers of its rays, straight beams that descended through the canopy to a spots on the ground. Other than those shafts and their ambient illumination, it was mostly darkness.

The horses had not lingered. Mykal stuck two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Everyone looked around. After a moment, all four horses returned.

"Nice," Quill commented.

Blodwyn took Applejack by the reins, and patted the horse's muscular neck. "What do we do next?"

"You don't know what you're doing?" Anthony demanded. "Quill, why are we—"

Quill controlled many things with his hand. He held it up and Anthony

stopped talking. He and his companions should develop silent communication, Mykal thought.

Galatia looked up. Mykal could tell she wasn't comfortable with an audience, or around people in general. It only made sense considering her interminably long time without human contact. "I suppose here is as good a place as any," she said.

Karyn held both Defiance and Jiminey's reins.

"Mykal, join me, please," Galatia said, holding out her hand.

Mykal gave Blodwyn his horse's reins, and then stood facing Galatia. He took her hands in his. They stared into each other's eyes. "I'm going to do this with you?" he asked. "What about not using magic?"

She smiled. "We're a bit past that point, don't you think?" Her smile silently said it was inevitable.

"What do I do?"

"Repeat everything I say, until you have the words memorized. Then we will say them together. Keep your eyes closed. You will hear things, and want to open your eyes, but do not. We are the ones in control."

"We? Who else is there?"

"Never mind that now. Don't let go of my hands. Close your eyes," she said.

"What do we do?" Blodwyn stood beside Karyn, but kept an eye on the Archers. Magic had been outlawed for so long, few alive had ever seen sorcery with their own eyes. They seemed more interested in watching what happened next, as opposed to anything more nefarious.

"Give us space; back away. Form a circle around us. No matter what you see, or hear, do not interrupt. Is that understood? Okay, Mykal. Let's begin."

Galatia began to speak. They weren't words Mykal recognized, simply sounds that seemed almost intelligible somewhere on the fringes of his consciousness. When she paused, he'd repeat them as best he could. She gave his fingers an encouraging squeeze, and then said more words, different words. He repeated them. A third set were chanted, and he repeated them, but couldn't fathom how he would remember them all in sequence.

Galatia recycled through the phrases. One at a time.

Mykal regurgitated them.

She went over them again.

Mykal noticed a rhythm to the words, a beat he hadn't discerned at first. Galatia stopped after repeating the third stanza; the two of them began again in unison. The bizarre, pseudo-words fell from his tongue as though he'd been speaking the odd language his entire life.

And they were moving. He'd swear it. It felt as if he and Galatia spun while knowing his feet were firmly planted on the mulched forest floor. He grew dizzy from the perceived twirl.

The chant increased in tempo. They repeated their mantra again and again faster each time.

He wished he knew what the words meant.

He began to hear voices surrounding them. It wasn't Blodwyn, or Karyn, or any of the woods dwellers. Like the chant, he didn't understand anything they said.

Hands touched him. Fingertips ran along his sides. Normally ticklish, he remained unmoved.

Who or what touched him?

Galatia had said not to open his eyes. If he did, would he see who was touching him? Would he see who was whispering this strangeness in his ears?

The number of voices increased dramatically. Men and women whispered in his ears. More hands, uncountable hands, caressed his body, moving up and down his legs, his arms, across his chest and over his back. Some enwrapped around his waist. Were they pulling him away from Galatia? Was he being lifted from the ground?

He'd climbed the tree because Karyn was in trouble. Floating was something else altogether. His fear of heights returned manifold.

He forced himself to keep his eyes closed. He continued to chant. Even with all of the whispering around him, he could still hear Galatia's voice above the cacophonous susurrus. It remained loud. It was clearly audible.

A sudden wind sprang to life and the whispers became screams. He almost let go of Galatia's hands and covered his ears. What prevented him was the fear

that he'd be pulled into the whirling current, carried away by the, multitude of hands. He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter.

The screams became more intense.

The hands no longer caressed, they now clutched.

The two wizards' chanting continued.

The wind increased, until it felt as though they were standing inside a tornado's funnel.

And then nothing.

All of it. Everything stopped at once.

Silence abruptly reigned. It should have been calming, relieving relief. It wasn't.

"You can open your eyes now, Mykal," Galatia said.

He didn't want to. The forest had to have been destroyed. He could only imagine fallen trees, and a slew of dead Archers.

"Open them," she said yet again, and let go of his hands.

He cracked open an eyelid, and looked around. Nothing appeared changed.

With both eyes open, he turned in a circle. "What just happened?"

Galatia said, "It was a very powerful spell. It revealed where the mirror can be found."

"A mirror?" Quill demanded. He threw his hands up. "We're looking for a mirror?"

"Why? Do you know where it is?" Blodwyn asked.

"Some mirror? No. No, I do not," Quill said.

"I was under the impression you knew where everything was in this forest." Blodwyn turned away, as if to hide his smile. Mykal caught it though.

Mykal shrugged. "Nothing was revealed to—"

Then he saw it. A redish light floated just over the heads of those that formed their circle. Pointing, he said, "What is that?"

Karyn said, "What?"

"*She* will show us the way to the mirror," Galatia said.

"She?" Quill said.

"The light, the red ball of light," Mykal said.

“They can’t see it.” Galatia shook her head. “Only we can.”

Mykal felt tired. Excited, but drained. The red orb pulsed. He wasn’t sure how Galatia knew its sex, or that it even had one. The leaves, the plants, the weeds, everything visible the forest was cast in a magenta hue. “And we follow it?”

“That’s right,” Galatia said. “We follow *her*.”

NO LONGER FOLLOWING THE PATH, they walked the horses in a line, stepping over fallen limbs, crunching on crisp leaves, and fitting between trees. Anthony and Quill walked behind Galatia who led the party and Blodwyn behind them. Mykal and Karyn followed the others.

Mykal kept shaking his arms, wiggling his fingers. A tingling raced up and down his body, and had ever since the ritual had been completed. He had been told that using magic drained one of their strength, their internal resources. On top of that, none of them had slept but a few hours at most the previous night, and Bodwyn not even that. And he had been knocked unconscious in the interim. He had so many questions. He needed the opportunity to ask them. Galatia would get sick of the sound of his voice quickly. Though it couldn’t be helped; he knew she must be expecting it.

“What did you see? While we were doing that, Galatia and I? Did you see anything?”

“I just saw you and Galatia holding hands and whispering,” Karyn said.

Whispering? They had been shouting, almost singing the words of the chant repeatedly. “And the wind?”

“Wind?”

“The screaming?”

“No one screamed.”

Not *screamed*. Screaming. “Who else was here, I mean besides us?”

She eyed Mykal suspiciously, and slowly shook her head. “No one. There were only the six of us. No one else.”

No one else. It didn't make sense. The hands. The voices. The raging wind. He kept an eye on the orb. It moved slowly, went around trees, and stopped until Galatia caught up. It knew it was being followed. *She* knew she was being followed.

The orb stopped, and hovered.

"What is it?" Karyn said.

"I'm not sure," Mykal said. "Wait here."

Mykal walked past everyone and stopped beside Galatia.

"It must be around here, somewhere," she said, looking perplexed.

Blodwyn stepped forward and waved his staff. "Everyone spread out and check the area."

"For a mirror," Quill shook his head, laughing.

They searched inside shrubs, behind brush, and under rocks.

"There's nothing here," Quill said. He didn't hide the smug look on his face; in fact he smiled brightly, as cocksure as ever.

"Over here," Blodwyn said.

A slanted tree with raised roots revealed a well-concealed hole in the ground.

Mykal knelt in front of the small opening. The orb now hovered just above his head, as though encouraging him. He reached inside without thinking about it. "There's nothing."

"I didn't think so," Quill said.

"No," Mykal said. "I mean there's nothing. It's more like a tunnel, I think."

"Tunnel?" Galatia said.

Blodwyn stood by the Archers, ready to react if they tried anything. "I know what you're thinking," he said.

"If you do," Mykal said, "tell me. Because right now, I've got nothing."

Blodwyn lowered his head. "Can you fit?"

"That's what you thought *I* was thinking? It wasn't. Furthest thing from my mind, actually," Mykal said. Tight spaces were bad enough. Crawling down a hole into the ground surrounded by more darkness wasn't going to happen. "There are probably giant spiders around here."

"The biggest," Anthony said, and demonstrated their size with both hands,

and bloating his cheeks. “With fangs. And they’re aggressive.”

Mykal rolled his eyes, knowing he shouldn’t have given away such sensitive and intimate details about himself. He *had* to learn to protect his secrets. Karyn looked from him to Blodwyn. “Shall I go down there?”

“I can do it,” Galatia said.

He couldn’t let her go. He would look like a coward. “No,” Mykal said, clenching his jaw. He removed his quiver and bow from his back. “I can do this.”

Sitting in front of the hole, he pushed his legs into the hole up to his knees. His eyes were shut tight; his breath held. His imagination began to run rampant. Large, aggressive spiders—with fangs—came for his ankles. He could almost see them ready, waiting to attack.

“Mykal?” Blodwyn said.

“I’m okay. I’m okay.” Mykal concentrated on controlling his breathing. He clapped his hands and rubbed them together. “I’m ready. I’m going in.”

Sliding forward, his legs were able to bend at the knees. He felt nothing below. He kicked around, hoping was wrong, and that there was dirt and roots and ground. There wasn’t. He’d been right. It was a hole. And he had no idea how deep it went.

The purplish-scarlet orb moved in front of his face and then pushed into the gap above his legs. The light it cast helped. He could see under the tree somewhat. It was far from a perfect situation, but the light from the orb did make things a little better. He scooted forward. His toes continually searched for some sort of solidity. Once down to his waist he spun around onto his belly. Everyone stood around, watching. Trying to smile, Mykal offered a thumbs up, and forced himself all the way into the hole.

And then fell.

The drop was several feet. He had screamed as if he’d stumbled down a bottomless well.

“Mykal?” Blodwyn shouted.

Mykal got to his feet, and dusted himself off. There was plenty of room to stand. Thankfully the orb was with him. The light revealed a number of openings

leading to potential pathways. Thick tree roots snaked out over the walls—or *were* there walls? Taproots dangled above, winding through the earth. “I’m okay,” he said. “There are tunnels.”

“And spiders?” Anthony quipped.

Punching the man in the face might help him feel better about being beneath the earth. “What do I do now?”

“You need to follow the orb,” Galatia said.

If she told him follow the orb, it was safe to assume he was on his own. “How will I know what to do?”

“Simply recover the mirror, and bring it back,” she said.

No one else was coming. He wasn’t sure how he felt about doing this alone. There was no way he’d ask for others to join him, though.

Dust fell from the opening. Legs appeared. Blodwyn dropped down, and landed on his feet. “We do this together.”

A surge of powerful emotion flooded Mykal. “I’m not going to lie, Wyn. I’m happy to see you. It’s not going to be easy getting back up that hole, you know,” Mykal said.

“Maybe there’s an easier way out?”

“What about Galatia?” he asked.

Blodwyn looked up at the hole. “She’s got the situation up top under control. You follow the orb, and I’ll follow you.”

“It’s dark down here, there are roots all over the place.”

“I have my staff, and I’ll be right behind you,” he said.

The orb hadn’t moved.

“Well?” Blodwyn said.

“The orb’s just floating in front of me. Hey,” he said, “ma’am, we’re ready. You can show me the way to the mirror, if you please.”

The ball of light bounced around and then made its way down one of the paths under the tree.

“Ma’am?” Blodwyn said.

“It’s a female,” Mykal replied, speaking softly. “And it worked. She’s moving this way. Stay close.”

“Why are you whispering?”

“I have no idea. No idea at all,” Mykal said.

Stepping carefully, Mykal proceeded slowly. Blodwyn tapped the end of his staff in front of him, sliding it back and forth from root to root. The staff worked to aid his eyes in the darkness. His resourcefulness continued to amaze Mykal. “There are so many passages down here,” he noted.

“Who would have known,” he said.

“Not my uncle.” Mykal laughed. He could not believe he had an uncle, or any living family members other than his grandfather for that matter. “Did you know him?”

“I knew you had an uncle. I’ve never met him.” Blodwyn kept the answer short. It made Mykal think there might be more. He left it alone for now. There would be time to explore the family tree later. He hoped.

“It stopped.”

“Now what do I do?”

“Do you see a mirror?”

“Stay right here,” Mykal said. He stepped under the orb, and looked around. “I don’t see anything.”

“Close your eyes.”

“My eyes?” Mykal could easily see Blodwyn under the magenta aura that filled the tunnel they were in. He looked annoyed. “They’re closed.”

“Think about the mirror.”

“I don’t even know what that means. Are teaching me magic?”

“I know nothing about magic, but I have seen it used. It involves focusing the mind.”

“I don’t know chants, or anything.”

“Picture a mirror.”

Mykal closed his eyes, and refrained from grunting. It wasn’t Blodwyn he was annoyed with. All these years he’d been a wizard. Something like that, it would have been nice to know.

“Are you picturing it?”

He hadn’t been. “Yes,” he said, and refocused.

In his mind's eye, he saw a small mirror in gold frame with a matching handle. It was one someone might hold so they could check their reflection up close, make sure no food was wedged between teeth, or that their hair was properly in place. "I see a mirror."

"Good. Good," Blodwyn said.

"Now what?"

"I don't know," he said.

Mykal lost the image, and opened his eyes. "Well, that wasn't very helpful."

"It was, because now you know what to look for," he said.

"Even if I didn't know what it looked like exactly, I'll bet there aren't too many mirrors down here," Mykal countered.

"That's a good point."

Mykal looked up at the orb. "Can you show me where the mirror is," he said, and added, "ma'am?"

The orb didn't move.

"Anything?" Blodwyn said.

"No, nothing."

"Wave your hands. Use some of that hocus pocus." Blodwyn sounded impatient.

"I shot lightning bolts from my fingertips, Wyn. I don't even know how I did that!"

"Try," Blodwyn said. "And close your eyes when you do it."

"That's real important to you, isn't it? Me having my eyes closed." Mykal closed his eyes. He shook out any tension in his arms. The tingling he'd felt had stopped at some point. He couldn't remember how long ago. He moved his fingers, pointing some up, others down, curling them in, then extending them straight.

"Are you going to try?" Blodwyn said.

"Shhh. I'm doing it now," Mykal said. He imagined the handheld mirror. It floated in the black space within his mind. Slowly, it rotated. When the glass faced him again, he didn't see his own reflection. A woman stared at him. And was then gone. He wanted to see her again. He wasn't positive what she looked

like. It had happened too fast. "I saw someone."

"Where, down here?"

"No, inside the mirror."

"You have the mirror?" Blodwyn said.

"No. In my mind."

"That doesn't count. Keep trying," he said.

Mykal wasn't sure how to think... harder. Inside his head he said over and over: Where are you? Where are you? Where are you?

He said it out loud. "Where are you? Where are you?"

Something pulled him forward. He opened his eyes as he stumbled. No one else was around. There was no mistaking it, though. It was as if something had grabbed the front of his vest and tunic and yanked on him.

"Where are you?" He said, as if expecting the mirror might answer.

Blodwyn said, "Eyes closed?"

He forgot. Closed them. When he spoke, he tried assertiveness. "Mirror, show yourself."

A sound like knuckles cracking.

Mykal opened his eyes. He watched as the roots hanging above parted. He walked toward them, and knelt down in the dirt. The orb circled around and around. Behind the roots sat the mirror. He reached for the mirror and stopped. "Thank you for your help," he told the sphere of light.

It zipped up and down, and again spun around in circles.

Mykal laughed.

"What's so funny?" Blodwyn said.

"Inside joke," Mykal said. "Ah, jeez."

"Ah, jeez, what?"

"Spiders." They dangled from silk webs above and around the mirror. Some walked on the time-packed dirt. They ceased moving when they noticed Mykal staring at them, or so it seemed.

"Big?"

"The biggest," he said.

"Aggressive?"

“Ah. Not yet. I haven’t reached in there.”

“You can do it,” Blodwyn said. “You’re bigger than they are.”

“Anthony forgot to mention one thing,” Mykal said.

“The fangs?”

“No. He said fangs. Hairy. He forgot to say hairy.” Mykal shivered, wondering how he was going to stick his hand into that nightmare.

“Walk me over to you,” Blodwyn said. “I’ll get it.”

Mykal removed his dagger. He jabbed the knife into the crevice. Spiders dropped and scurried out of the hole.

Mykal jumped up to his feet. “Bad idea. That was a bad idea.”

The spiders ran by him, trying to get away. That was a good thing. He wasn’t sure he could step on them. What if they didn’t crush underfoot?

He ran the blade around the mirror, and then tried flicking it out of the hole with the end of his knife.

What if the glass breaks, he thought?

He switched the knife into his left hand and, cringing, reached in with his right. He retrieved the mirror, removing it from under the roots and shivered as if spiders crawled all over his body.

“I did it. It’s done,” he sighed in relief after a frantic, sweeping removal of an potential hangers on.

“How very brave of you,” Blodwyn said.

Mykal ignored the sarcasm and studied the mirror more closely. In the oval glass he saw his own reflection this time. The casing and handle were exquisite with a hand-chased and beveled floral design, and rope-twist border. “Now, we just need to find a way out.”

He missed the spider on his boot. Didn’t notice it as it crawled up his leg...

“Back the way we came?” Blodwyn said.

Mykal sighed. “It might be the easiest way. I don’t want to spend too much time down here. We’re apt to get lost.”

CHAPTER 22



Captain Sebastian stood behind the ship's wheel. *The Derecho* was his ship. Guiding her was a pleasure, especially on a morning like this. The sun burned away the few clouds that had lingered from the night. The slight breeze inflated the sails and pushed away the humidity. The vessel glided easily atop the Isthmian. The ship's wake cutting the water was the only disturbance as far as he could see.

He'd almost lost his ship in a freak storm. Helix, his Boatswain, was who he thanked most for getting them out of the mess in one piece. He'd managed and coordinated the deck crew that worked the ropes and masts as well as repairing the damage sustained by that hellish torrent. This was their first time out in days. Usually the Lieutenant, Cearl—or *Lou* as they called him—manned the wheel, but right now he was enjoying himself.

“Captain! Captain!” Mercer stood in the crow's nest atop the main mast.

Sebastian shaded his eyes with his hand. He watched the carpenter close his spyglass, climb out of the nest, and shimmy his way down the mast. “Richard! Take the wheel,” he commanded the ship's sub-lieutenant.

The captain made his way from stern to bow, stepping around the shrouds and riggings. “Tar,” he said to a sailor, “lend me your spyglass, son.”

The captain extended the spyglass, brought it up to his eye, and peered out beyond the bow. They were headed south and coming up on Fjord Range. A ship was pulling out of the inlet. White masts and sails flapped in the wind. “Mercer!”

The carpenter jumped the last few feet. "Captain."

"You recognize the ship?"

"Never seen her before, Cap. It's smaller than our lady, that's for sure," he said. The two men were nothing alike. Sebastian stood at just over six feet. His long, dark hair was kept from his eyes with a black cap. Beefy arms bulged against a too-tight white tunic loosely laced together across the top of his chest. In contrast, what little stubble Mercer had atop his head was blond, and had been shaved short. He was a head taller than the captain, but as thin and wiry as his captain was burly.

Sebastian didn't like seeing another ship. The sea was his, it belonged to the Voyagers. Everyone knew as much. He supposed it was normal to test boundaries now and again. It made sense that, once in a while, reminders needed to be given. He couldn't remember the last time he'd seen another ship dare trespass on his Isthmian. He smiled. His tars were mostly younger. Many never had the chance to overtake another ship. "Helix!"

"Aye, Captain." Helix was short, but brawny. His shoulders and arms were thick, filled with muscle from working with ropes and wood day in and day out. His coarse beard resembled the brushes used to scrub the decks.

"Ready at the sails," Sebastian said.

"Ready at the sails!" Helix warned the tars.

"Two possible things happening here. Either Osiris forgot who owns these waters, or the cargo on board is so valuable they're willing to risk a run." He surmised aloud. "As soon as that galleon is clear of the fjord, we take her."

"Aye, aye, Captain," he said.

Sebastian never took his eyes from the distant sea. Without the spyglass, he could barely make out the other ship. A lot of water lay between them. There wasn't much wind. He was confident Helix would ensnare enough of it for their needs. The man was a master at reading the winds and directing the crew to attain the highest potential from Sebastian's ship. He'd once been offered his own ship to captain, but turned the Voyagers down, content working the reins behind the scenes. That was somewhat admirable, but it was also a fact that Sebastian was the better captain and the whole of his crew considered among the

Voyagers' elite.

The tars buzzed, repeating back orders Helix shouted at them. Men worked the yard, unfastening knots to unroll sails at the mizzen, the main, and the foresail. A clap of thunder sounded as the sails released, and the wind slammed into them. The bow of *The Derecho* dipped forward, and surged back up; true wind and apparent wind harnessed for speed. Tars cheered. Skimming the sea felt exhilarating, but with sails in use, their ship smashed through it like a charging horse kicking up clumps of dirt and grass in its wake.

THE MOUNTAIN KING sat across from Ida in the Captain's cabin. The table was bolted to the floor. Anything at risk of sliding, falling over, or rolling was secured in some similar manner. The decor was dark; dark wood walls, dark furniture, even the bedding was a crimson. The windows around the cabin were curtained with thick cloth, preventing the early day sunlight from providing any contrast. "Your first time on a ship?"

She sat with crooked hands laced together on the table. Her cloak's hood covered her face as was her habit. Hermon hated admitting to himself that he was thankful, but he was. Sharing the cabin, he didn't think he could look at the sorceress's face the entire voyage. He wasn't worried about her reading his thoughts. If she had been, out of spite alone, she'd have removed the cloak, forcing him to stare into her black eyeballs.

"I don't care for water," she said.

COMPLAINTS HAD REACHED the castle about a witch living in the area. It was while touring his realm that King Hermon first came across Ida in a small hut at the southern side of Flaming Crystal Valley, just north of the Rames. She lived beyond the kingdom's boundaries, and just outside of the Constantine Realm, as well. It was one of those strips of land that no one had ever claimed, and for

whatever reasons, no one had bothered to. The valley ran west and east, from the Isthmian past the ancient library's ruins.

There were stories about that valley. Talk of ghosts, dragons, pixies, and magic. This could be why no one tried too hard to occupy the land. From all King Hermon knew, it was not farmable land, just useless dry sand. What he saw firsthand made put his readings to shame. The books did not describe the overall wasteland before him. Nothing would grow in this valley. There was nothing green through the strip. The grains of sand were as fine as sugar. He could only surmise if this much had been true then it was all too possible ghosts, and pixies and magic existed here, as well. He wasn't buying into the idea of dragons. His imagination just couldn't surrender to the idea of the mythical beasts.

Outside the modest structure, he had found there a black kettle boiled over an open fire. The young king approached with his general a colonel, and a few of his knights. They each kept hands on the hilts of their swords. He'd almost laughed at them. They didn't trust anyone. He supposed it came with the job, along with the eternal pledge to protect their king with their very lives.

Ida must have heard their approach. A dark wool blanket covered the entrance, and was used as a door. It parted, and her head popped out. "Can I help you?"

What immediately struck him profoundly were her eyes. Black. No whites at all. He noticed then the knotted skin that comprised her forehead, and the loose wisps of white hair. He didn't think she was old, but she certainly appeared as though she were.

When she smiled, Hermon winced. The teeth had been hidden before. He wished he'd not seen them. What few remained were yellow, or brown, and pointy like small fangs. "We've heard report that people in these parts are practicing magic. Have you any knowledge?"

He'd not worn the crown long and tried to be a fair ruler to his people. Doing so wasn't easy. He overheard the whispers in the court, and could only image what horrid things were said about him when not within earshot. Craving acceptance, love, and respect, he did as much as possible for everyone. All of them. His people, his Lords and Ladies, his knights and advisors. It wasn't long

before he knew the truth. Such an endeavor was impossible. It couldn't be done, and realizing that truth wound up turning his stomach to acid.

It marred his position. Becoming king was never his dream. He never thought it obtainable. Since he was a child he knew his older brother, Jeremiah, was destined to shed the prince title. Not him. He had been content with that reality, and satisfied with the notion of remaining a prince and serving his brother, the heir apparent.

"Practicing?" she said, and snickered. Lifting the large wood spoon, the woman stirred the broth simmering in the kettle. Disturbing the ingredients had been a mistake, the king thought. Its rank aroma wafted into the air. It was as though she had stewed his soldier's undergarments after a week's tour of the realm with no change of clothes. His nose wrinkled, and he waved the stench away from his nostrils. "As far as I know, there is no one 'practicing' sorcery around these parts, boy."

A knight stepped forward, unsheathing his sword. "This is the king of these lands! You'll address him with respect!"

"King of this valley? I didn't know there was one," she said.

King Hermon held up a halting hand. "No. She's correct. There isn't a king of the valley."

Hesitantly, the knight replaced his sword, but didn't step back. King Hermon noticed the tightening of the man's jaw, and knew he was itching for a fight, despite the fact that his adversary was female. They had been traveling the kingdom for a while. Trained knights needed more entertainment than bare earth for a bed and cold provided. The nearest small town was miles in the opposite direction. "Are there many people living around here?" he said.

The woman continued to stir the kettle's contents. "Not sure I've seen a neighbor as long as I've lived here."

"And how long is that?" he said.

"Long. Days and months and years don't mean much to someone like me. Not the way it does to people like you, I imagine." She lifted the spoon to her face and sniffed the concoction with relish. "Ah...it's just about ready. Can I interest you and your knights in a bowl of soup, your highness?"

The mocking tone of voice wasn't masked, but over-announced intentionally.

"As generous an offer as that most certainly is, we will decline," King Hermon said, knowing he'd rather gut a goat and eat the innards raw than let a spoonful of whatever she cooked pass his lips.

His knights didn't know him well. Not the way they'd known his father. King Elroy had often traveled his realm with the men. He had yet to form any such bonds. They'd known him from the time before he became king, but that was under different circumstances. It was important visiting the lands he ruled, but this expedition was more about building loyalty, and trust. They'd been away from the castle for nearly seven days. Uneventful night after uneventful night. He needed a way to gain the respect of the men he commanded. Since they'd be starting back in the morning, he could think of only one thing that might accomplish his goal.

"I'll ask one last time," King Hermon said. The woman thought she was clever. Her use of words might have been missed by the others, but was not lost on him. "Do you know of anyone *using* magic around here?"

She lowered the spoon into the broth, lifted the bellows, and fanned the fire. "I will be sure to alert your highness if I learn of anyone practicing witchcraft, or magic in these parts. Person like that can be dangerous."

"Yes, they can." Flames rose licking the bottom of the kettle. Smoke billowed around the sides and into the king's face. He ignored the smoke, and allowed the sting to burn his eyeballs. "And how would you notify my kingdom of something as malevolent as magic?"

"I'd come and tell you myself, I would," she said.

The lie fell comfortably off her tongue. "Enjoy your meal," the king said.

On the edge of the valley, just inside the borders of the Osiris Realm, King Hermon addressed his knights. They sat on rocks, or rested on the cold hard ground, but close enough for the heat from the fire pit to reach them. "We're going back," he said.

A few of the men looked up at them. He didn't have their attention. He knelt by the fire, stabbed at the coals with a stick. The flames crackled, and the

glowing embers rolled popped. They'd caught and cooked rabbit, squirrel, and snake over the fire. One carcass remained on a spit beside the fire. "She is a witch," he said. He always wondered how much his father talked, worried what the men suspected. "We're going back."

"Back, your highness?"

"The woman hadn't been cooking soup," the king explained. "Nothing edible could smell so foul. It was a potion. People live in and around the valley. Everything she said was either a lie or misleading."

"We're bringing her back as a prisoner?"

"And burning the place to the ground." He wanted her as *his* prisoner, not stashed in the dungeons, or burned at a stake. Something about her intrigued him. There was a connection he couldn't explain; a sensation he felt in his bones that tingled and demanded further examination.

A new life entered his men. Some fun. They longed for it. He'd sensed it. The smiles told him he'd made the right call. He knew some of them also wanted a brawl, or an excuse to drive steel through someone, but he wanted the sorcerer unharmed.

For now.

King Hermon led them back the way they'd come. The woman's hut sat at the very bottom of the valley, sandwiched between mountain ranges. There were legends behind the land's name (as there were for most). Flaming Crystal. If he'd ever been told the tale, he did not recall it.

Smoke rose from the mouth of her stone chimney. "We will get her out of the hut, and secured, and then do with the place whatever you wish."

"And if we find gold, or silver?"

King Hermon shrugged. They were beyond the realm. She had made it clear that she knew the distinction and chose to live alone, unprotected in the bottom of a valley. "Keep anything of value you find."

At his command, they charged the hut, swords bared. King Hermon stopped at the pit where the flame had been allowed to die and kicked over the kettle and makeshift stand. The men trampled the garden, hacked at vines and weeds alike.

A blue ring of fire encircled them. King Hermon spun around. The woman

stepped through the flames, untouched. “I will admit there was a time I practiced magic. But once I mastered it, there was little need for practicing. However, the desire to use powers I’d been forced to keep hidden only grew and grew with each passing day. I was hoping all of you would return,” she said. She wore a dark cloak. The hood was over her head. Her voice boomed above the roar of flames like a preacher atop a mountain. Her words echoed continually around them, as if rebounding off of the wall of brilliant blue fire. The reverberation was maddening.

Men covered their ears as they fell to their knees. Blood oozed from their noses, leaked from their eyes.

“Stop this!” King Hermon said. “I command you to stop this now!”

“You have no authority over me, boy. You haven’t the power, or the courage, or the ability to stop me.”

“I don’t want to stop you,” King Hermon said.

That clearly caught her off guard. Raised arms lowered.

“I want you to come back to Osiris.”

His knights were flat on the ground. Some kicked, writhing as if a hive of wasps lived inside their armor. The screaming made him think they were being stung, flesh swelling. He wasn’t sure why these thoughts filled his mind.

Was it because she made them believe that was what was happening to them?

“I want you to explain yourself,” she said.

“My men.”

There was a moment where nothing happened, then the wall of fire faded away. The men stopped screaming. They became still. King Hermon wasn’t sure if any knight was still alive, until they stirred. He sighed, relieved.

“Now explain.”

He said, “There is no reason for you to hide in this valley.”

“Hide?”

He ignored the interruption. “Come back and live in the palace. My castle.”

“You’re a king? I always imagined King Elroy a bit bigger. Older.” There was a twist to her lips, and her eyes narrowed as she looked him up and down.

“King Hermon Cordillera,” he said, chest out, puffed with pride.

She let him watch as she rolled her eyes. “And why would I do that?”

“Because I believe wizards have a place,” he said; serve a purpose, he thought. “You cannot be the only one left. I want to gather as many of your kind into my service as I can.”

She remained motionless. It was dark but he saw her clearly enough, mixed with shadows, and blend of the nothing of night that surrounded her.

She laughed. It came out in a loud blurted burst, and was over. “There have been laws against magic since Henry Rye ruled the empire. Even after his fall, the kings on both sides of the sea upheld the decrees. I don’t know what kind of fool you take me for. I’m in no hurry to get hung, or to have my head severed from the rest of my body. Thank you, but I’ll pass.”

“I am not imprisoned by narrow minded discrimination. I am a new king, a ruler uninhibited by prejudices instilled by the kings of yesterday,” he said. All of it true. “If you come with me, I will allow ensure that you have the implements you require to grow as a wizard.”

“You will?” The suspicious tone of voice was sharp like the edge of a razor. She made no attempt to hide it.

The cabin’s door banged opened, pulling the king out of his memory.

“King Hermon, we’ve got company?”

“Captain?”

“A Voyagers’ ship, it’s headed this way!”

CHAPTER 23



Mykal held the mirror up so everyone could see it. The sense of pride he felt was greatly shadowed by the nightmares he knew he'd suffer. Never had he been surrounded by so many spiders. It didn't matter that he'd overcome his fear and retrieved the relic. "It wasn't easy to get, but I have it."

Anthony shook his head, but kept his mouth shut.

Mykal eyed his uncle, but Quill also remained silent.

"I don't want you to panic," Blodwyn said. He rearranged his hands on the staff, and lifted it up like a club.

Mykal's breath caught in his lungs. Telling someone you didn't want them to panic meant something was terribly wrong. It left few options, but to panic. Seeing Blodwyn ready to swing at his head with the staff didn't help cut the tension, either.

Galatia raised her hands, and aimed them like arrows at Mykal. All he could imagine was fire spitting from her fingertips and cooking him like a carp on her open flames. His throat went dry, and he strained to swallow.

Anthony took steps backwards, pulling on Quill's cloak.

Mykal didn't need an explanation. He immediately knew what had happened. For confirmation he no longer required, he saw in his peripheral vision an arachnid perched on his shoulder. The pedipalps and front two legs wiggled and stretched to brush against his cheek. Rows of eyes glared at him, as if angry he'd taken the creature from the dark, dank cavern it had made its home.

In natural light, or as natural as it could be under the Cicade canopy, the thing was hairier, and fatter, and more vicious-looking than the horrid creatures had appeared in the glow of the orb's redish light. "Get it off!"

Before anyone could react he felt the fangs penetrate his skin.

Blodwyn swung his staff, managing to smack only the spider.

As it flew from his shoulder, Galatia zapped it with fire. It burst into flames before even hitting the ground.

Mykal jumped on it. The heel of his boot crushed what remained of its charred bulbous body. Its bones crunched.

His hand covered the bite mark. "I don't feel good."

"What do you know about these spiders?" Blodwyn asked, looking at Quill.

"They're venomous," Quill said. "They stay underground. Feed on grubs and night crawlers."

"Deadly," Anthony said. "Lance was bit by one this summer. Face swelled up like a melon. Throat closed up in minutes—"

Quill shot the Archer a look.

"Never," Anthony said, less enthusiastically, "never seen the likes."

Blodwyn pushed, "antivenin?"

Quill shrugged. "If there is, I am unaware of one. We've no cure that I know of. The spiders don't venture to the tree tops and we don't spend much time on the forest floor."

Mykal tried following the conversation. Sound had become muffled, trapped inside his ears, like his head was pinned by a pillow, or those talking kept getting further and further away. Vibrant colors became dull, and in one blink turned grey. Everything looked grey, and ashen.

He coughed.

Everyone looked at him as his hands went to his throat, as he struggled to take breath. Before he could ask for help the ground met his face. A tree stump met his forehead with a solid whap. The grey became black as his eyes closed, and there was nothing but the burning sensation that coursed through his entire body. He feared the spider's venom had set his blood on fire. Once it reached his heart he knew that he would combust.

Karyn shouted, "Roll him onto his back!"

Blodwyn and Quill moved, grabbing Mykal and flipping him over.

"Careful, boys," Galatia said. "Please. Be careful."

"Is there anything you can do?" Blodwyn asked, looking to Galatia.

"I can heal him," Karyn said. "It's why I'm here. I knew this would happen."

Blodwyn grimaced. "You knew what would happen?"

Karyn pointed at Mykal's head. His face was bloated. He still had his hands at his throat. He might be conscious. It was hard to tell. His eyes were swollen shut. "Can you hear me, Mykal?"

"You've done this before?" Galatia said.

Karyn shook her head. She knelt beside the young wizard. "Never."

Blodwyn watched the girl lower her head against Mykal's chest placing one hand over his face, the other to his stomach.

"What is she doing?" Anthony asked.

Galatia shushed him.

Blodwyn hadn't noticed the noises in the forest, hadn't been aware of the sounds, until everything stopped. No birds chirped. No insects chirruped. There was nothing. Silence surrounded the group, grasped the forest like a thing alive. It was obscure, unlike anything he'd ever experienced before.

And then the hum started. It rolled at them from every direction. Blodwyn knew he wasn't the only one hearing it. The Archers changed their stance, as if the ground trembled beneath their feet. Their arms were out, knees slightly bent.

A light, as bright and white as that coming through the narrow gap down the length of a partially-drawn curtain in a pitch black room at midday spilled from the canopy above Karyn as she lay motionless, draped across Mykal's body.

It wasn't possible, but felt like the forest was spinning. Blodwyn ground the butt of his staff into the ground for additional support. He held it with both hands, afraid he might lose balance. He found it odd that Galatia merely smiled, her eyes never straying off the two prone figures.

"What's happening?" Blodwyn demanded.

"She's calling on nature."

"She's what?!" he repeated.

“She’s healing him. Completely healing him.”

MYKAL OPENED HIS EYES. Karyn sat on a rock beside him, sunlight above her head. He puckered his lips and tried swallowing.

“Are you okay?” she said.

“I’m dry.”

Quill offered him a deerskin. “Here. It’s water.”

Mykal didn’t know he was on the other side of him. “Thank you, uncle.”

Tucking a hand under his head, Quill helped Mykal into a sitting position. “Here, just a little. Don’t overdo it. You scared us there for a bit.”

Mykal needed a moment. The water was wonderful. And then he remembered the spider, and pushed himself up to his feet, slapping at phantom bugs on dancing across his body.

“You’re okay, Mykal.” Karyn had his arm in hers. “It’s okay now.”

He tried calming himself down, knowing he was just paranoid. “I’m okay?”

“You’re okay,” she said.

“She saved your life,” Quill said. Something was different about the man. He was being genuinely nice. Mykal wasn’t sure if he trusted the change. He liked it. He just wasn’t sure he trusted it. Perhaps once he understood the reason for the change, or determined what was going on, he’d have a better idea as to where he stood.

“Galatia?” Mykal said.

Karyn hmped.

“I’m just kidding. I remember when you told me about this.”

“About what?” Quill said.

“I dreamt that something like this would happen,” Karyn said. “I just didn’t know it would be from a spider bite.”

“That little bit of information would have been helpful. I’d have stayed home,” he said. He wouldn’t have, but he might have given the quest deeper consideration.

“You did it though,” Karyn said.

“Did what?”

“The mirror. You found it.”

“Where’s Galatia?”

“Getting ready to ride,” Quill said. “I’m coming with you.”

“Ride? Has she summoned Pendora? Is the other wizard here?”

“She hasn’t.” Quill held onto Mykal’s shoulders. “Did you hear me?”

“Yes. She hasn’t used the mirror to call Pendora.”

“No. Not that. I said, ‘I’m coming with you.’”

Mykal shrugged out of the hold. “I heard you. Why would you want to come with us? It was only a few hours ago that you were ready to have us be pierced with arrows.”

“While you’ve been napping, I’ve been talking with Galatia and Blodwyn. The Mountain King needs to be stopped. I am convinced we’re all in danger. This forest has been my home for almost as long as I can remember. I love those people up there. There’s a responsibility I accepted when they put me in charge. Keeping everyone safe is up to me. I want to be part of the force set on stopping a potential threat,” he said.

The words were perfect, as if he had practiced to perfection every syllable before speaking. Mykal wanted his grudge to disappear. It was much easier desired than done. He thought about his mother and father. Quill knew something about them, about his past and what might have become of them. “I need to see Galatia,” he said.

CHAPTER 24



The Mountain King and Ida stood beside the captain of *The Shadow*. The sea fought the ship's parting in vain as its bow sliced through the water. Salt and spray filled the air. The Osiris Realm was near enough should they need to retreat, which was the captain's fervent hope.

King Hermon saw the waving flags of a Voyager ship.

"We could turn back. Head into the Fjord. We'd be safe there. The Voyagers don't venture that close to land," the captain said. "Normally."

He hated the yellow which stained the man's skin and clothing. "We shall not turn back. Ready the tars. We will stand against the Voyagers, should it be necessary. How long has it been since their battle skills have been tested? They rule by fear and legend. They may think the sea as theirs, but I'm to show them differently. No longer will the Isthmian be their haven. A new day is close at hand, captain. And no such further cowardice shall I hear from your lips again. Are we clear?"

The captain offered up a shaky nod.

"Then go! Get to it! We might be able to outrun their ship, but we shall change course and head for them, *captain*. Let's, for the first time in recent memory, make the Voyagers the prey." King Hermon threw a fist into the air to accentuate his proclamations.

Shouting commands, the captain ordered the tars here and there. Ropes were pulled and sails turned. *The Shadow* charged the Voyagers. The men wore swords at their sides, and daggers in their belts. The bright sun was misleading.

It presented the illusion of a peaceful morning. A battle was about to ensue. And the sea would turn red, there was no mistaking that truth.

“And me, your highness?” Ida asked.

He hated when she mocked him, the way her words spilled from her mouth like the hiss of a snake. He’d just as soon backhand her across the face, then share his plan of attack. Her chafing against his rule would be dealt with. Eventually. “Get to the bow. Pull the wind away from their sail!”

Barely glimpsed beneath the hood of her cloak, he caught the rise of the corners of her lips, and the foamy spittle caught between them. Her only redeeming qualities were the evil that flowed through her and her belief in his vision, that he would one day he would become the new emperor. “As you wish,” she said.

He watched her walk on unsteady legs, keeping a hand on the rail along the stern for support. *The Shadow* pitched forward, bobbing up and down as it cut the sea. Twice he thought she’d topple overboard and into the Isthmian, surprised that she somehow did not.

At the bow she raised arms in the air. Bony fingers covered in liver spotted skin twitched at the sky. Hermon thought he could see the flow of magic, as she harnessed power from the world around them. Envy filled him. He hated such weakness. People should be envious of him. His own skills hardly rivaled that of a street hustler’s trickery.

Ida’s arms shot forward. The wind picked up and waterspouts appeared, racing ahead of *The Shadow*. King Hermon made his way to the bow.

“That is not what I commanded,” he said. The waterspouts grew, the spirals reaching toward a blue sky. It looked unnatural. The sorceress ignored him. The *Shadow*’s speed forced her hood back. With eyes closed, she concentrated on her magic. Two waterspouts became one, and bore down upon the Voyagers. Although he witnessed storms she’d generated from the safety of his palace, this was the first time he was on the sea during one of her displays of power. He wasn’t sure how safe he felt in her presence. The reminder was clear: he should never underestimate this witch.

The temptation to knock her off the ship nearly overwhelmed. He fought the

urge, gritting his teeth, and curling his fingers into fists.

Just before reaching the Voyagers, the spouts rose into the air, and vanished.

Hermon turned and stared at Ida.

She grunted, and motioned his eyes forward.

The full sails slacked.

Just like that, the wind was out of them, and their vessel slowed as if anchors had been dropped and snagged on rocks under the sea.

Unable to control himself, King Hermon laughed. If the witch weren't so ugly he could have kissed her. The bile that rose up in his throat from the thought prevented any such sign of affection. "Well done," he said, the only praise he could muster. "Well done."

The Shadow would be on the Voyager Ship in no time at all. King Hermon spun to watch the crew ready for battle. Excitement swelled inside him. There was no containing the feeling, and he welcomed the energy provided. It had been far too long since anything had moved him at all, other than his dark ambitions.

"CAPTAIN!" Cearl watched the waterspouts rise into the sky. They simply not exist. There was not one cloud in the sky. When the wind left the sails, he made up his mind. The woman on their bow was like a living figurehead. The magic came from her. He'd seen her arms in the air, and those forces spark from her fingertips. He needn't a spyglass to witness it, either. "They're using magic, captain. They've a wizard on board!"

"Men!" Captain Sebastian said from the wheel, "ready your axes! The people of Osiris believe they are equipped to fight us? They think a wizard on their deck will tip the odds in their favor? They have forgotten the strength and fury of the Voyagers. It is time they are reminded why the sea is ours, and their trespass will be punished!"

Cheers erupted.

With sails useless, they readied for the fight.

The small ship was fast, Cearl thought. It sped across the sea toward them.

Mere minutes stood between vessels colliding. Was the intent to ram? Cearl loved the sea, yet had a healthy respect for its creatures. All sailors did. Axes to the back of the neck, or even a blade through the gut, were better ways to die. He'd seen the giant serpents, and had caught sight, once or twice, of the mermaids. There were more below, legends of beasts thought extinct, but, in truth, they hid still alive and breathing through ancient gills. These monsters survived in the dark and crushing depths of the abyss. At any moment one could race to the surface and crush *The Derecho* in giant jaws. There have been a few ships running cargo to, or from, one place or another, that never returned. Occasionally, pieces of the missing ship's boards would be caught up in a fishing net, providing some closure to the fate of the lost crew.

"Lou!" Captain Sebastian said.

Cearl crushed his imaginings. He needed to focus on the now. "Aye, Captain?"

"When the ship is beside us, we strike first. We've a larger crew, a bigger ship. They want to rush us, then we'll bring the battle to them. Have the tars ready to swing across!" Sebastian commanded, eyebrows furrowed; his eyes mere slits. He grunted, "We'll not be made to look like fools on our sea."

Waiting was worst. Cearl didn't wield an ax. He preferred the sword. It handled better. His steel was sheathed, but his hand rested on the hilt. The sea splashed against the side of the ship. Overhead, gulls cried. The scavengers didn't care if fish carcass, or chunks of man salted the sea. They circled ready to feast.

The moments passed in counted heartbeats, as the smaller vessel closed the gap between them. Cearl watched the men bounce on the balls of their feet, ready for a fight. He didn't share their enthusiasm. He would do what needed getting done, but cruising the sea, fishing the waters, making it home to his family was far more essential than driving his sword through a gut, and dodging the blade aimed for his.

"Ready!" Captain Sebastian shouted, his own sword drawn and raised toward the sky.

The small vessel from Osiris pulled up alongside the Voyagers. The men on

board were dressed in black and red. They had swords ready, as well.

Captain Sebastian lowered his sword with a swing. "Attack!"

The Voyagers jumped from their ship onto the other. The blood-letting began. Cries erupted. The men swung axes like loggers chopping trees.

Metal clashed. Some sailors fought defensively; others on the offense.

Cearl went ahead of his captain. They wouldn't leave their ship. They stayed and defended the deck. Any Osiris men attempting to board *The Derecho* were cut down. Cearl thrust his blade toward a man's throat. Avoiding the blade, the man let go of the rail and fell backward. No blood drawn.

Splashes came from the left, and right.

Seagulls dove for bits of flesh.

The sky darkened. Clouds formed directly above them, and spread outward in a wide vortex. They were heavy and filled with water, ready to rain down on the battle.

Cearl watched the men battle below him. Few enemies made their way toward him or the captain. The need to fight alongside his mates surged through him.

Helix held his ax with two hands. He used it deftly, parry and riposte. Attack and defend. His moves were smooth, almost elegant. In direct contrast, to the way Mercer fought on the forecastle deck. The Carpenter was all bulk, and moved like a massive beast. He swung his ax with one hand, and threw a first with the other. Always appearing a bit off balance, Cearl constantly expected him to fall. His approach was as effective in cutting through the king's men as it would be swatting flies from food. Richard struggled. Two of the boarders had him backed against the mast. A sword swung for his neck. He ducked. The blade lodged into wood. Richard rolled out of harm's way, stood up, only to have others there, trying to spill his blood.

Cearl thought about going over to where Richard needed help.

Hands clapped onto the side railing of the *Derecho*.

Sebastian cut the fingers from it with a swing of his blade.

A man screamed, fell back onto the attacker's vessel, leaving his tips tumbling across *The Derecho's* deck.

Thunder boomed.

The sea churned creating small white caps.

The gulls weren't easily deterred. They dropped into the heat of fights, dodging swords and axes for a chance at severed ears and rolling eyeballs.

Determining which way the battle swayed was not simple. From his vantage point, Cearl saw bodies too bloodied for identification, if not for what they were wearing. "Captain?"

Sebastian looked hesitantly from his lieutenant to the fight on his ship on the deck below, and then back at his lieutenant. "Go. I've got the ship."

Cearl jumped over the side rail. He spotted Richard, still alive, still fighting, still outnumbered. He ran at them. He thrust his blade through a man's back until he could reach a hand to his shoulder then twisted the sword as he pulled it free of muscle, meat and bone.

Richard carved a 'Z' before him. The razor curve of his ax tore a line through the flesh of the man's chest, and then across his thighs. The man's shrill scream cut off abruptly when he dropped to his knees and in a single swing, Richard lopped the head from the body.

In the deadly melee, Cearl's muscles tensed expecting a sword in the back at any moment. It was a dark fear that needed to be ignored, yet it reminded him of the night spent treading water in the middle of the sea; the traditional Voyager rite of initiation. The first night he joined the experienced seamen dropped and left him and his fellow recruits overboard for hours. The danger was real. Creatures swam about below. He and the others formed a circle. Holding hands, they provided each other support. Some wanted to quit, ready to drown instead of kicking their legs for survival. During a moonless night, Cearl never once worried about his stamina. He could tread water for days if forced; instead it had been his mind that beat him. He panicked more than once waiting for serpents to swallow him whole, or worse, bite away limbs until nothing remained. It was they who saved each other that night, a powerful bond, formed to last and designed to unify.

The king's warriors were losing.

The battle was nearly over.

Captain Sebastian dropped down onto the deck of the king's vessel, confident his ship was safe, and being properly defended by his men.

Best he could tell, only two boarders remained on the *Derecho*.

They stood close together at the bow, facing the stern; facing Captain Sebastian, and Cearl, Richard, Helix, and Mercer, and the other Voyagers.

"Stop right there," the man said. If it weren't for the crown on his head, Cearl wouldn't have known who stood before them.

A woman wearing a hood was a few feet behind the king.

Sebastian didn't stop. "Why would you attack us?"

"I command you to stop!"

"You are not my king. Your commands don't mean anything to me. The sea is ours. Our fleets run these waters. You are in *my* territory."

The woman raised a hand. Energy formed at her fingers, then bloomed. Half a sphere, blue and electrical, it hummed and crackled as it pushed like a bowed wall toward the captain and his men.

"Captain?" Cearl said.

Sebastian held up his arms, stopping his men from advancing. "You came onto our sea!"

The king shook his head, as if comically annoyed. "The sea does not belong to you—"

"No more than the land on the eastern shore is yours," Sebastian fired back.

"We were making our way for the west," the king said, "not that I need to provide you with explanation."

"You made your way for us. Your witch stole the wind from *our* sail, forget the fact that magic is against the laws of the realms. Your presence was hostile the moment you left the fjord. Go ahead, deny the truth," Sebastian said.

Cearl was tempted to touch the living wall in front of them; drawn by the color, the sparkle. His palm was inches from it. He dare not make contact, though. The hair on his arms, and neck stood on end. Richard slapped his arm down.

"We are going to the west," the king said. He looked beyond the captain and his men. "And you are now our crew."

Sebastian laughed. It was for show. He clapped a hand on his belly and tipped his head back. “You are madder than legend tells. We are not yours to order. You are not going to the west. You can return to the east, and hide in your mountains, king. Let today’s battle be a lesson, a reminder, that the sea is ours. Crossing it is not an option. Not without prior arrangements. Nothing has changed. You are well aware of how this works.”

The king nodded at the woman.

Her second hand rose up, parallel to the first. Her fingers bent upward at the knuckle closest to the tip. It sounded like bones snapping.

Cearl felt real fear for the first time since the fighting began. He’d never encountered a sorceress, and the idea of magic in a fight against steel was unnerving. There was no way of knowing what to expect. He did not want his emotions so easily displayed. He re-gripped the hilt of his sword, as if ready to cut a hole through the blue shield in front of them, as if ready to charge against the king as his witch.

Axes rose in the air.

Sebastian spun around.

His men were ready to attack.

Cearl didn’t know what was happening. There have always been stories of wizards and magic. He never believed them. They always sounded like fairy tales told at bedtime ensuring restless children slept when instructed. Sorcerers were made up stories shared around fires.

“If you will not captain this vessel, I will be forced to have your men kill both you and your second.” The king’s smile enraged Cearl.

“My men would do no such thing.” Sebastian laughed, but stopped when no one laughed with him. He saw *her* bolts pass through his men; their bodies were illuminated for just a flash of a moment. His men all wore the same blank expression. Their eyes were open, but vacant.

The woman controlled his tars? Sebastian’s expression dropped. He frowned, silent, and turned back to the king.

Captain Sebastian stood ready to fight. “Release my men!”

The king laughed. “You mean, *my* men?”

CHAPTER 25



“*I* don’t understand. We have the mirror. It’s why we came to the forest,” Mykal said. He stopped there. Karyn had been kidnapped. They’d all been close to losing their lives.

Galatia had placed the mirror into the side saddle on her horse. “It will do us no good to call Pandora now. Not without having the other artifacts, too.”

“What other artifacts?” Blodwyn demanded.

“It isn’t *you* I need,” she said, ignoring the question and locking eyes on Blodwyn.

Mykal cringed. It wasn’t that her words came out harshly, but the meaning was clear. What she said might not have offended Blodwyn, but they’d visibly upset him. She made it almost impossible to trust her, even though he wanted to. Everything about her had been mysterious from the beginning, never revealing more than pieces each time she spoke. “If you expect my support, I need some assurance that all of us are in this together.”

She raised an eyebrow, as if she appreciated his stand. “I told you four wizards went into hiding, including me. We have the mirror and can now summon Pandora. But we need to acquire two more artifacts in order to call on Matteo and Osuald. The ritual is draining. Completing the steps once will leave us vulnerable. Repeating it three times will insure that the king will catch up to and capture us all.”

“Which king?” Karyn said.

“Does it matter?” Galatia said.

Mykal thought it did. They were wanted by both, but for such different reasons. There were dead men south of the forest. Eventually, King Nabal would discover the murders. Where were they going to hide with royal enemies in both the west and the east? Despite his earlier determination, he *knew* that they were all committed now. “What else do we need? Don’t piecemeal it. Okay? We need to know everything.”

“In the belly of the Zenith Mountains, Matteo hid a dagger dipped in gold. He had the weapon specially crafted. The blade is maraging steel, forged in dragon flames. It is indestructible,” Galatia said.

“Dragon flames?” Mykal said. “That is a real thing?”

“It was,” Blodwyn said. “A long time ago.”

“Dragons existed,” Mykal said. It wasn’t a question. It was said in awe. *This might be my other grandfather, Mykal thought. If he is anything like Uncle Quill, summoning him out of hiding might not work to our favor.*

“Why would he part with such a weapon?” Blodwyn said, not hiding his confusion. His thick brow arched, and eyes squinted. “Seems he’d want to keep such a unique blade?”

“He has two,” Galatia said.

It was the first time Mykal had seen her drop eye contact. She gazed at the ground. It had something to do with the dagger. There was a story there. Maybe it wasn’t her place to tell it? The weapons didn’t seem to have any bearing on their present situation. He shouldn’t let it go, but decided he would. For now. “And Osuald?” Mykal said.

“Osuald hid a chalice somewhere near or in the ancient Library Ruins, just beyond the Constantine Realm, north east of the Flaming Crystal Valley. It’s studded with rare gems, and is very valuable,” Galatia said.

Blodwyn opened his mouth and closed it. Mykal knew he was going to question, again, why such precious items were hidden. Instead he tapped the end of his staff on the ground.

Although still under the deep canopy, it was obvious that the sun was fading. Mykal guessed more clouds were moving in. He was impatient about to leave the forest. His skin itched as if spiders crawled all over him, beneath his

garments. Scratching at his shoulders and arms brought no relief.

“I believe it is safe to assume we will head north for the dagger first, then to the east for the chalice?” Quill stood there, legs apart, hand holding wrist behind his back.

“We?” Blodwyn said.

“I’m coming with you,” Quill said. “I’m family, after all.”

Mykal sighed. “Family?” he laughed.

“I think he should accompany us. Anthony, too,” Galatia said, as if she did not hear Mykal’s last statement, or if she did, she chose to ignore it.

Nothing felt right to Mykal. He needed time alone with Blodwyn. “Once we get the dagger and chalice, there’s nothing else we need to search for?”

“That is all,” the wizard said, the palms of her hands pressed peacefully together.

Mykal kept looking upward. He couldn’t see a single Archer. They must have the group surrounded, arrows ready to go. “And then we summon the others.”

“Yes.”

“I suppose the sooner we find these things, the sooner we can head home,” Mykal said.

Galatia looked around, then back at Mykal. “*Home*? I’m not sure you fully understand what’s going on. No. You can’t go home.”

Mykal eyed Blodwyn. “I don’t understand what you’re saying. I—”

“The war *is* coming, Mykal. The king and his men are on the way. They hunt for us as we stand idle discussing things we’ve already covered. He wants these items.” She patted the leather satchel. “He wants me, and he wants you. There is no going *home*, Mykal. We are only at the beginning. This is only where it all starts. I thought you knew that when we left the farm.”

Deflated, Mykal waved a wild hand around, and pointed behind them, toward home. “I will return home. I will not abandon my grandfather. That is not what family does.”

“My father,” Quill whispered.

Karyn put a hand on the back of Mykal’s arm. He felt the warmth from her

touch pass through his body, it soothed his itch, and calmed his anxiety. He thought his heartbeat slowed, but couldn't be sure.

"But you are one of the wizards," Galatia said. "You need training. Magic comes easily to you. I am impressed by the things you've been able to do naturally. I will help you. Along the way, I will teach you things that will allow you to control your abilities," Galatia said.

Blodwyn interjected, "And where is the dagger?"

"It's within the Gorge Caves, beneath the Zenith Mountains," she said.

Quill whistled. "The caves, seriously?"

Mykal knew the mountains. On a clear day the snowy peaks were sometimes visible from the farm. The Isthmian cut the range in half, just north of Crimson Falls. He often planned riding out with Babe to see them more closely, but had never got around to it. There were always too many chores.

"You've been there?" Galatia asked Quill.

"I've been as far as the Ironwall Pass. Rough area. Originally, it was set up as kind of a military outpost. It was only after the old empire fell that it became a village independent from the nations. It's about a day's ride," Quill said, and then nodded toward Anthony. "We know a man, mines for coal beneath the mountains."

"They all mine for coal beneath the mountains," Blodwyn said. Mykal almost smiled. No one except Galatia seemed keen on having the Archers join them.

"It won't be simple getting through Ironwall Pass without trouble. I can assure you, even if you're not looking for a fight, you're going to find one," Anthony said. "The way the four of you look, you'll practically be begging those guys to kick your a—"

Quill raised his hand, silencing Anthony. "I know we got off to a rocky start."

"Like you trying to kill us?" Mykal said.

"I told you," Quill said. "I talked with Galatia. I understand what she's saying. We were knights once. We took vows to protect and serve. It wasn't our fault the lawmakers were corrupt, and the laws unjust. We did what we were

commanded to do for as long as we could.”

“And then you became hoods,” Mykal said. “Robbing, and killing. Talk about a one-eighty.”

Anthony stepped forward, fist cocked.

Again, Quill raised a hand, halting the attack. “You do not know what you’re talking about, nephew. And now is not the time. A storm is coming in from the sea. It is going to rain soon.”

“And how do you know this?” Mykal asked.

Thunder boomed.

“Let us get our things, our horses, and we will guide you through Ironwall Pass. We’ll help you retrieve the dagger. If you don’t want us helping after that, we’ll return to the forest. At least we’ll know we did our part to help this cause.”

Mykal noticed everyone stared at him, including Galatia.

Karyn never removed her hand from his arm.

They expected him to make the call. While he still considered this Galatia’s journey, he may have been the only one. “We’ll wait. Get your stuff, your horses.”

THE EVIDANUS RIVER sliced through the Cicade. It fed Lantern Lake, and ran east to the Isthmian. Although not very wide, the rocks and rapids made anyone think twice about attempting to cross on foot. Quill and Anthony led them to a small wooden bridge. There wasn’t much of a trail to follow once out of the woods.

“The bridge is guarded from the trees.” Quill waved to unseen men hidden by the cover of the forest. “No one gets across without our knowing.”

Large, black clouds spun slowly, unnaturally in a gyre above them. No one remarked on the anomaly. It rained, and thundered, lightning flashed from the central core of the dark mass. Magic had to be driving the odd storm, this fact instinctively understood by everyone in their party.

Horseshoes clacked on the bridge.

Mykal knew that following the river northwest would eventually lead to Karyn's family castle. He knew the realm was in ruins, but had no idea to what extent. If Karyn had become Nabal's ward at a young age, he assumed she didn't know the condition of her kingdom, either. Maybe she did; perhaps King Nabal had visited the lands and had brought her with him. It would have been a foolishly cruel thing to do, taking a child to see the decimated remains of her birthright, but kings weren't often recognized for their intelligence. The throne was not given to the most capable; it was purely a matter of lineage.

"I never got the chance to thank you," Mykal said, riding beside Karyn.

"Thank me?"

"For saving my life. Things got hectic kind of fast. I wasn't thinking. You saved my life, and I didn't even thank you."

She smiled. "It's why I'm here."

"Oh," he said. "Well, I just wanted to say thanks. So, thanks."

"That's not how I meant it," Karyn said. "I found you because I've dreamt of you since as far back as I can remember. I'm glad I was here to help you."

"Perhaps we should have stayed in the forest until the storm passed," Blodwyn said from behind them.

Mykal's stomach sank. He thought about his grandfather, and the farm. He felt that the storm wasn't going to pass anytime soon. It was like Galatia had said, this was just starting. They were only at the beginning. He was working hard to accept his fate. Every time he thought he had a grasp of things that have happened, and of things yet to come, he panicked and found himself reverting. It would take him some time, unfortunately, it sounded like there was little time remaining for the ability to adapt.

CHAPTER 26



Prince Calah Nabal followed the king everywhere. At ten years and three, the boy was on the cusp of manhood. With matching crimson capes, Calah also wore a sword on his belt, but kept a hand on the hilt at all times. The prince's golden hair resembled wheat. The scar along the left side of his jaw gave his appearance gravitas the king felt, at least. It was from a fall. The boy had tripped on stone stairs, the cut a product of his face striking the wall as he tumbled. Calah could alter the story when older, making it suit his needs.

"I've not seen clouds like that ever before, have you, father?" Prince Calah said. They were in the long room where the knights' captain reviewed a map of the land with his king.

"Come away from the window. This is far more important than rain." While the king appreciated the boy's enthusiasm, he grew annoyed with the constant flow of questions that continually wandered from topic to topic. "My apologies, Lanster. You were saying?"

"Riders were dispatched along all roads. All have returned except for those sent north. They were to ride as far as the Cicade Forest, Lantern Lake, and return. They should have been back by now."

King Nabal looked at the map, although it wasn't needed for reference.

"Archer's must have gotten them," the prince said.

Nabal would have shushed his son, but couldn't argue with his conclusion. He knew Lanster wouldn't appreciate the accusation. As Captain of the Knights, Lanster knew most of the men living in the trees, had trained many of them as

young squires. Sparing feelings wasn't the king's concern, however. He thought Lanster considered the Archers deserters, and oath breakers, but couldn't be positive. "It is possible they ran into trouble."

"I can send another platoon that way in the morning," Sir Lanster said.

There was a knock on the door.

"Enter," Nabal said.

Prince Calah walked around the center table, eyeing the map and licking his lips. He kept his hands folded behind his back. The king watched, hoping his son was listening, and learning. Even though Nabal had no plans to die anytime soon, Calah was the last of his bloodline.

A knight from the Watch entered saluting. "Your highness. Prince Calah. Captain."

"Yes?" King Nabal said, the impatience apparent in his voice.

"A ship has docked in the Delta Cove, sire."

King Nabal stood up straight. "Ship?"

At the eastern end of the kingdom there was Ridgeland Port and Delta Cove with docks and slips in place for fishing boats. The locations were rarely used. Two-man row boats, and those only slightly larger, barely ventured offshore in order to cast nets. No one risked sailing out much further.

"Voyagers," Prince Calah said.

The knight shook his head. "I was told it was not a Voyager ship."

"Where did it come from?" King Nabal said. No matter from what angle he looked at it, the news was troublesome. If a Voyager had docked within the cove, the question was why? Why were they here and what did they want? If it was as the knight said, and not Voyagers, then who? Where did *they* come from, and what did *they* want?

"I'm not sure, your highness." The knight shifted weight from one leg to the other. His stare was aimed at the floor, mostly.

"Lanster, I want your men to investigate this. And for you to go with them," Nabal said.

"Yes, sire. And I will dispatch that platoon to the forest," Lanster said. "We'll all ride at first light."

“You’ll go *now*,” Nabal ordered.

NIGHT CAME BARELY NOTICED. There had been no sunlight due to the roiling storm, so there had been little transition. The horses galloped across wet fields of high, green grass. Hooves kicked up mud, splattering it on cloaks. A low fog rolled with them, as though it were following. The temperature had dropped considerably. The cold air surrounded them like a chilled blanket, but was better than when Mykal caught a whiff of his dried sweat.

They must soon stop for the night. They’d not reach the pass anytime soon. They were better off entering the mining town well rested, or at least better rested than they were. The longest day of his life was coming to an end. He couldn’t imagine the next few days getting any easier. Resting whenever possible would be the smartest idea, Mykal knew. As bone weary as he was, Mykal wasn’t sure he’d be able to fall asleep.

Once the rain stopped, they rode on just a little further before, decided, Mykal whistled. Karyn, Blodwyn, and Galatia halted their horses. Riding point, Quill and Anthony were too far ahead. The whistle didn’t reach their ears. Soon enough they’d realize everyone else had stopped, and return. “I have never been beyond the forest before. *Well*, I have never been as far as the forest either. I thought for sure we’d have encountered a barn, or somewhere suitable to rest for the night.”

“Not many land owners this far from the realm,” Blodwyn said, his hands on the horn of his saddle. “Between the forest and the pass is good land, but mostly unused land. We passed the last small farms, homes and barns long before we reached the forest.”

Mykal looked around. “We’ll stay here for the night.”

The thick fog that covered the ground as high as his knees carried with it a certain eeriness. Each step he took sent the fog swirling. It made him wonder if stopping was the best decision.

The Archers returned. The horses neighed and shook their heads, as their

riders reined them in. Quill patted his mare on the neck. "I take it we're stopping for the night?"

"Unless you know of somewhere better?" Mykal said, hoping he might.

"There's nothing. Not around here. Be a while before we see anything habitable," he said. "Actually, I don't think we'll find much of anything until we reach the pass."

"It's what Wyn said." Mykal sighed. "Then yes, we're stopping here for the night."

"Sleep in shifts?" Quill said. "I'll feed the horses, brush them down and take first watch."

Anthony jumped off his horse. "Thank you, boss. But I can give you a hand with the horses before I try and sleep."

Mykal shook his head. He didn't trust these guys when awake. There was no chance he'd sleep a wink with them on guard. It didn't matter if Quill was his uncle, or not. The only two he trusted were Blodwyn, and Karyn. Three and three. "You sleep. I'll take first."

"Want us to take care of the horses first?" Quill said. "There's a stream just ahead for water."

Mykal didn't mind taking care of the horses. Four of them were his. "I've got it. You guys get some rest."

It wasn't long before the others fell asleep, which didn't surprise Mykal. It had been a long and arduous day, to say the least. Blodwyn's snores rumbled worse than the skies during a storm. This proved just how exhausted everyone was, because no one should be able to sleep with that man's heavy breathing.

Galatia motioned for Mykal to follow her. She walked away from the makeshift campsite, Mykal on her heels.

"You should still be sleeping, my watch isn't over. Blodwyn is next, anyway," Mykal said.

"I can't sleep. I thought this might be a good time for a lesson," she said.

"The middle of the night?" He would disagree, if he weren't so bored. "What have you got in mind?"

"Basics."

He held out his hands thinking about the electric charge that shot from his fingertips. That didn't seem basic.

"I'm not sure how you did what you did," Galatia said as if reading his mind.

"I watched you?"

She shook her head. "It's not that simple. You don't know the words that go with that power. You have to call on the magic."

"I didn't say anything. I just thought it, I imagined it. It was like a part of me thought, 'hey, if you really are a wizard like Galatia, then zap them.'"

"You just thought that?"

"Almost word for word."

She narrowed her eyes. "I want to try something. Hold out the palm of your hand. Now, imagine a small ball of fire. Picture something the size of an apple."

Mykal laughed.

"Humor me."

"I've imagined things before, you know. Like for the fence around the farm to fix itself, or the cows to milk themselves. It's never made a difference before," he said, shaking his head.

"I am what you might call a Tantra Wizard. I need to recite things for them to happen. I also think about what I want to occur, but it is the rhythm of the words, the tempo that brings forth the power inside of me," she said.

"Like when we conjured the red orb?"

"Exactly." She motioned with her head toward his. "Try it."

Mykal stared at his palm. In his mind's eye he saw a small ball of flame.

Nothing happened.

She said, "Concentrate."

He tried, closing his eyes.

After a moment of nothing, she said, "Keep your eyes open. See where you want the fire."

"I'm going to burn myself."

"You won't. The ball of fire should float above your hand. Tell yourself the flames can't burn you."

He snickered.

“Do it,” she insisted.

His smile vanished. He focused on his palm. A tingling began in his chest. Vibrated. There was a sudden whoosh, and in his hand he held a ball of fire. The flames were white and blue, and snapped and hissed in his palm.

The smile, the laugh, returned. “Look at that!”

She lightly clapped her hands. “Very good!”

“What do I do with it?” Mykal looked around, anxious.

“Throw it.”

“Throw it?” he said. “I have no idea how to throw this. Do I just...”

Mykal hesitantly gripped the fire as if it were a small ball, expecting the heat and flames to blister his skin. When it didn't, he drew back his arm and threw the flame forward. The ball flew fast, and went far.

“Now wish it away.”

He blinked, and the fireball was gone. It had simply vanished.

Knowing he was giggling like a child, he ran his palms down the front of his pants. “That was something else. I mean, I can't believe I did that, that I can do these things.”

“There are other forms of the craft, each slightly unique from the rest. But you, *your* magic is something I've never witnessed before,” she said. “We call this kind of sorcery Natural. You are a *Natural Wizard*.”

“What does that mean?”

“When you wished the fence fixed, or the cows milked, it would have happened. If you'd believed it would. Those were just flippant wishes. Lazy hopes. It's why you've not called on your power before. You didn't believe in magic. You didn't know you were a sorcerer. That has all changed now. I suspect the lessons I thought I was going to have to give you, will all be useless. The things you can do might be near limitless.”

“Limitless? But how will I know what I can and can't do?”

Galatia smiled, and shrugged, “By trying. The thing to remember, magic is not to be used for trivial matters. Using your power will drain your energy, though that will replenish over time. The more frequently you use your ability, or the extent of the use...can leave you weak, and vulnerable.”

CHAPTER 27



The roar surrounded her. It rose and fell in waves. There were cheers and jeers, and snide comments. None indistinguishable from the other. Together it was impossible to make out any one word.

There was a sense of chaos. People everywhere. Shoulders bumped, and pushed. Rancid breath and body odor made bile rise in her throat; she feared she'd vomit if she continued breathing. Packed in tight, she couldn't see over anyone's head. Whatever was happening, she was missing.

But she somehow *knew* that it was bad.

Whatever *it* was, the collective oohs and ahhs grew more intense. Snaking her way forward was difficult. No one wanted to step aside, or let her pass. Not easily detoured, she continued forward, gaining as much ground as allowed. There was barely room to breathe that fetid, collective stench.

The man in front of her spun around. The size of a small giant, she strained her neck looking up at him. If she wasn't pressed person to person, she would have backed away, frightened. Yet, she couldn't move. There was nowhere to go; no way to flee, though running seemed prudent.

He had no eyes. The nose was wide, flattened, and somehow still bent to the left. The few teeth he did have were crooked and decaying. His gums were shredded, as if he'd been chewing on broken glass. Goopy strands of pink flesh dangled where teeth once occupied space.

"He's not going to live." He breathed in and out of his mouth; she was confident he'd recently eaten a barrel of fish left to dry out in the sun for two and

a half days.

She didn't have to ask who.

While there was no apparent light source, she had no issue seeing clearly. Her skin was cold, clammy. "I can save him."

"Only one can live. You are the one who kills him."

"I wouldn't do that!" She grabbed his arm and attempted to move him aside. The man was a wall. His muscles felt like rock. "Move!"

"Only one can live."

"I can save him!" She would never kill Mykal. Never.

"Not this time. You are the one that kills him."

"I will save him!"

"You will be the death of him."

Karyn came awake abruptly, eyes wide, sitting up. The fog shrouded most of her body; it was as if she were treading water with her head just above the sea's surface.

She realized her mouth was open. She was thinking, *I will save him!*

She didn't think she'd screamed.

The voice came from behind her. "Not this time."

She turned her head, and just before she could make out who had replied to her thoughts, her eyes lurched open, and out loud she gasped, the scream caught in her throat.

WITH NO REAL path to follow, the six of them rode their horses in a line, an inverted V. The Cicade fell further behind them, and the Zenith Mountains loomed ahead, stretching on for miles. As they drew closer and closer, the breathtaking beauty of the range should have filled him with a sense of peace. It didn't. There was something foreboding about their sheer size and the overabundance of cold grey rock. With a break in the mystical storm, a view of snow covered peaks and a blue sky were bold contrasts in color in the sky. The mountains were more distinct now that they were closer, the intimidating size of

each jagged rise brought on anxiety that made his heart race and his breath quicken. He could feel them, the mountains, as if they were pressing against him; against the very air he had trouble breathing, reminding him of his desperate struggle trapped beneath the Isthmian.

Karyn stayed close. She was on his right, Blodwyn and Galatia to his left; Quill and Anthony continuing to lead.

Quill said they'd reach Ironwall before midday.

The steady clap of hooves stamping the ground was rhythmic, a hypnotic counterpoint to his stifling dread, like a tantra which formed Galatia's magic.

He felt *aware*.

It was the only way he could explain it to himself.

Between yesterday and today, some switch inside him had flipped, something had changed.

He was aware of himself unlike he had ever before been.

A Natural Wizard. He wasn't positive what that meant, but felt comforted by the simplicity of the way it sounded. Natural.

His breathing slowed.

It wasn't arrogance that fed his level of comfort, as much as it was the beginning of finding real answers about who he was, who his mother had been. Or, he dared dream, who she was *still*.

He concentrated on his breathing. Deep breaths in, and long, slow exhales.

The flat landscape evolved, becoming hilly, and rocky. There was a narrow brook, and a few sparse trees with patches of green grass under them. After the horses stopped for a drink, they continued on, falling into line, one behind the other.

Mykal saw the village. Two rows of main structures separated by a wide dirt road. Behind the buildings along the main road were clusters of small homes. A lot of the houses were surrounded by an odd looking twenty foot tall wall. It looked like some kind of loose metal, like it was made from iron chainmail. Sharp, coiled loops ran across the top of the wall. Mykal thought that even if someone scaled the iron, they'd have a difficult time getting over to the other side without fileting flesh off the bone.

The sun sat directly above them. There were no clouds—not that clouds mattered, since bizarre storms had been springing up without any notice.

Quill pulled back on reins, “Whoa.”

His horse’s neck turned to the side from the tug, and its feet kicked up mud. The other horses slowed, and the six of them clustered together.

“This village is filled with people who spend their days in the bowels of the mountain. It’s dangerous work. They’re not even-tempered men. Their lungs are black, and their souls blacker. You stay close, and watch your tongue,” Quill said. It was like he had not heard Blodwyn at all. “Stay close.”

They approached the village at a trot. It was nothing like Nabal’s keep. There were no fortified walls, or armed guards. The main fortification was the odd looking walls around the villages behind the main street. Unlike the market in Grey Ashland where vendors sold product from carts, here merchants sold from buildings set one beside the other. Most noticeable were a tavern, and an iron smith shop where custom swords and daggers were crafted. There was an inn, and a place that sold fresh grown vegetables and fruits. Across from the inn well building where fish was sold. Some of the others looked like dwellings, one on top of the other, as high as three stories. Mykal was in awe at the unique ways of the village. Anything a person could want was here, in one of these buildings.

“Where is everyone?” Karyn said. She whispered, as if her voice would disturb everyone who was not in town.

“Under the mountain.” Anthony pointed toward the Zenith.

“They’re working,” Blodwyn said.

“So where do we take the horses?” Mykal said.

As they walked the main street of the Ironwall Pass, Mykal noticed posts in front of each building, with troughs filled with water. “We can tie the horses off here for now. Let them have some more to drink, and rest, while we figure out where we can get some oats. It’s going to cost us some silver, though. No one here is going to take care of our horses out of the kindness of their hearts,” Quill said, and then motioned Blodwyn over to him.

Mykal watched them whisper.

“What do you think’s going on?” Karyn said. She wasn’t looking at him. It

didn't seem as if she was interested in the village, so much as she was avoiding eye contact.

"Is something wrong?"

She shook her head.

Galatia stood in the center of the road, arms up, stretched wide.

He noticed Karyn's arm wrapped around his.

"No," Karyn said. "Nothing's wrong."

Blodwyn walked over. "We're going to find food for the horses, grab something for ourselves. Not sure about the rest of you, but a hot cooked meal would be a nice change to the rations we've been living on."

"I second that," Anthony said.

Blodwyn smiled. "I've a friend here. Makes candles. We'll stop and see him, as well."

"Shouldn't be too tough to find. Signs hanging by each place," Mykal said. "What were you guys talking about?"

Blodwyn looked back at Quill, who watched them. "If it turns out we need to, we'll discuss it then, okay, Mykal?"

He didn't like the way that sounded, but Blodwyn wasn't a man you argued with. You could argue, just don't expect to win. It was a lesson he'd learned long ago. "I suppose."

Blodwyn clapped a hand on Mykal's shoulder, like he was relieved the subject was dropped. "You two hungry?" he said, an awkward segue.

"Very," Karyn said.

"Me, too."

WHILE THE OTHERS searched for a hot meal, Mykal and Karyn followed Blodwyn. He walked with calculated steps, using his quarterstaff as a walking stick. His cloak flapping in the breeze that flowed from the mountains. The colder air gave even dirt a crisp scent.

"I have not seen Copper in a long time," Blodwyn said. "We go way back.

Knew each other when we were just kids.”

“What happened?” Mykal said.

“Tragedy.”

Mykal looked at Karyn, who frowned. “What kind of tragedy?”

“There was an explosion. Copper lost his eyesight. He was about your age when it happened, Mykal. It became difficult for him to make a living. Working his father’s fields was no longer possible. He felt like a burden. I did my best to convince him things would work out. One night he vanished. I remember wanting to look for him,” he said.

“And did you?” Mykal said.

Blodwyn shook his head. “His father forbade it. Ahh, here we are.”

A shingle hung over a door. It read, simply, *Candles*.

The building was old. The clapboard was warped, showing cracks. A large bug scurried over a plank, and disappeared into a knothole in the wood.

Blodwyn opened the business door. A bell jingled.

The inside of *Candles* was dark.

The man was blind, so lanterns or torches must not have been *his* priority.

There were several barrels set in rows in the center of the room. Each rested on an iron plate over a small open flame. Above each row of barrels, on a spit were odd-shaped shafts. There were handles at one end, with gears that meshed together. Dangling over each barrel was a long white piece of string. Mykal stepped closer, and dipped a finger into a barrel, and wasn’t surprised. “Hot wax,” he said.

A curtain leading to a back room parted.

A man stepped out. “Hello?”

Copper and Blodwyn might have been friends when young, but Copper had not aged nearly as well. His thin white hair were mere wisps on his head. Oblong, brown spots dotted his skin. A few days’ worth of stubble covered his cheeks and, chin. He hunched forward, his spine bent at an angle, and his feet scuffed as he shuffled forward. “Hello?”

“It’s been a long time, old friend,” Blodwyn said.

Copper stopped. He tried to stand up straight, but his angled spine prevented

the movement. Only his head raised, and with milky white film covering his eyeballs, he appeared to search the room, making Mykal wonder if the man was completely blind, until he noticed that the man focused on nothing, and the eyes continually panned left, right, up, and down, as if twitching; the muscles behind the eyeballs, restless.

“Blodwyn? Can it be?”

Blodwyn laughed. He moved forward and embraced Copper in a tight hug. The two clapped each other on the back.

“It’s been too long, Copper. Far too long.” Blodwyn held Copper’s arms and studied the man. “You look well.”

“I wish I could say the same.”

They both laughed.

Mykal smiled at Karyn as they witnessed the exchange.

“And who do you have with you?” Copper said.

“Friends.”

“And you need help?” Copper said.

“We do.”

“Is it dangerous?”

Blodwyn looked back at Mykal. “Yes. A war is coming, my friend.”

“Isn’t there always?”

It wasn’t true. Mykal never knew war. He’d heard stories. There has been peace as long as he could remember.

“We have several horses, which are going to need tending to. We can pay,” Blodwyn said. “We have them tied to posts outside.” From under his cloak, Blodwyn produced a small leather purse, cinched closed with a gold string. It clanged, full of coin. Without any word, he tossed it in the air.

And without turning his head, Copper caught it and, as if a magician himself, it disappeared. “I can assure you they will be well cared for.”

“We also need a guide. Someone familiar with the caves, but more importantly, someone you trust.”

“The mines?”

“No. Not the mines.”

“You mean the Gorge Caves?”

“I do,” Blodwyn said.

“Why would you want to be heading into there? It’s not a safe place for people to venture. I know of many who have entered, but never come back out. Many. Their families still mourn the loss, crippled by not knowing what happened to their loved ones,” Copper said.

“We wouldn’t go down into the caves unless it was absolutely necessary,” Blodwyn said.

“No,” Copper said, “I suppose not. There are few men who know those caves very well. Even fewer I trust as a guide. Let me think on that for a moment.”

“Thank you,” Blodwyn said.

“Will you introduce me to your friends?”

After the introductions, Mykal said, “A pleasure to meet you. Wyn has told us all about you, sir—”

Copper held up a hand. He snickered. “It’s Copper. Not sir. Has never been sir. Not for me. My father. He was Sir. Capital ‘S,’ that’s for sure. And what did you think when Wyn told you that explosion of his cost me my eyesight?”

Mykal looked at Blodwyn, who shrugged, sheepishly.

Copper laughed. “He left that part out, didn’t he, Mykal?”

“He may have, si—Copper,” Mykal said.

“Ah, yes. He always does. Would you like to hear the story?”

Mykal raised eyebrows at Blodwyn, who only shrugged again. “I would?”

“We were just kids, really. Young, wild. We were invincible. When youth is on your side, it’s hard to believe some day you’ll die. Or worse, some day you’ll grow withered and old.” Copper pulled at his shirt, indicating he had failed to die yet was instead plagued with age. “Wyn fancied himself a magician when we were kids. Oh, hush hush now. We never broke any laws. Just kids playing. Same as if we pretended to be knights and thieves, really. Only Wyn gathered a bunch of items from his family, chemicals used to clean, and such. He had a glass beaker and mixed items together, cooking them over an open flame. He took notes on when the liquid changed color, or bubbled, or boiled, or foamed. The foaming, that was always fun to watch. Except one day, he asked me to add

something-or-other to the concoction, and like a fool, I did. He was older than me. So I believed everything he told me, or showed me, or did anything he asked me to do.”

“Oh, you make it sound like you are nothing but an innocent victim,” Blodwyn said.

Copper waved a dismissive hand at Blodwyn. “Who’s telling the story? Seems like you had your chance. Didn’t you? Of course you did.”

He wasn’t mad. He seemed almost joyful retelling the tale of how his vision was lost. Mykal marveled at the man’s good nature. It impressed him. He smiled at Karyn. She seemed as involved in the rendition as he was. She was so silent all of the time. He hoped he’d get her to talk more. He had questions for her. Not about him, or his safety. He wanted to know more about her, since she seemed to occupy his thoughts more than anyone else had before.

“I did as I was instructed, and added the whatever-it-was to the beaker, and ... *BOOM!* ...” Copper bounced his head from side to side in a lackadaisical manner. “The rest is history.”

Silence fell over them. Blodwyn no longer smiled. His eyes stared toward the ground. The melancholy seeped into old wounds that apparently weren’t yet healed.

“Copper?” Mykal said, trying to think fast. “What is this contraption you have here?”

“Ah, this?” The man’s eyes lit up at the question. “Watch!”

Copper bent below the first row of barrels. He turned a knob. The flames increased. After a moment the wax began to bubble. Copper walked the line, checking to ensure a thin piece of string was attached over each barrel. At the opposite end, he worked the crank. The gears rolled. The shaft spun. The strings dipped down into the wax, and then were raised. Over and over he churned the crank. Soon the string held onto the wax, and the wax thickened as it cooled layer upon layer.

“This is how you make candles?” Mykal was impressed. He stood over a barrel and watched as the wax took shape. “The string, it’s candle wicks?”

“Yes!” Copper said.

“And with this...thing, you can make five candles at the same time?”

“I can. I do. And I sell out daily. The people here spend their lives in the mines, surrounded by nothing but dank darkness. When they emerge the sun is close to setting. They burn candles all night long. The darkness makes them fearful. They prefer to spend the night in some kind of light.”

CHAPTER 28



Mercer stood on the starboard side of *The Shadow*. He held the lower end of the ax handle in one hand, and the other gripped higher near the double-headed blade. The few men who did not die during the boarding stood around him. They were sentinels. Their charge was guard and protect.

There was a fog inside his head. Mercer could not clear it. He understood the task, but knew there was something else, something more about it which he couldn't recall. It was right there. Just in front of him. But invisible. He hated when that happened, like when he misplaced the name of a friend within his mind. He knew it, of course he knew it, but at the moment the name escaped him.

He knew he was supposed to protect the ship, but ... there was something about the ship, something about the order he was mentally unable to grasp it.

The port inside the cove was littered with small, modest houses, and shops. Vendors sold fish, netting, and bait. There weren't too many people around. In fact, it had been some time since he'd seen a single soul. It didn't matter. Instead, he enjoyed the stillness; the quiet sound of waves lapping against the pillars supporting piers, and the hulls of the boats. The air was filled with salt mixed with fish. Such a distinct and pleasingly pungent odor. He breathed in deep through his nostrils and savored it.

Mercer saw six riders approaching long before he heard the hoof beats. The line of horses trailed a long thin cloud of dust behind them. They headed through

the port toward the dock, toward the ship Mercer was instructed to defend.

There was no need to squint. He recognized the sigil on the rider's banner. King Nabal's Watch. News about *The Shadow* had spread.

The Shadow.

That was not a Voyager ship name.

Mercer looked around. He was forgetting something, and knew it was important.

The riders approached, stopping just shy of the docks. One man climbed from his horse. He wore a breastplate, and chain mesh. He removed his helmet and walked toward the ship.

"My name is Sir Lanster," he said. He set the helmet under an arm. His free hand rested on the hilt of his sword. "We've been told you recently docked?"

"That's right, sir," Mercer said. The urge to jump from the ship onto the dock and engage the knight in a duel nearly consumed him. He blinked his eyes over and over, the only way he could think of forestalling the sensation.

"Is everything okay?"

Mercer looked left and right. Men were behind him with their weapons at the ready. "We're okay."

"I come at the request of the King. What is your business in this realm?" Lanster had stopped advancing.

"We are protecting the ship," Mercer said.

"From what?"

"Everything," he said.

"For how long?" Lanster said.

"Until they return, I suppose," he said.

"Until who returns?"

"The Mountain King," Mercer said. He chewed at his lower lip. Warm, coppery blood filled his mouth.

"And where has the Mountain King gone?"

"To the forest, of course," Mercer said.

"The Cicade?"

"I imagine. I'm not sure."

Lanster said to a man behind him. "It's as if he's bewitched."

"I see that, sir," the man said.

"And what is your name?" Lanster said.

"Mercer, sir."

"Mercer. Are you from Osiris?"

He shook his head. It was tough to stop. He felt dizzy from the movement.

"No, sir. I'm a Voyager."

Lanster said, "Have you been cursed?"

"I have, sir. We all have. Can you help us?"

Lanster did not know how he could help. He wasn't sure he understood what was going on. While he believed magic had been used, it was something he'd never witnessed before. Magic was something he never believed existed in the first place. The stories of wizards and magicians always came across as fables shared with children. And yet, he recognized the oddity of the men in front of him as off. Most off. "The Mountain King knows magic?" Lanster said.

"No, sir. The sorcerer with him does. She's powerful. Scary, dangerous, and powerful," he said.

"Will you come down from the ship and attack my king's people?"

"No, sir." Mercer re-gripped the hold on his weapon, agitated. He was shaking his head again, though, as if in conflict with some internal battle. "But you can't have this ship! We will defend it to the death."

Lanster held up a hand. The man's tone of voice changed. He sounded suddenly harsh, vicious. Lanster thought he might understand the parameters of the spell, the boundaries set. He could be wrong. He hoped he was not. "You may keep the ship. No one will try to take it away from you. It is yours."

"It is the Mountain King's ship. Not mine. Not ours." Mercer breathed more easily. "Thank you, sir."

Lanster turned around and addressed his knights. "Two men stay here. Do not let anyone near this ship. Is that command understood? No one goes near that ship. If the men on that ship decide to step onto King Nabal's dock, kill them." Lanster said, put on his helmet and mounted his horse. "Everyone else, follow me!"

CHAPTER 29



Copper lived above his candle shop. It wasn't much of a dwelling. There was the one room with a table and two chairs, a lumpy bed on a wood frame, and little else. The impressive part was the bookcase that lined the walls. Copper had hundreds of books. Mykal shook his head in disbelief, but didn't say anything.

"I understand there are three more of you," Copper said.

"They are outside," Blodwyn said.

Copper pulled a tin can from a shelf in the kitchen area and dropped the purse of coins inside before replacing it. "Well. As you can see, we can't all fit in here. Why don't we go across the street? The tavern isn't much either, but they've got ale and bread, and goat meat."

Mykal dropped a hand over his stomach, unable to muffle the long and loud rumble.

"Sounds like the lad is hungry." Copper laughed.

They crossed the road together. Copper walked as confidently as any seeing-abled person. Mykal surmised the man had memorized his surroundings. Maybe he counted off steps, or went based on smell, or sound, or a combination. It didn't matter how he did it, Mykal was impressed.

Blodwyn waved over Quill, Anthony and Galatia, and introduced them to Copper.

Lanterns lit the place. There were long dark wood tables with benches, and smoke filling the top few feet of head space from the meat cooking on a spit over

an open fire. Above was a square hole in the roof. Sunlight filtered in, and some of the smoke spilled out.

The front counter was long, 'L' shaped, and low with barrels of ale stacked behind it.

A lone man sat at one of the tables. His left leg jettied out in front of him. His pants had been torn, making room for a bandage wrapped from ankle to knee. A walking stick with a half circle handle rested beside him. His hands were curled around a mug. His head was bowed slightly, but his eyes followed them.

"Mining accident," Copper said, as if he knew the man was inside the tavern, and as if he'd also known Mykal was staring.

Quill, and Anthony yelled for ale.

The seven of them sat at the largest table.

"There's a stable around the corner. Perfect place for the horses," Quill said.

"Patton's place. It's exactly what I had in mind," Copper said. "Don't fret about the details. I'll handle that. Patton's a good man. Loves his animals."

Mykal took some comfort in the fact. He'd take them after they ate, see to it that they were properly fed and brushed.

Anthony whistled. "My goodness," he said.

Mykal noticed the woman. She wore a long black skirt, and white blouse barely contained more than ample breasts. Her soft brown hair was long, curly, and draped over her shoulders and down her back.

"Meat, bread and ale for everyone," Copper said.

"Before we do anything, I am going to want some time out back with the lady." Anthony laughed, and slapped his hand on the table.

"Don't be an animal," Quill said.

"I'm just saying," Anthony said.

"And *I'm* just telling you!" Quill's jaw set.

"Copper," Mykal said, changing the subject. "I'm curious about something. In your place, you had so many books."

Copper's face lit up. His smile widened. His eyes still traveled across the room, wild as if he were being stalked and was in search of the source. "My books. You want to know why a blind man like me has so many books."

“I was, actually.”

“When I was young, I learned to read. It was one of the best things my parents ever did for me. Teach me to read. We had one book in our home, and I read it over and over and over. I always wanted to read other books. There are books written about everything. I pledged to read them all.” Copper pointed at his eyes. “Now, I just collect them. Many nights, when I have trouble sleeping, I select a book, and just run my hands over the leather bindings, and my fingertips across each page. Silly as it may sound, I find it very relaxing, and somehow, satisfying.”

The meat was fat and gristle. They ate every bite.

OUTSIDE, the workers returned to the village from the mines, covered in black. Their clothing and skin was blanketed in iron dust, blackened from day after day of hacking away at the iron found inside the mountain. They lumbered along, dragging picks, and hammers, too tired for lifting tools much higher.

Some looked at Mykal and his friends, but the stares were hollow, as if looking through them, without seeing them at all. Others watched the ground in front of them. They veered into different directions. Many, if not most, headed for the tavern. None of them smiled.

“What are you staring at?” The man did not look strong, but lean, and wiry. When he growled, the whiteness of his teeth surprised Mykal.

“Nothing.” Mykal shook his head.

“Well then, get lost.”

“Watch how you talk to my friend.” Quill stepped forward.

It was a bad move. Other miners immediately stopped walking. The circle formed fast, even though the miners moved with a slow and sluggish lack of grace.

“Now, now,” Copper said. He held his hands up, and turned in a circle.

It was like he could see.

“Stay out of it, old man,” the miner said. “Guy’s staring at me. Looking at

me like he's better than me? Want to prove it, kid? Want to show me how much better?"

"Prove it? Prove what? I haven't said a word," Mykal said. He knew he sounded yellow. It didn't matter. He wasn't, and he wasn't looking for a fight. "We're not looking for trouble."

"That's the funny thing about trouble," the man said. "Sometimes it comes looking for you. And unfortunately, like it or not, it's found you."

Quill wasn't having it. "Tell you what? You go and bathe. Wash some of that grime off your face and then come back and see us. We'll give you a fight. But rolling around with dogs is not worth our time."

The miner swung. His first resembled a block of coal.

Quill deflected the punch with his right arm, and delivered a blow to the miner's gut with his left fist. The miner doubled over, the air knocked from his lungs. The lungs must have been filled with filth, leaving only minimal room for air in the first place. Quill didn't care. He grabbed the man's hair, raised his head up, and brought it down onto his rising knee. The crunch of bone almost echoed in the silence around them. Blood sprayed.

Anthony drew a sword, a quiet hissing threat to any that might interfere.

Galatia drew her hood over her head, stepping back as if invisible. Mykal wondered if he was the only one who could still see her.

Blodwyn raised his hands. "We're not looking for a fight. We'll be gone from your village soon."

"You better be!" A lone voice. It came from back in the crowd, perhaps from a coward who wanted to sound tough though removed from the actual potential harm.

Two others came forward, clearly intent on helping the injured miner away.

As if nothing had happened, the other miners moved on, headed here and there.

The cluster of people thinned, and eventually the road was once again deserted. When it was clear no other threat existed, Mykal began to breathe more normally, and for the first time, noticed that Karyn held his hand.

"If we're done here, then please excuse me. I'll be back," Copper said.

“We’re sorry for the trouble,” Blodwyn said, speaking to Copper, but staring at Quill.

“We have five, six fights a night,” Copper said. “Same thing, different players,” he replied as he walked away.

No one said a word, until Blodwyn slapped Quill’s arm. “Are you kidding me?”

“THIS IS COIL.” Copper stood on the wood walkway that ran the length of the buildings. The rails in front of the walk were where the horses were tethered.

While it was only late afternoon, it felt like much of the day had been used waiting for the villagers to return from the mines.

“He will be your guide into the Gorge Caves,” Copper said, vouching for the man.

The man was big. Bound with muscle. His hair was shaved close to his skull. His face, neck, and arms were covered in ink. Mykal had no idea the significance of the markings, though. They seemed to represent something dark, perhaps from the man’s past.

“He’s a scary man,” Karyn said.

Coil heard it, and looked her way. His upper lip quivered as he snarled. The scowl he wore on his face let everyone know he wasn’t thrilled with her assessment. “It was implied I’d receive compensation for my time,” Coil said. His voice was like shod feet grinding loose gravel.

Blodwyn, once again, produced a small leather purse. He tossed it over to Coil.

The large man uncinched the bag and poured coins into his palm. He picked them over with a fingertip.

“I assume that is satisfactory?”

Mykal wondered how much was in the purse, and how much more Blodwyn had stashed on him. It was peculiar to say the least.

Blodwyn must have caught him staring. He winked.

Mykal wasn't sure why, but the wink made him suspicious instead of putting him at ease.

"It'll do." Coil stuffed the purse into a pocket. "Well then. Let's get started."

"But it's nearly night," Galatia said.

"Sunlight. Moonlight," Coil said, "it doesn't matter. Not inside the caves. Come on. I don't want to be gone forever."

Coil started away, down the road, toward the mountains. The others grabbed their gear, and fell in behind him.

Odd choice of words. They left Mykal shivering. "Ah, the horses," he said. "I'll get them."

Quill looked back at Blodwyn.

Blodwyn turned walked over to Mykal.

"What?" Mykal said, wondering if this was what the two had been whispering about earlier.

"We can't take the horses, Mykal." Blodwyn spoke softly. His words were barely audible.

Mykal said, "Copper is going to look after them until we return? Is that why you paid him in coins?"

"It is."

"What? What aren't you telling me?" Mykal sensed more. He saw it in Blodwyn's eyes.

"It could be some time before we come back this way," he said. Blodwyn put a hand on Mykal's shoulder. "We may never come back here."

Mykal shook his head, confused. "Of course we will. We have to retrieve the dagger, and then we come back for the horses. It's that simple."

"I wish it were. And you may be right," Blodwyn said.

"But you don't think so. Do you?"

"I hope so."

Mykal looked at Babe. She drank from the trough of water in front of her. He petted her neck. She stopped drinking long enough to look over at him, and then went back to the water. "I'll be back, Babe. I'm not leaving you here. I won't leave you here," he said.

He turned around. Everyone stared at him. He didn't care. He walked over to Copper. "Please take care of the horses, sir. I will be back for them. I don't have much to offer, but I will pay you back somehow. You have my word," he said.

Copper nodded. His milky eyes roamed all over the place, but stopped and appeared to focus on his. "I've been paid well. Your horses will be fine. And they will be here for you whenever you return. You have my word, sir."

"Thank you." Mykal looked back at his horses one more time.

"We're ready then," Coil said. He didn't hide the fact that he was annoyed. It rolled off his tongue as natural as spit. "If you have torches, bring 'em. Dark as Hell inside those caves."

Mykal picked up his bag, bow and quiver. "I'm all set."

They each carried torches. "Even if we enter the caves in the middle of a summer day it is going to resemble the middle of the night in there," Coil explained.

Coil spun around and walked, taking long strides forcing the others to match his pace.

The pace he did set did not slow. He really had no intention of being away from Ironwall longer than absolutely necessary.

"Are you okay?" Karyn stayed beside Mykal. She'd become like his shadow, he thought.

"I'm fine," he said.

"I actually feel your pain." She touched her heart.

He wasn't sure if she used a figure of speech, or if she actually felt what he felt. He knew he'd lied to her. He wasn't okay. Leaving the horses was a mistake. Leaving his grandfather was, too. The world was about to change. That much he understood. He wanted to fight it though, confident if he refused to change then nothing around him would change either.

It was a foolish and childish thought. Knowing that it was didn't make any of it easier to accept.

"I believe him, you know," she said.

"Believe who?"

"Copper. That he'll take care of the horses."

Mykal smiled. "I do, too."

"We'll come back for them."

"You're right. We will," he said.

"I remember my father kneeling in front of me. We were just outside of the castle. It was midday, and the sun was so hot. I don't think there'd been any rain for weeks. Everything green was turning brown. Living things were dying," she said. "My father took my hand in both of his. They were big hands. Rough. He wasn't afraid of work. When things needed to be done, he was there with his people doing the work. They truly loved him. I remember that most of all. And he said to me, 'Karyn, you are going to stay with King Nabal for a while. Until things are better here. No matter what, one day, I will come for you. I will bring you back home. Hold that promise in your heart. Don't ever let it go. One day soon you will return home with me.'"

Mykal watched Karyn's lips while she talked, noticing the way her mouth moved forming the words. The tear that slid from the corner of her eye rolled down her cheek. He wanted to catch it on the back of his finger, and try to take the pain away. He didn't. Instead, he waited. He knew there was more to her story.

"You remind me of my father," she said.

"I do?"

She nodded. "Yes. You do. Because you promised Babe you would be back for him."

"And I will. I will come back for him."

"Just like my father promised one day he would return for me," she said.

Mykal wasn't sure he understood the comparison.

"I know I am still with Nabal, or I was. But the only reason my father didn't come back for me was because he was killed. If he were alive, if my kingdom still stood, I'd be a princess in my father's realm. He would have come for me. I never doubted his promise. Not once. Not even for a minute. Babe, she believed you."

But she's a horse, he thought. "Do you think so?" he said.

"I saw it in her eyes. She understood. She'll be waiting."

Mykal's breath quickened, and the muscles in his stomach tightened. He bit back emotion, and forced himself to smile. "Thank you, Karyn. That helped."

She wrapped her arm in his. "You're welcome."

They fell behind the others. Mykal didn't mind.

"In my heart, my father came for me. He didn't let me down." She wasn't done. She needed to get more out. "My father was a king, a ruler. No matter the size of his kingdom. He made life and death decisions all of the time. He has started wars, and always fought on the front line in every battle, witnessing horrible, horrible atrocities and death. In all that time, and I know I was young, but in all of that time I'd never seen him cry. Not once. Not until that day when I was on the wagon, and only after he'd waved goodbye to me. I don't think he expected me to look back a second time. But I did. I looked back. He wasn't just crying. He'd fallen to his knees. His body shook, and his face was buried in his hands."

She cried silently, tears streamed down her face. No sound escaped her.

"I'm sorry," Mykal said.

"No." She shook her head, putting off any consolation. "No. I'm okay."

CHAPTER 30



Mykal never saw the openings to the mines. They must have been more to the east. It didn't matter. Having seen the people who worked them, he wasn't interested anymore. In fact, except for getting the horses back, he didn't care if he ever saw this village again.

Once they reached the edge of town, they went west and followed a road with tall grass and weeds on either side. The mountains were to the right. His neck hurt straining to see the top. It was an impossible feat. The peaks were in the clouds. The snowy caps made it that much more difficult to differentiate.

The temperature had dropped even more. The chill would only increase as night fell.

The six of them walked on in silence. Only Quill appeared in any kind of hurry. Galatia and Blodwyn walked side-by-side, and ahead of them Quill and Anthony. Only Coil walked alone. He didn't seem bothered by this, though. If Mykal had to guess, their guide wasn't likely interested in small talk or companionship.

When they walked more in a huddled group, Coil started talking.

He pointed to his right. "There are a few entrances. Inside is a maze of tunnels. You think you can keep track of which way you're going, your rights, your lefts, but you can't. Something happens and you get turned around. People that know these caves better than I do have gone in, and I've never seen them again."

"That's what Copper said," Blodwyn said.

“So what’s your story? I mean, not for nothing, but you are the oddest gang of people I’ve ever seen together. We were walking and I was trying to piece it together. But I’ll be honest with you all, I got nothing.” Coil stopped walking. He’d turned and was addressing them face to face.

“Kind of a long story,” Blodwyn said. He leaned on his staff. Although he wasn’t breathing heavy, he looked tired.

“It’s none of my business, right? That’s what you’re telling me without so many words?” Coil grunted, but was smiling. Sort of.

“We’re looking for something,” Galatia said. Mykal loved the sound of her voice. It was lyrical. It was such a stark contrast to Coil’s.

“In the Gorge?” Coil shook his head. “You knew where it is?”

“Deep. At the bottom.”

The guide laughed. He pressed palms to knees and bellowed.

“Something funny?” Blodwyn said, sounding annoyed and a little protective of Galatia.

Coil took a moment regaining composure. When he was close, he attempted talking. It was interrupted by short bursts of scoffing. “The bottom. That’s what’s funny. You look up. You see how high the Zenith’s go? Those are nearly unreachable summits my friends. Unreachable. Up there, in the clouds, you have entirely different weather. Snow-blinding blizzards in the middle of summer. Blizzards.”

“You’ve misunderstood,” Galatia said, grace and calm her voice. “We do not wish to climb to the top of Zenith.”

“No. You want to go to the abyss below. The descent is nearly as treacherous and, perhaps, goes down twice as deep as it is tall,” Coil said. His smile now gone, his laugh extinguished. “It’s a suicide journey you’re on.”

“I assure you, it is nothing of the sort,” Galatia said, her warm and diplomatic smile never faltering. “You’ve been paid well. So I am not sure what the issue is.”

“I was paid, lady. But it doesn’t mean I have to like it, or the people I am guiding!”

“Watch it,” Blodwyn said, pointing the tip of his staff at Coil.

He raised both hands. It was a mockery. He wasn't afraid. "I work part time in those mines, and the rest of the time as an iron smith. Your staff doesn't scare me, old man."

Mykal thought he should have been, but simply didn't know better.

"The only reason I am here is because of Copper," Coil said, and wiped his palms on his pants. "I wasn't paid to kill myself. You guys want to die in there, be my guest. Me? I'll have none of it,"

Blodwyn reached into his cloak.

Everyone seemed familiar with the gesture.

He tossed another purse at Coil. "Will this cover it?"

Coil opened the pouch and peeked inside. "This will get you as far as I think I can take all of you safely, but not a step further. I can't promise any more than that, regardless of how much you pay me. These coins are useless to a dead man."

"Fair," Galatia said, nonplussed by the exchange.

"Fine. Listen to me now, and listen good. Once we go inside," he pointed to the cave entrance with his unlit torch, "you do as I say, exactly like I say it. Jump, drop to your bellies, whatever the order, just do it. We'll get through there faster, and safer, without a lot of questions."

Mykal hadn't noticed an entrance until then. It was a small slit in the rocks. A tight fit to press through. Hardly an entrance at all. "We're going through there?"

Coil growled. "Were you even listening? Forget about questions. Just follow direction. Got it?"

Mykal held up both hands. "Yes, sir."

It was sarcasm, but lost on their guide. He hoped.

"Copper tell you about the Cavers?"

"The, *who*?" Quill said, and looked at Anthony, who only shrugged with a befuddled expression on his face.

"Never mind. Just stay close. Alright?" Coil's friendly chat abruptly ended. He marched across the field of weeds, stomping a path toward the opening in the rocks.

Mykal stared at Blodwyn.

“Stay close. Keep an eye on Karyn, and Karyn, you keep an eye on him. We’re using the buddy system,” Blodwyn said.

“The what?” Anthony said.

“You got Quill’s back. He has yours. Galatia will cover my back, I’ll watch hers. The kids are doing the same. No one gets left behind,” he said.

“Is there a chance one of us could get left behind?” Karyn said.

“Not if we listen to Coil.” Blodwyn and Galatia followed the guide.

“That just sounds wrong. Not if we listen to Coil,” Mykal said, his best imitation of Blodwyn’s voice.

“Shhh! He’ll hear you,” Karyn said.

“Wyn? He doesn’t care,” Mykal said.

“No. Not him.” Karyn patted Mykal’s chest and pointed at the cave.

Coil stood by the entrance. He stared at them. And while he was too far away from them to be sure, Mykal thought he might be snarling.

“His hearing is amazing,” Mykal said, hoping his whisper wasn’t carried on the air. “What do you think? Cavers?”

“Shhh!” She started into the weeds, following Blodwyn and Galatia. She waved him on without looking back, and said, “Come on.”

At the entrance, Coil was prepared for more instruction. “I’m going through first. I don’t care who comes in next. Thing is, once we’re inside, we light the torches before we start walking. It sounds obvious, but I don’t want to feel guilty if something happens and I didn’t at least say it. We are going to mostly be in single file, one behind the other. Stay close. Even with these torches, it is going to be dark inside. I don’t want anyone getting lost, or falling over the side or something.”

“Fall over the side?” Mykal said.

“Foot placement is essential. We’ll mostly be hugging our backs to the stone,” Coil said.

Apparently, that was the end of his lecture because he turned sideways and pushed through the rocks. He was out of sight in moments.

The others stood there, a little surprised.

“We’ve got ten seconds, people,” Quill said. He shrugged off his bag and held it in one hand, his bow and quiver in the other and pushed through the rock. Anthony wasted no time, was right behind him.

Mykal wondered why they were in such a hurry. Had they really bought into the quest? It didn’t matter if they did. He didn’t trust them. Not at all. “Go Karyn,” he said.

She hesitated.

“Go,” he said. He’d come too far. He was not going to be left back. As much as he wanted to stay behind.

Karyn kept her eyes on Mykal as she made it through the crevice.

“You next,” Blodwyn said.

Mykal split his belongings into two hands and sucked in a deep breath, turning his head to the side. Cold rock pressed against his ears. He thought his skull was going to get stuck. Someone inside, took the things from his hand which made passage easier. He used his free hand and pushed on the rock, and was through. “That was tight,” he said.

Coil’s torchlight cast his face in moving shadows. “But you made it. Get your stuff together, we’re moving.”

“Hold it.”

Galatia appeared. Mykal took her hand.

Mykal stood by the thin opening, and waited for Blodwyn. He reached in the darkness, blindly waved his arms around. They touched Blodwyn’s staff. He took it, transferred it to his other hand, then helped pull Blodwyn the rest of the way.

“We ready?” Coil said.

They all slung their gear over shoulders and onto their backs.

Mykal looked around as best he could. Everyone seemed set. “Yes,” he said. “We’re ready.”

Coil grunted and turned away.

It was dark where they stood, but with flames from so many torches the inside of the cave was not as ominous as it could have been.

The passage was much wider than Mykal had been lead to believe. The

ground was dirt. There were dislodged boulders they could walk around. The sides of the cave leaned at odd angles. He felt like they were passing through the bowels of the mountain. The path sloped downward. They weren't only walking further into the mountain, they were going deeper.

He heard Karyn's teeth chatter.

The air had bite. It grew colder with nearly every step.

Coil continually waved the torch left and right. There was a whoosh with each pass.

"Okay," he said. "We have to crawl under this section. You don't have to get on your belly, but bend forward. Watch your head."

"Can't we go around that way?" Anthony said.

Coil held the torch between them. Close. Mykal thought he might have heard hair singe.

"What did I say about questions? I remember saying something about not asking them. Maybe I only thought it. No. No. I distinctly remember saying not to ask questions, and to just do as I say. You want to go around that way, meet us on the other side? Be my guest. Be my guest, and good luck to ya," Coil said. He almost spat while he talked. Any spittle that sprayed from his mouth the flames ate. Anthony should consider himself lucky about that.

Coil dropped to hands and knees. He used all fours to get under the low opening in the rock, taking with him every shred of light.

Mykal and Karyn locked hands, and lowered themselves onto their knees. "You follow me," Mykal said.

The ground was cold to the touch.

The darkness disturbed Mykal profoundly. It pressed in, making him feel as though there was even less space seemingly crushing his chest. His lungs burned. Were they running out of air? No. They couldn't be. There were cracks all over the mountain. Holes. Mines. Caves. There was air. It wasn't as if they were down deep. They'd only just entered the Gorge Caves. They hadn't been travelling long at all.

Minutes.

An hour, maybe.

Couldn't possibly be more.

They were going down, not up. The air wouldn't thin from descending, would it? Could it?

Maybe it could.

His difficulty breathing increased.

The sensation was bizarre, smothering. His clothing felt tight on his body. Constricting? Restrictive?

He continued crawling, and ignored the heat in his cheeks. Beads of sweat covered his forehead, and dripped from his armpits. It was far too cold to sweat. That fact didn't prevent his body from reacting as it did.

This was worse than climbing deep among the roots.

Far worse.

How long was this tunnel? He didn't think he could take it much longer.

His back scraped against rock. He had to get lower to keep from getting more scraped up.

His eyes were open wide.

It didn't matter.

Black consumed everything. It breathed up his air.

"Karyn," he finally said when he was certain he was going to pass out. Before she could reply, the darkness receded. Light became more prevalent.

A flame fell in front of his face.

The flame from the torch appeared, and a hand.

"Let me help you up." It was Coil. "Stay to the left. Keep your back against rock. Slide further down along the wall. Don't go too far, though. Got it?"

Mykal let Coil help him to his feet. "Got it. Karyn?"

"Right behind you," she said. "You okay?"

They held hands and slid with backs touching rock. "Me? Fine. I was getting worried about you. It being dark, and closed in like that."

"I wasn't bothered," she said. "How far do we go?"

Didn't bother her. He couldn't understand that. It felt as if he'd been buried alive. "We'll stop here," he said. His eyes were drawn to Coil's torch. It was a beacon in the belly of the mountain. He knew as long as he could see that flame,

he'd make it. He would be alright. "Wait for the others to catch up."

It wasn't long before they were all gathered together. Coil stood in front of them. He seemed apprehensive, looking left and right. He wrinkled his face up, and then let his jaw set.

Mykal worried that their guide was lost. It couldn't get much worse than that. If Coil was lost, they were doomed.

CHAPTER 31



“*I* know about you Archers,” Coil said. He had stopped scanning the area. He spoke, barely above a whisper. His voice echoed regardless. It bounced around the chamber in which they huddled, and then faded away.

“You know about us?” Quill said, but it was Anthony that took a step forward. It looked like if Coil said the wrong thing about Archers, Anthony was primed to fight.

Blodwyn swung his staff, preventing further movement.

“Want everyone to think you’re such *badasses*. You all took vows and served your king. You did his dirty business, stealing land and collecting taxes.” Coil’s expression showed his disgust. The flame in front of his nose, conjured images of demons. “You guys got fed up with the bureaucracy and politics disappeared. You left your posts, and fled. Might be the king is the only one who can’t make the connection, that his own knights are living like squirrels and monkeys up in the trees. Like kids living in a fort their father’s built for them when they were seven.”

“What’s your point?” Quill said. “And you better have one, or I’ll ask Blodwyn to lower his staff so my friend here can rip you apart.”

Mykal didn’t think Anthony had a chance at ripping Coil apart. Coil was almost two heads taller, and his arms looked a lot like they’d been chiseled off Zenith. In his own training he learned size was not everything. However, looking at Coil, he would be remiss to not at least reconsider.

The threat sounded good though. It might make Coil think. He doubted it, but hoped just the same.

“The people that live under this mountain—”

“The Cavers?” Karyn offered.

Coil nodded. “Aye. The Cavers. They’re not like us,” he said. “We can fight, and we still might, but it would be different.”

“Different, how?” Blodwyn said.

“I hit one of these guys, it’s just to shut them up, make a point.” Coil pointed at Quill and Anthony. “Cavers hit us, we’re might never get up. It’s been said they’ve never ventured out from below, have never seen the sun, or moon. And they’re crazy, barbaric, and violent. They’re as territorial as hornets.”

“And you’ve encountered them?” Anthony asked, more a challenge than it was a question.

Coil blinked slowly. His lips were dry. The fire seemed to have taken what little moisture there was. His skin was red, and not only from the heat of the flame. “I’ve never seen them, but that doesn’t make it a lie! I have plenty of friends who have seen them—seen them and managed to escape from the mountain before getting caught.”

Mykal was tempted to ask, *who?* But refrained.

He refrained. No good could come from such a question.

“And those same friends told me about others, slower men behind them, who weren’t so lucky,” Coil said.

Silence descended.

Quill broke it. “Why are we talking about this?”

“I think it’s only fair,” he said.

“What is?” Anthony said.

“Before we go any further, I wanted you all to know. If we encounter the Cavers, I’m not going to get caught,” Coil said.

“Every man for himself, is that what you’re saying?” Quill said. “You’d just hightail it out of here, leave us to die?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. I mean, if you can keep up with me, fine. But I ain’t slowing down, and I ain’t coming back for anyone. You trip, you fall,

I wish you all the luck,” Coil said. “I said it before. All this money you have paid me isn’t any good to a dead man.”

Quill clicked his tongue. “It’s good to know, Coil. Good to know.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Coil said.

Quill wagged a finger back and forth between them. “This works both ways. I guess, may the gods help you if you’re injured, or trapped, or caught by Cavers. Good guide like you, seems like a waste to just let you die.”

Coil squared off. He dug his feet into the ground. “I’ve got no problem with that.”

Quill matched the moves. “Good. Us either.”

Mykal wanted to object. Karyn must have sensed his intention and clasped onto his wrist. He looked over at her. She shook her head, *No*.

“Then what are we doing just standing around? Let’s keep going,” Coil said.

“Let’s,” Quill said. He followed the burly man.

“Remember the things we talked about, Mykal. You are a Natural. And you are not alone,” Galatia said.

A natural.

A wizard.

He just needed to concentrate. Being deep inside a mountain, he knew concentration would not come easily. He could barely focus on breathing normally.

“Oh yeah,” Coil called back. “The snakes down here, they’re poisonous. Don’t get bit. There ain’t no antivenin. And the bats, they all have rabies.”

“Great,” Mykal said. “That’s great.”

“Hey, at least he didn’t say anything about spiders.” Karyn thought she was being helpful. She wasn’t. He rubbed the spot where he’d been bitten. He might have been healed, but the skin was scarred, raised. He hadn’t been thinking of spiders.

He subconsciously scratched the place where he had been bitten.

Now he was.

“OLD MAN?” Coil said. “Come up here. Let me see your cane.”

“Cane?” Blodwyn said. “I believe he’s talking to me.”

They watched Blodwyn move forward until he stood right behind Coil.

“There was ground here before,” Coil said.

“Was?”

“It erodes. Time chips away at everything. The temperatures fluctuate in here. Sometimes it’s as cold as winter during the summer,” he said.

“Like now?” Blodwyn said.

Coil smiled. “This is nothing. At other times it is a furnace regardless the season. The heat, it comes from below.”

“How far down?”

“I’ve no idea,” Coil said.

“Why are you here? Why does anyone come here if it’s so dangerous? Crumbling ground, bizarre weather, venomous snakes, rabid bats...Doesn’t make sense, does it?” came Blodwyn’s reply.

Coil ignored him. “Let me see the cane.”

“It’s a staff.”

“Like I care,” Coil said. “Hand it over.”

Blodwyn watched as Coil knelt at the edge and stretched the staff across.

“Doesn’t reach. What’s this about five and half feet long?”

“Six. Exactly,” Blodwyn said.

“We have us an eight-foot gap,” Coil remarked, stood up and handed over the staff. “Okay everyone, back up. Go on. Back up. One at a time we’re going to get a little bit of a running start and then—”

“Wait, what?” Anthony said.

“It’s not that far. We’re going to have to jump across,” Coil said.

“We’re jumping from here, to there?” Anthony said.

“Eight feet. Easy-peasy,” Coil said.

Mykal looked at Blodwyn. “What do you think?”

“Nothing to think about,” Coil said. “We either leap across, or turn back. Only way to go down, is to go forward.”

“I saw other tunnels. We walked by many,” Galatia said.

“Place is a maze. I know this way. Those other tunnels, who knows where they lead. You want to wander around lost, at risk, be my guest. You don’t want to jump, don’t. I have no problem going back. I’ve been paid. Coins are mine. Choice is yours. You all want to talk about it? Talk about it. But don’t take long. Because no answer is the same as telling me we’re goin’ back.” Coil smiled. It didn’t express happiness, rather his smug cockiness.

Mykal walked up to the edge. “Hold the light still. I want to see how far down the drop is.”

“Can’t see it,” Coil said. He dropped to his belly. He held the torch below them. “See that? Nothing. Blacker than my lungs, that’s for sure.” He laughed.

Mykal didn’t find that funny. He kicked loose a small rock. “Hold it steady,” he said as he dropped the stone.

Everyone seemed to hold their breath, listening.

“It must have it bottom,” Mykal said after a few moments. “We just missed it.”

“I didn’t hear a thing,” Quill said.

“It’s not that far,” Coil said. “I don’t see anyone really struggling to make it. Maybe the old man with the walking stick. You want to head back, old man?”

Mykal grit his teeth. He pushed himself chest to chest with Coil. “You need to show some respect.”

“Oh yeah,” Coil said.

Quill dropped a hand on Mykal’s shoulder. “Easy, killer.”

Coil laughed.

“Where is he? Wyn?” Mykal said.

“Over here,” Blodwyn said.

Mykal waved his torch around. Blodwyn stood safely on the opposite side. He smiled, and ran his tongue over the corner of his teeth. “Looks harder than it is,” he said.

Anthony shook his head, laughing. “Well, I’ll be.”

Without warning, Anthony ran forward, past Mykal and Coil. He leapt in the air. He cleared the gap easily. Blodwyn stepped aside so over the two wouldn’t collide.

“Galatia,” Mykal said, as if unsure how to proceed.

“I can do this,” she said. She lifted the length of her dress into her hands, ran and jumped across. She landed in a crouch. Anthony and Blodwyn helped her to her feet. She brushed the dirt and crushed rock off her clothing. “It wasn’t that bad.”

It wasn’t *that bad*, but she almost hadn’t made it, Mykal thought. “Quill?”

“After you, nephew,” he said.

Mykal shook his head. “You first. Then Karyn. I’ll go last.”

Quill looked at each of them, sighed and nodded. With barely a running start he jumped and landed on the other side smoothly.

“He makes it look easy. They all did,” Karyn said.

“You nervous?”

She swallowed. “No. Well, maybe a little.”

Mykal walked her up to the end of the ledge. He held the torch. “I will stand right here. Keep the path lit so you see right where you are going. Do like Coil said. Get back some, and run all out. Won’t even be like jumping.”

“You think?”

“You’ve got this,” he said.

She backed up several feet. Mykal saw the nervousness in her posture. “Count down for me?”

“Three. Two. One. Go,” he said.

Karyn ran for the edge of the lip. Mykal saw her hesitate, anxious. He knew at that moment she wasn’t going to make it. She was in the air. The pause just before she jumped stole her momentum. Reaching out with an arm, he tried to catch onto her arm.

He couldn’t reach her in time.

Mykal dropped the torch. It landed by his feet.

He reached for Karyn with both arms.

Halfway across she plummeted, screaming, “Mykal!”

CHAPTER 32



“*K*aryn!” Mykal’s voice echoed. It bounced off the rock walls. Karyn had disappeared into the abyss below.

Mykal reached down for her, his mind saw him catching her, holding her. A sudden pressure crashed inside his head.

He dropped to his knees.

Inside his mind, he held her. Tight.

“Oh man,” Anthony said over and over.

“I have her,” Mykal panted. He remembered using magic in the forest, how he couldn’t control his power and killed a man, frying him. “I have her.”

“Boy, what in the world are you talking about?” Coil said.

Galatia moved forward and stood at the edge on her side of the path. “Don’t let go.”

Karyn shouted from below.

“She’s alive?” Coil sounded perplexed, excited, but perplexed. “How is she alive? What is going on?”

Mykal couldn’t answer the guide. He kept his focus on Karyn. “How do I bring her up?”

“Lift her,” Galatia said.

“How?”

“With your mind,” she said. “Concentrate. See her rising. See her floating back up to us.”

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“You can. See her floating up. Don’t let go,” she said.

“I won’t let go,” he said. “I’m not letting go Karyn. I’ve got you.”

With eyes closed he saw Karyn in his arms, saw him lifting her higher and higher.

“I don’t believe this,” Coil said.

“A little higher,” Quill said. He was on his belly, reaching over the edge. “We can see her.”

“Grab onto his legs,” Blodwyn said.

“A little higher, Mykal,” Galatia said. “We’ve almost got her.”

Karyn cried, sobbing.

“A little more.”

“Reach for my hand,” Quill said. “I won’t let go.”

Mykal didn’t dare open his eyes. He did as Galatia instructed. He concentrated on levitating Karyn higher and higher.

Her weight became less *obvious*, as if she had grown lighter.

There was weight associated with the magic.

He felt it in his brain. His arms grew weaker and weaker. The muscles ached, straining, though he wasn’t lifting her in the air with the muscles of his body. “I can’t hold on any longer,” he said.

“Don’t you let go,” Blodwyn said. “Just a little higher.”

Mykal was holding his breath. Spittle sprayed from between clenched teeth, quivering lips. “Get her.”

“Just a few more feet, lad, a few more feet,” Anthony said. “Grab her, Quill!”

“I’m trying.”

“I can’t do it,” Mykal said to himself.

“Don’t drop me,” Karyn said. “Mykal, don’t let me go.”

The tremble in her voice gave him the extra bit of needed strength. With the last bit of effort he could muster, he lifted her as high as he could.

He couldn’t do anymore.

His head spun around, and he collapsed to the ground. His arms fell away from Karyn. He knew he’d failed. She would fall again, only this time he

wouldn't be able to save her. His mind switched off. She fell.

MYKAL SLOWLY RETURNED TO CONSCIOUSNESS. His memories were real. It had not been a nightmare. He didn't want to open his eyes. If he couldn't sleep forever, he wished for death. Karyn had saved him from the spider bite, and he'd let her die.

He heard them calling him, saying his name.

Ignoring them wasn't an option. Their voices were too insistent. Over and over they said his name. He knew they wanted him to wake up. They didn't understand, they couldn't understand, he had no interest in ever opening his eyes.

"Mykal."

That was Karyn's voice. He heard it above the others. Her ghost was already haunting him. He deserved it. If he was still alive, the days he had left should be filled with haunts and terrible nightmares.

"He just needs a moment." Galatia spoke more softly than the others. "Using magic that powerful exhausted him."

"He saved me," Karyn said.

I let you fall, he thought. That is not saving you.

"Yes," Blodwyn said. "He did. I wouldn't have believed it possible if I hadn't witnessed it with my own eyes."

Who was Blodwyn talking to?

"Will he be alright?" Karyn said.

"His strength will return in a moment or two," Galatia said.

"Will he be strong enough to make the jump?" Blodwyn said.

"In time," Galatia said.

Mykal felt it in his lungs. Heat. They grew hotter and hotter. Pressure filled his mouth. He felt it press against the roof of his mouth, and up into his nose. Mostly it closed in on his chest. Although he never wondered what swallowing fire was like, he felt that he now knew.

And then his eyes and mouth opened wide.

He shot up into a sitting position, gasping.

He hadn't been breathing.

"Mykal! Mykal!"

He turned around, leaning his weight on one extended arm. His palms pressed into the gravel. He felt stones cut into his palm. "Karyn?"

"You saved me, Mykal. You saved me," she said.

She was okay. Somehow he'd managed to lift her high enough. He almost couldn't believe it. The others were smiling at her. He pushed himself to his knees, grabbed the torch. He was close to the edge. Had he of rolled around while unconscious, he would have fallen.

He held out his arms. His legs still trembled, but he didn't think he would fall.

Standing still for a moment, he waited for his balance.

"Don't rush it, Mykal. Rest," Galatia said.

"We don't have a lot of time for resting," Coil said.

"You have your money," Quill said. "Let the boy rest. We have no idea how he feels. After what he just did, he deserves a minute to catch his breath."

"I'm not arguing that. The way we've been yelling, I'd be surprised if we weren't heard all the way on the east end of the Zenith Mountains. We've been shouting in here so much, I'm worried about what the Cavers might do. This is where they live. We're trespassing. And we're being very, very loud about it. I don't know any Cavers personally, but I think it's safe to assume, they won't be too thrilled we're here, you see what I'm sayin?" Coil raised his eyebrows.

Mykal pulled a deep breath through his nostrils, and exhaled from his mouth. "Catch," he said, and threw the torch across. It flew end over end, and for a brief moment looked as if the flame might blow out.

He wasn't worried about that. Galatia could make fire with her hands. For that matter, so could he.

They would have light, one way or another.

He took a few steps back, and once again held out his arms. He was sure he could stand without falling. The idea of running made him apprehensive.

For some odd reason he thought about a specific section of fence on the farm that he'd been repairing, and couldn't recall if he'd left the hammer and a container of nails in the grass.

Shaking his head, he pushed away thoughts about of the farm, and the unfixed sections of fence.

"Mykal," Galatia said. She stood beside Karyn. They had their arms wrapped around each other.

"I'm okay. I've got this."

The worst thing he could do would be to overthink the situation. He thought of Karyn, and began a countdown. "Three, two," he said, took a deep breath, and added, "one!"

He ran, and immediately understood what Karyn had done wrong. Your eyes played tricks on you. It was too dark. Seeing exactly where the edge was, was difficult. It was why she had hesitated and came almost to a stopped before jumping. He sped up, and at the very last second leapt into the air.

He stared only at the faces waiting for him across the chasm.

In his heart, he knew he'd make it to the other side.

In his head, his arms pinwheeled and his legs flailed as he fell.

His arc across the gap ended, and his feet crashed to the other side. He exhaled, panting. "There. That wasn't so bad."

Karyn released Galatia and hugged Mykal quickly, before pulling away.

He not only didn't mind her hugging him, rather wished she'd not have let go. Quill clapped him on the back, then so did Anthony.

"Well done, kid," Coil said.

Galatia just smiled at him. The admiration in her eyes Mykal was unmistakable. That troubled him. For some reason she stared at him as if he were something special. Like she knew some huge and wonderful secret about everything but was keeping the news to herself. She couldn't be further from the truth. Could she not see that he'd almost let Karyn die?

"If the circus show is about done, can we move on?" Coil said. He did not wait for a reply. With the torch back in his hands, he began walking. "Stay close to the wall on the right, now. The right. Go too far to the left, and all of this

jumping was for nothing. Understand?”

Blodwyn winked at Mykal. “Nice save.”

“I don’t know how I did it,” Mykal said.

“Does it matter?”

Mykal thought it might.

“Nice jump, too. I know how much you hate heights,” Blodwyn said.

“In the darkness I couldn’t see how far the fall might have been.”

“We could be hundreds of feet from the bottom.”

Mykal grinned. “We could be. But that’s far different than being in a treetop looking down. Now that’s crazy.”

“Hey,” Quill said.

“No offense,” Mykal said.

“Really?” Coil returned. “No one followed me? No one.”

Blodwyn said, “Lead on. We’re right behind you.”

Coil shook his head, but walked away. “You know what?” he mumbled, talking to himself. “I don’t care anymore. I just, I don’t care. And I saw magic. Magic! I never thought I’d live to see something like that. I have a wizard with me. A magician. I don’t believe. No one is ever going to believe me. No one.”

CHAPTER 33



Mykal kept an eye out for snakes, and listened for hissing, rattling, or anything out of the ordinary. If anything sprung at him, he worried he might be too tired to react. He wasn't sure who he thought he was kidding. There wasn't enough light. Anything could hide in the crevices, around corners, and get the drop on them. A snake. A Caver. He yawned. Cold air filled his lungs. He saw his breath in front of him. It plumed before disappearing. A dragon. A troll.

He never thought magic and sorcery existed, or that he was a wizard. Why couldn't other things from nursery rhymes and bedtime stories be real, too?

"Doing alright?" Blodwyn asked.

"Hanging in there." Mykal shrugged. He kept his thoughts to himself. If he started talking about dragons, they'd laugh at him. He wasn't sure he could handle that right now. "I do have a question for you, though. You mind?"

Blodwyn arched an eyebrow, and stared at him curiously while twirling the ends of his mustache in his fingertips. "Shoot."

"Where'd you get all of the coins?" Mykal kept flexing his fingers. He didn't think it did anything, but hoped it increased his circulation. The more time that passed the stronger he felt. He still needed to sleep, but knew he was recovering just fine from having used magic.

The deeper they went, the more the temperature dropped.

"What coins?"

He knew exactly what Mykal was referring to. Mykal wasn't sure why

Blodwyn was being evasive. “The pouches you’re carrying. The ones filled with enough coins that anybody we’ve run into is happy to do whatever you ask. Those coins.”

Mykal waited for a response while they walked. Galatia had warned him that using magic would deplete his stores of energy. He’d experienced it when in the Cicade Forest, and had thought that had been bad. It didn’t compare to what he now felt after catching and raising Karyn. “Wyn?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to answer me?”

“I’ve been saving up for a rainy day, you might say,” he said. “I think this qualifies.”

It wasn’t an answer. It revealed nothing at all. “Being on the verge of war, you mean? A potential war qualifies as a rainy day”

“Exactly,” he said.

“And aside from training me to fight for the last ten years and five, what work have you done? I don’t think Grandfather’s been paying you.”

“I wouldn’t take money from your grandfather,” Blodwyn said.

Mykal knew Blodwyn never took money from his grandfather. It was the only potential source of income he could think of, though. “You wouldn’t?”

“I wouldn’t. I didn’t,” he said. “You think my life revolves around spending time training you?”

“I see you just about every day. I can’t really recall a day when I haven’t seen you,” Mykal said. “You’re not going to tell me, are you?”

“Not right now. No,” he said.

Mykal said, “How far beneath the surface do you think we are?”

He looked upward. “We’ve been at descending quickly. It might be easier to judge if we had more light. With how cold it is down here, I’m worried we might freeze if don’t find this dagger quickly and head back. Spending the night could be dangerous. I just wish we had more light.”

Mykal loathed the idea of spending the night. He’d hate to remain this far underground for any extended period of time. The darkness was dense, crushing, and weighed heavily on his shoulders as if *nothing* could be that tangible. As far

as he was concerned, they'd already been inside the mountain longer enough.

Those ahead stopped. Coil held a fisted hand in the air. Everyone was silent, waiting, and listening.

Mykal stared at Karyn, who stood beside Galatia. He wondered what the two of them had talked about. Quill and Anthony were directly behind Coil. Both held their bows with arrows nocked.

“Something’s wrong,” Blodwyn said. He angled his staff, grasping it in both hands. “Do you feel it? Can you sense it?”

Mykal tried, but wasn’t aware of anything new or odd.

“Shh!” Coil commanded.

They could be quiet, though doing so wouldn’t hide the torchlight. Mykal wondered if they should put it out, as much as he hated the very idea. He unsheathed his sword, steel scraping the leather scabbard reverberating. He cringed, mouthing the word, “Sorry.”

Coil didn’t look like he’d accepted the apology. His brow furrowed, and without a sound, Coil growled at him, cursing under his breath.

Coil dropped the torch, and stepped out the flame, but Mykal could still see.

Light came from around a corner ahead. Slowly, they proceeded forward, staying close, keeping quiet, and pushing on. They came to a wedge of rocks once they passed the sharp bend. Everyone knelt taking cover behind the waist-high ridge.

The light came from below.

A fire burned in the center of a large pit. Perfectly smooth and round rocks outlined the pit. Mykal couldn’t see anyone around. He wondered if Coil had heard Cavers. If there were Cavers down there, it might explain why the torch hadn’t given their location away. The fire below burned brightly.

Their talking and walking might have exposed their location, but maybe not the torchlight. Either way, Mykal figured if Cavers were close, they knew people trespassed within their domain.

Mykal had questions. He was sure everyone did. No one voiced a single word.

Galatia had her eyes closed, her lips moved, and her hands extended

outward.

Mykal remembered what she'd said at the farm. An evil wizard searched for the same items they sought, and that same wizard was also searching for them. Galatia knew because she'd been able to tap into *that* wizard's magic, as though she *watched* the spells cast. Galatia said once he'd used magic, the wizard was able to find him. The same thing could be used to their advantage, he supposed. He imagined that it was about knowing when, and how to tap into someone's power.

He closed his eyes and listened intently. His ears picked up the sound made by the crackling and snapping fire below. He could hear the others breathing. Somewhere water dripped, splashed into a puddle. He tried listening with his mind, and not his ears. He had no idea how he could do that, but knew it wasn't his ears that would hear Galatia's magic.

He just knew it.

He squeezed his eyes more tightly shut. He was tempted to cover his ears with his palms. Doing that would look odd though, and he didn't want to draw attention to himself.

Her voice filled his head. It wasn't as complicated as he'd worried. He was able to drown out exterior sounds, block them from his ears. Colors filled his mind. He saw swirls of blue, and purple. There was red, and orange. Strands of mist inside his head moved from side to side, and rose up and down. The colors glowed brightly, the iridescent, brilliant.

The colors came from Galatia. It was her magic he was seeing. He wasn't sure how he knew this, but he knew it did with certainty. Words joined the colors in his mind, becoming clearer each time she repeated them. He recognized the words. They were the same she had used in the Cicade. She was summoning the red orb. She obviously felt that they were close to the dagger.

He wasn't sure how she knew. He hadn't sensed anything. He wondered if he could learn how to.

Being a Natural Wizard didn't mean he wasn't interested in training. There was much he didn't understand. Galatia could mentor him, should mentor him. They needed a chance to sit and talk.

He shook his head, hoping to chase away distracting thoughts.

He recited the chant inside his mind, not sure if Galatia heard him, or if his doing so even helped. After a few times through the words, he opened his eyes. Galatia was staring at him. Her eyes wide, as if amazed he was inside her head.

Or she was in his?

He couldn't hold back a smile.

Between them, the red orb appeared.

It just *popped* into existence. Like last time, it didn't seem like anyone else could see the orb.

Mykal took a step forward.

Karyn grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

Coil looked at them.

"I'm going to retrieve the dagger," he said. "You stay here. You stay near Blodwyn. He'll protect you."

Coil's stare intensified. "We'll all go."

"I feel like I should do this alone." Mykal gripped the hilt of his sword tightly. "You see anyone?"

Coil shook his head. "No. The dagger's around here?"

The orb floated down over the fire below them to one of the tunnel openings, and waited, bobbing slightly up and down suspended in midair. "It's that way."

Last time Blodwyn's help had made the difference between retrieving the mirror, and Mykal remaining curled in a corner cowering away from deadly spiders.

"How do you know it's that way?" Coil said.

Galatia said, "He has help directing him."

"Help?"

"You can't see it. But it *is* showing me where to go," Mykal said.

"Like a guide?"

Mykal nodded. "Different than what you've done for us."

"So from here on, this invisible guide is going to show you where the dagger is?"

"That's right."

“Then I’m going back, assuming, that is, you don’t need me anymore.” Coil stood, holding only the unlit torch. He looked ready to run. The man was *big*, Mykal realized, yet again. It hurt his neck to look up at him.

Mykal gave Galatia a look. She pursed her lips, and shook her head.

“We do need you. Without you we can’t get out. There are too many different passages. If we try backtracking, we’re bound to get lost,” Galatia said.

Coil looked all around. “What about this new guide? Let it show you to an exit.”

Mykal knew Coil mocked him. It was the way the man stood, looking around for signs of someone else. He needed to diffuse the situation. “We need you to wait,” Mykal said. “Our lives may depend on it. If you leave, the Cavers will catch us all. Please. You have been compensated.”

Coil resembled a statue. He stood with massive arms crossed over his chest. “Fine. Go and get the dagger.”

Mykal thought Coil had more to say, but for some reason stopped. It didn’t take a mind reader to fill in the blanks. He was thankful Coil left it alone, and agreed to cooperate.

“I’ll go with you,” Quill said.

Mykal glanced over at Blodwyn, who nodded. He wasn’t as sure Quill was the best choice of companion, but realized that trust had to begin somewhere. “Let’s go,” Mykal said, secretly, relieved he didn’t have to venture out on his own.

Coil grabbed Mykal’s arm.

Quill slapped it away.

Coil regarded Quill with a harsh look, eyes narrowed. “Listen, just because we haven’t run across Cavers yet, doesn’t mean they aren’t close. More than likely they’re watching us, and have been for a while. My guess is they’re seizing us up, trying to figure out how much of a threat we pose, or how much effort it would be to take us out. You never know, so just be careful. If you guys aren’t back by morning, I’m leading this pack out of the mountain. We clear on that? Keep your guard up. We’re in their territory. Understand what I mean by that? They know these tunnels better than any. They’ve been moving through

them since they were able to crawl.”

Mykal started forward. Quill kept the bow in one hand, a finger wrapped over the arrow.

“Guy’s a few arrows short of a full quiver, if you know what I mean,” Quill said.

“How do you mean?” Mykal asked.

“Legends. Every land has ‘em. The Cicade forest is haunted,” he said.

“It is?” Mykal said.

“No. That’s my point. My men started the rumors. Keeps people away. We’re no more ghosts than you are,” Quill said.

“And the Cavers?”

“Same thing. Legend. These mountains are rich in natural resources. Way I see it, those who own the mines don’t want anyone moving in on his claim. Best way to do that is create something that will scare people away,” Quill said.

“That’s pretty brilliant,” Mykal said.

Quill tapped a finger against his temple. “Got to think things through sometimes, is all. Can’t just assume everything you hear is true.” Quill smiled, as if he’d completed teaching a lesson successfully. “You following that orb-thing again?”

“I am. It amazes me that you guys can’t see it. You know what a ruby is?” Mykal said.

“Of course I know what a ruby is.” Quill grunted.

“Shhh,” came from behind them, Coil most likely.

“I’ve never seen one, so I wasn’t sure,” Mykal said.

“Well,” Quill said. “I’ve never seen one either. But that doesn’t mean I don’t know what a ruby is. Like a diamond, but red.”

“Yeah. Exactly. That’s what this orb is like. I imagine it is just like a big floating uncut ruby,” he said. “But alive.”

“Alive?”

“Galatia said that it is a she, but I’ve not gotten close enough to be certain. She always stays just ahead of me. When she stops by the dagger this time, I’m going to see if I can tell.”

“Can you touch it? Her?” Quill said.

Mykal tipped his head side to side. “I don’t really know. I didn’t try that last time.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’m not going to try this time, either,” Mykal said. He thought he knew what Quill was getting at. They weren’t going to steal the orb.

Kidnap was a better word. Any points Quill thought he’d earned, he’d just negated.

The fire pit was to their right.

Quill said, “It’s like we’re at the center of the bottom of the mountain. You see all those tunnels? This is a hub.”

“Hub?” Mykal said.

“Think of a wagon wheel. The spokes all come to the center of the wheel. Their connected. It’s why the wheel can turn.”

Mykal nodded.

“And the orb went which way?” Quill said.

“Follow me,” Mykal said. They entered a tunnel on the left. It was a tight fit. The rocky surface of the wall jettied outward, making it difficult to push through. If it weren’t for the orb, a few feet in front of him, Mykal knew he’d be panicking.

“You can still see the orb?” Quill said.

Sounded like the Archer was nervous, Mykal thought. “Yes. Just a few more feet. We should be through. Stay close.”

“Are we there?”

“A little more.”

“Now?”

“Almost,” Mykal said. He wanted to tell him to stop acting like a child. He didn’t, though. He was too busy struggling with his own breath. The space was almost too narrow for his head to fit through. Sweat coated his skin, and his clothing clung to it. He hated the feeling.

“You don’t like me much, do you?”

“Uncle, why ever would you say such a thing?” If Mykal’s face weren’t

tightly pressed between damp rocks, he'd shake his head at the question.

"I think we've gotten off on the wrong foot."

"I believe we have, and we've talked about this already."

"I was a knight. I—"

"Spare me. Please? I need to concentrate," he said. He didn't. The orb set a clear path. All he needed to do was follow it. Quill didn't know that, though.

The confinement became overwhelming. His chest was being crushed. There was barely room for his lungs to fill. Then there was the air. It seemed scarcer. He knew he breathed irregularly; quick and shallow.

"Stay calm, nephew. Don't breathe in and out. Breathe up and down."

"I have no idea what you mean."

"When you breathe in, let your chest go up, instead of out. It helps," he said.

Mykal tried it, and it worked. It made a major difference. He felt slightly less claustrophobic.

"That helping?" Quill said,

There was no way he'd give the man satisfaction. "You're crazy, Uncle Quill. Crazy."

Right before he felt he'd scream, Mykal came free. He nearly gasped. "Don't move," he whispered.

"What? Why?"

"I said, don't move. We're not alone."

CHAPTER 34



The Mountain King walked a step ahead of Ida. They needed horses. The breeze coming in from the sea chased some of the humidity from the day. King Hermon wasn't used to it. While winters in the Rames could be brutal, leaving roads impassable, fall was more mild and refreshing. He could handle the walk, but not the unseasonable heat.

They were forced to bring the Voyagers with them. With most of his men from *The Shadow* either dead, mortally wounded, or severely injured, he was left with little choice. They left Mercer, the Voyager carpenter, with the ship. He had been commanded through sorcery to protect the boat with his life.

Ida maintained her control over the Voyagers who followed behind them. They'd been instructed to protect the king with *their* lives. Hermon saw in their faces that the command revolted them. Ida had explained to him they could feel revolted all they wanted, but they'd behave as directed.

The terrain was grassy, and flat. The road was loose dirt. Their boots kicked up dust with each step. The Grey Ashland Realm was nothing like Osiris. It seemed fitting they were separated by a wide and swift sea. There was nothing neighboring about the lands, nothing similar at all. The farming might be better on this side of the sea, but Hermon preferred home.

Riders approached. There was no sneaking up on anyone in such open territory. He halted his small party. "We will wait for the king's men. They clearly seem anxious about catching up to us, and we could use the horses."

Ida closed her eyes. Her hands went up in the air. She spoke in fast whispers,

sounding like a snake hissing in warning as it lay below one's feet, coiled to strike.

King Hermon said, "What's wrong?"

She shook her head, strands of white hair barely displaced by the violent movement. "Magic is in play."

"The woman, or the boy?" he said.

"Both. I can read her power so clearly. It's almost as if she doesn't know how to guard herself, or cloak her magic. The colors dance like distinct strings inside my mind. Each thread glows bright, and crisp. They twist, knot, and vibrate," Ida described. She spoke keeping her eyes closed, and hands up in concentration.

Hermon was thankful, seeing that he could barely disguise his disgust. Could it be that she'd grown uglier since the beginning of the journey? Her odor even more ripe. Sweat from walking dried into her clothing, and billowed like smoke fanned from a fire. Breathing through his mouth somewhat masked the smell, but doing so left the rank taste on his tongue.

He could not deny the envy he felt. He wished he could close his eyes and see the magnificent colors Ida described. He wanted to feel when others used magic around him. "And the boy?"

She pursed her lips together tightly, lowering her head in further concentration. When she looked up at him, her eyes were open, but narrowed like knife slits through bloodless flesh. "The boy is hard to read. I know he is using magic. I sense it, but I am unable to see anything more. No colors, no definition."

"Is he purposely hiding his power?"

"I can't say."

"He's strong then?"

It appeared like she stopped herself from answering too quickly. There was a pause, as she chose her next words carefully. She said each one slow, and deliberate. "He is strong."

Hermon wondered if she feared the boy's power, and perhaps, her position in his realm knowing his goal was to amass all of the magic in the old empire. Who sat on his right was not necessarily chiseled in stone. "And are they at the

forest?”

“Beyond it,” she said.

King Hermon punched air. “Where, Ida? Where have they gone? We crossed that horrid sea to find them!”

“I can only loc on a location when magic is used. If they don’t use magic, then I can only tell you where they’ve been. They are north, within the heart of the mountains.”

The Cicade forest was shy on the horizon. They would reach the haunted woods before twilight. Ghosts didn’t scare him. It was time that spirits learned to fear him!

Beyond, he saw a hint of Zenith’s snowy peaks. Without horses it would be days before they could close the distance between them. Docking so far south at the cove, they undershot the location. If he knew how long they’d be in the belly of the cave, or even. He would have come with horses if he’d be warned about traveling north before they left.

“Ida, I want you to find out where they are going next,” he said. “I don’t want to know where they are. I want to know where they will be.”

“I can only find them when they use their magic, your highness,” she said. The slur against his royalty seeped between clenched teeth.

“Stay inside the woman wizard’s mind, find a corner inside her brain and hide there, an undetected cockroach in the darkness,” he said. The riders were close enough to count. Six horses. Nabal’s banners flapping as they rode.

“I cannot make promises. There is no way of telling if such magic will work.”

“Keep at it,” he said. Now was not the time for games, or power struggles. He needed compliance on all fronts. Advancement of the plan balanced on the ability to adapt, and follow direction. “Once we have caught up to them we will bring them in!”

“The woman is simple. We gag her. Her voice is her magic. The power is in the words she speaks. I have just the thing for handling the boy. He is different from the woman, from myself. I look forward to snuffing out his magic,” Ida said.

“There will be no ‘snuffing out his magic.’ I want him. Unharméd.”

“As I warned you before, he is the most unpredictable in all of this. It may be best to simply kill him, and take the sorceress.” Ida waited for a reply. The king only stared at her. She said, “Of course, your highness. Unharméd. Of course.”

The sorcerer did not trust him. Never had. She had good reason for suspicion. The part of his plan he kept hidden, excited him, although he closed his mind around the concept. He knew if he allowed himself the luxury of fully thinking it through, she might detect it. He needed her as an ally, not an enemy.

“Once we deal with the riders, I want you to do nothing but work on entering her mind. You have but one task. Figure out where the wizards are going next. Do you hear me? We must get ahead of them, anticipate where they are headed. Chasing after their tail like geese behind their mother is unacceptable. Do not fail me in this request.”

“Ready your weapons,” the Mountain King commanded. The handful of enchanted Voyagers grunted, and groaned wanting nothing else but to disobey, but took up their weapons, and flanked the king. Their growls might be meant for him, but the approaching knights wouldn’t notice the difference.

Hermon stood front and center, watching Nabal’s knights arrive. The horses hooves kicked up loose dirt as they almost skidded to a stop. The knights were shadowed by the swirling cloud, keeping their mounts still as they waited for it to settle.

“We are knights of Grey Ashland. I am Sir Lanster, and speak on behalf of King Nabal. Is the ship docked in the cove yours?”

“It is,” King Hermon said.

“And the men on it are under your command?”

“They are, now...”

“And what business do you have in King Nabal’s domain?”

“Your timing is impeccable. I find it marvelous that you’ve reached us in time,” The Mountain King grinned. His heartbeat increased with anticipation. It reminded him of dinnertime when he was young, after he’d spent the day in his chamber, punished and prevented from breaking fast in the morning and afternoon. Famished he’d sit at the table across from his father. Wordless he’d

scarf down marinated meat like a ravenous wolf, and even eat all of his vegetables without complaint or criticism.

Sir Lanster cocked his head to one side. “In time for what?”

Hermon noticed Lanster didn’t make eye contact with him, but instead focused his attention on Ida. The knight feared her. He could see it in the man’s eyes. He kept his temper in check. Let them worry about her, and underestimate him. That was fine by the king.

“We are in need of both your services, *and* your horses.” King Hermon scrubbed his hands together, as if waiting for the meal to be served. No. The ghosts inside the Cicade did not scare him in the least. He was going to become emperor over all of the land, every living soul, and haunting spirits. The time was close. He felt it as sure as he felt his tongue running over the front of his teeth.

CHAPTER 35



“*W*e’re not alone?” Quill said.

“What part of *shh* don’t you get?” Mykal stood in an open rock chamber. The red orb bounced above, rotating. “It’s nothing. I just thought I—I sensed someone.”

“I’m stuck.”

Mykal reached back into the crevice, latched onto Quill’s hand, and then tugged.

“Again.”

“I’m trying,” Mykal said. He pressed a foot against the rocks and pulled, leaning backward. Quill came free. Mykal fell back onto his rump, and grunted. Quill landed on top of him. “Well, this is awkward.”

“You forget. You can see. I feel blind as a bat in here,” he said.

“Bats can fly around just fine in the dark. I think they’d be offended if they heard you compare yourself to their species.”

To Mykal’s eyes, the room was cast in a red glow. It was not a large area, but nearly round. Perfectly round, in fact, as if the walls had been sculpted. There were three other crevices. Each must lead somewhere. He wasn’t at all curious as to where.

“Where are we headed next?” Quill asked.

Mykal described the room. “There is another opening directly across from where we just came. And then two at opposite ends opposite each other.”

“Like points on a compass?” he said.

“More perfectly aligned than you might imagine. The walls are smooth, round. So is the ceiling and floor,” Mykal said.

“But you sensed *someone*?” he asked. He stood with his arms stretched in front of him, stepping slowly toward a wall. He pressed his palms against the rock. His eyes were opened wide, as if that might help him see.

“I sensed something, not necessarily someone,” Mykal said. “It’s hard to explain.”

“Your mother was never really forthcoming about her...abilities, either. Your dad wasn’t too happy with what she could do. I don’t blame him. She is a good lady, your mother. Her, being what she is, though, kind of put everyone in jeopardy. The decree never expired. Folks’d be just as happy to turn in your mother as a sorcerer now, as they would have been hundreds of years ago,” Quill said.

Mykal felt slighted. This Archer, *his uncle*, knew more about his parents than he did. It wasn’t right. It lit a small fire inside him. He knew he shouldn’t hold it against Quill; it wasn’t as though it was his fault, but that didn’t stop him from feeling jealous.

“The dagger must be in this room, somewhere.” Mykal changed the subject abruptly.

“What do you see?” Quill said. He made his way around the room. His hands slid up and down on the wall. “You’re so right about these walls. This isn’t natural. Rocks don’t rise from the ground this way.”

“Rise from the ground?” Mykal wanted to ignore his uncle’s nonsensical talk. He said such odd things, though.

“The mountains weren’t always here. They grew, over time. Just like trees, but over a greater span of time,” Quill said.

“That is the most absurd thing I’ve ever heard. Do you even listen to yourself when you talk? Mountains don’t grow. They’re rock. Not a living thing. A tree is alive,” Mykal said. Part of him suspected his uncle was just busting his chops on purpose, trying to goad him. And he had.

“You’re right. Rock’s aren’t alive. Our world is though. Below the ground we stand on is a power more fearful than any thunderstorm, more dangerous than

a blizzard, more relentless than a blazing fire,” Quill said.

“Below us? We’re pretty far down, Quill,” he said.

“We’re not far beneath the surface. I’m talking about deep, deep down, beyond even where the minor’s mine. They don’t even come close, and they’ve got tunnels going as deep as a mile into the earth,” Quill said. He had walked completely around the room, stopping at the crevice he started at. “When the world is angry, the ground shakes. Sometimes liquid fire shoots from mountain tops. And when these things happen, more and more rocks form.”

Mykal stood in the center of the room. “Kids must love you, Quill. Your stories are very entertaining. You might not have noticed, but I am no longer a child. Now, please. Stay quiet while I search for the dagger.”

“And you’re sure it is in this small room.”

“The orb has not left.” Mykal looked up at it, at *her*. “Is it here?”

“Are you asking me?” Quill said.

“No. I’m not.” Mykal talked with his mind. *Is it here? Can you point me to it?*

The orb gyrated faster, in a less concise manner. It wobbled, as if tilting left and right. It was a round orb. There was no way Mykal could tell if it tilted, and yet he knew it had. The orb dropped low, and hovered an inch above the ground.

Mykal got down on his knees. He brushed rock dust around. “There’s a circular indentation in the ground. It’s about as wide and as long as my hand. But I can’t get my fingers in the edges.”

Quill shuffled forward. “Am I close?”

“Follow my voice. Now, kneel down,” Mykal said.

As he knelt down, his uncle held his arms out and patted Mykal on the top of his head, slid his dirty palms over his face, and tapped him on the shoulder.

Mykal pushed his hands away. “You can stop. It’s me.”

Quill snickered. “Here, let me use my knife to see if I can pry this open.”

Quill edged the tip of the blade into the recess and ran it along the potential opening. He pushed against the hilt for leverage. “It’s not budging. I don’t want to snap the knife, either.”

“Let me see it,” Mykal said. He held the blade up, and then slammed the hilt into the center of the circle.

“Kid, what are you doin—”

The sound of rocks rubbing together filled the chamber.

“Back up,” Mykal said.

A cylindrical pillar of stone rose.

“What is it?” Quill said.

Mykal told him. “It’s inside a hole in a stone pillar.”

“You can see it.”

“I see it.” The artifact stood within a hollowed out portion of the rock. “Do I just reach in there and take it?”

“Why are you asking me? Is there some dance, or mumbo jumbo you have to do first? What did you do when you snatched mirror out of the roots?” Quill asked.

“No.” Mykal bent forward and walked around the pillar, the top of which reached his waist. The orb hovered on the opposite side of the opening, as if looking in at the dagger as well. “Thank you.”

“What are you thanking me for?” Quill said.

“Not you.”

“Are we alone, or not, nephew?” Quill said.

“We’re alone,” Mykal said. He reached his hand toward the dagger.

“Then understand that when you speak, I can only assume that it’s me you’re talking to. That make sense?”

His fingers gripped the hilt.

“Perfect sense. You have my deepest apologies.” Mykal removed the dagger. The pillar hissed, and then lowered back into the ground.

“You have it?” Quill said.

“I have it.” He held it in both hands. In the red light, cast by the orb, it was difficult to tell if the dagger was indeed plated in gold. The blade was straight. He rubbed his thumb over the steel; it was sharp on each side. He removed his knife from the sheath, and replaced it with the dagger. He stuffed his knife through his belt. If he lost the old knife, it wouldn’t matter all too much. He

couldn't risk losing the talisman.

"Good. Then let's get out of here."

Mykal didn't need to be prodded. He wanted out of the chamber out of the mountain at least as much as his uncle did. He went to the crevice, Quill following by resting a hand on his shoulder. The orb zoomed in close to his head, buzzed around and then went back into the chamber.

"Wait," Mykal said.

"What's wrong?"

"I'm not sure," he said. He turned around and saw the orb over by the crevice at the north side of the chamber. "But that's not the way we came in."

"What's not?" Quill said.

"Shh," Mykal said. *We didn't come in that way.*

The orb fit through that particular crevice.

"What's going on?"

"The orb is trying to get us to follow it. It wants us to go through one of the other openings," he said.

"Ask it why," Quill said.

"It doesn't talk."

His uncle smiled. "But you talk to *it*?"

He didn't deserve an answer. Did the man forget he could see him? "Yes."

"How do you know if it even understands you?" Quill said.

"She does," Mykal said. "I think we should follow her."

"*And* I think we should go back the way we came. There're people waiting for us. If we're gone much longer they're going to start worrying." The words were thoughtful. The tone of voice used was purely sarcastic.

Mykal looked from Quill to the orb, and back. He wanted to get back to the others. The idea of going deeper into the caves unnerved him. The orb could be leading him to a pit of snakes, although he didn't think so. "You go back; I want to see where she's leading me. It could be important."

Quill set his hands against the wall and walked the room. He clapped a hand on Mykal's face, the shoulder, and chest.

"Stop that!" Mykal slapped his hand away.

“I’m coming with you,” Quill said. “Imagine if I go back without you? *Bloodywind* will think I’ve killed you or something. I have little interest in scrapping with him. I’m just anxious to get out of this cave and, maybe, get some sleep.”

Mykal ignored the mispronunciation of Wyn’s name, and instead focused on the thought of getting some decent rest. The idea appealed greatly. “Let’s just check it out fast, and get out of here.”

“Lead the way,” Quill said.

The orb went through the crevice first, Mykal next, and Quill following. It was a very tight squeeze at the onset, before the rock walls opened up some. Even so there was barely room to move. As they side-stepped through the narrow gap, Mykal asked, “Can you see that?”

“The light?”

“It’s firelight.”

“I see it,” Quill whispered.

The orb exited the crevice and vanished.

“She’s gone.” Mykal stopped shuffling forward.

“Who? Who’s gone?”

“The orb. She’s gone.”

“Forget this. I say we go back. We don’t know her. She could be leading us right into a trap.”

Mykal said, “A trap? Like what?”

“Cavers. Have you been listening to Ox, our guide?”

Was he scared? “There aren’t any Cavers in these mountains, just like there aren’t any ghosts in your woods.”

“There are ghosts in those woods, nephew. I just would say the entire forest is haunted,” Quill said.

Mykal pressed forward a few more steps. “That fire…”

“We’re turning around. If you want to come back through here, fine. But clear it with everyone else before we do.”

“Quill, wait,” he said, and moved a few more feet forward. “The fire, it looks like the same one we passed earlier. Maybe this is just another way back.”

Quill didn't say a word.

"I'm going ahead," Mykal said.

"I knew you were going to say that," Quill said.

Mykal stepped out from between the tight gap in the rocks. Only then did he realize that he'd gone the entire distance without having a panic attack. His claustrophobia hadn't impacted him the way it had earlier. He hoped it was a sign that he was getting better at handling the issue.

Bent forward with hands on knees, he sucked in a deep breath, and held it for a moment before exhaling. When he stood, he looked around. The fire pit was encircled by smooth rocks. The path wound around it. Above looked like the place where his friends waited. "I think this is the same fire."

Quill emerged. He blinked several times, and rubbed his eyes with both hands. "Looks like it. But, if it is the same place, then where is everyone?"

"They were up there," Mykal said.

"We got turned around, kid. This can't be the same fire. There were four... doors back in that round room, right? Maybe there is a fire at the other end of each of them. Remember, this is like a hub. That room, that was the very, very center."

"So why did the orb lead us this way?"

And then someone screamed.

CHAPTER 36



Mykal had a surge of varying thoughts run through his mind. He recognized that it was Karyn who had screamed. He wondered if the orb brought them this way to avoid trouble, or if she'd brought them this way to help their friends. Perhaps both. He pulled his jian sword, and listened closely for more noise. The scream had echoed, bouncing off the rocks, seeming to come from every direction.

Quill nocked an arrow. He held the bow in his left hand, arrow held in place with a finger. Two fingers on his right hand curled around the string, ready to draw in an instant. "It came from the other side of the fire," he said.

Mykal noticed the playful uncle was gone. A warrior now stood beside him. His jaw was set, eyes focused, body tense, ready. "What do we do?"

"This time, you follow me. Stay close. Be ready," he said.

"For what?"

"Anything." Quill offered a nod of reassurance and was then moving.

Soundlessly they edged their way around the pit, backs to the walls. Quill leading. Mykal watched their back.

A clamor erupted from in front of them. Loose rocks falling? It was hard to tell. The noise, at least proving they were headed in the right direction.

Mykal's breath misted in front of his face, then disappeared as it rose past his eyes. The chill had returned. The small round chamber where he'd recovered the dagger had been hot, almost steamy. He hadn't really noticed until now, where the cold made small bumps rise on exposed skin.

Listening to Quill's slow, steady breathing, he wondered if his uncle was anxious at all. The man had been a knight, lived with a bow in his hand, and slept with his quiver for a pillow. He must have seen things over the years. Nightmares. Horrors.

They reached a corner. Quill stopped standing tall. Mykal waited for the next move. He pressed his tongue to the roof of his mouth tried swallowing. His mouth was far too dry.

Quill raised a hand and counted off one, two, three.

Mykal didn't want his inexperience exposed. On three he wasn't sure if they were storming ahead, ready to fight, or cautiously rounding the bend. He was holding his breath, and despite the cold air, was sweating profusely.

He didn't have to wonder long. Quill stepped around the corner, dropped to a knee. He had his bow raised, string drawn back, his thumb against his cheek, the shaft on the rest, and panned the area.

At this point, Mykal drew his knife, as well, and held it in his left hand. He stood directly behind Quill. It seemed impossible being ready for anything. He thought of his training with Blodwyn. In his wildest dreams, Mykal had never seen himself leaving the farm, and certainly never imagined he'd embark on such a quest. Grandfather, the animals, and the farm are all he'd ever known. He missed those things dearly, and they were what he thought about now.

The cave opened wide before them. Lit torches were hung from sconces attached to the rock walls. Firelight flickered and danced. Shadows moving like ghosts. All around dripstone made Mykal think of nothing so much as the gaping maw of a mammoth dragon. If they were within the mouth of a monster, then the center would be the tongue. Though stalactites hung like icicles from above, the oblong area of ground was devoid of stalagmites.

Those were the first things Mykal noticed.

In that open space, on the tongue, his friends were surrounded. He could only assume the assailants were Cavers. It was difficult to discern their skin color. It looked as though it might be dark, black. They were covered in a white powder, though, and thick red, and seemingly random stripes were painted across their chests, and on their faces. They all had blue eyes. Bright, blue eyes. They wore

no clothing, except for short strips of cloth strung around their waists covering genitalia. They wore head piece made from dead flowers, weeds, and bones, twisted in wreaths, liked horrific crowns.

Blodwyn's head hung low, his hair dangled, wet in front of his face. Anthony lay flat on the ground, unmoving. He couldn't tell if the Archer was breathing. Coil's arms were up, fingers hands laced behind his head. Even from a distance, Mykal could see that his eyes were swollen, already beginning to turn purple.

Galatia and Karyn were at separate ends from each other. Cavers stood behind each of the women. One held Karyn's hair in a fist, pulling her head up and back. He held a long-bladed knife under her chin, against her throat. The man behind Galatia held her tightly, his arm encircling her neck. She held onto his forearm with both hands, apparently struggling to breathe.

Mykal counted fifteen Cavers on the tongue. The spears they carried with their chipped-stone points were pressed against his friends' ribs. One Caver stood over Anthony, his spear tip just above the spine, prepared to drive it into the man's back.

Movement caught his attention.

A Caver on the left, and right, attacked.

Mykal dropped his weapons and thrust his palms in front of him.

A surge that began in his toes coursed upward through his legs, gut, chest and arms. He felt the power leave his hands as the magic discharged. A bubble of purple and blue shot left, and right. It moved like lightning, struck the Cavers, sending each man through the air, slamming them against cavern walls. They crumbled to the ground.

The Cavers in the open area yelled, and chanted. Their grunting echoed inside the large chamber. Howls and intonation.

Quill remained at the ready. "What the hell was that, kid?"

"They were going to kill us." Mykal said.

He retrieved his sword, and knife. These were not the weapons that he would use in this moment. He was beginning to learn his true strength. He needed training, wanted to read books on the art, but his confidence was growing.

"I bet they've never seen anything like—"

A Caver shouted above the din. There was authority in his voice. Quill stopped talking. The other Cavers fell silent as well.

Wearing a necklace of small bone charms, the Caver standing behind Blodwyn poked a spear into his back. Blodwyn looked up.

His face was cut above the brow, and on his left cheek. Blood dripped from his mouth, and nose.

“Their chief wants you to stop,” Blodwyn said.

“He understands their language?” Quill said, he spoke quietly. It didn’t matter. Every sound carried across the room.

The leader of the Cavers spoke again, and waited. When Blodwyn was silent, he poked him with his spear, and yelled at him.

Blodwyn looked over his shoulder for a moment, then back at Mykal. “Listen, Mykal, their weapons are coated in poison. It’s deadly. They are angry at us for trespassing. He wants your magic. You will fight one of his warriors. If you win, we are free to go. If you lose, he takes your magic.”

“How can he take my magic?” Mykal said. It wasn’t arrogance that made him ask, it was surprise. He didn’t know something like that was possible.

Blodwyn spoke in the strange language. The Caver replied. “No,” Blodwyn said.

The spear jabbed him in the arm, tore through his cloak, and drew blood.

“It is a fight to the death. When you are dying your magic leaves your body. They believe they can capture it, and share it among their people.”

The weapons are coated in poison. Blodwyn was cut by a spear. “You’re bleeding,” Mykal said.

“I’m fine,” Blodwyn said.

“The poison?”

The leader shouted. He smashed the spear over Blodwyn’s head.

Mykal lifted his arms, ready to wreak havoc inside the belly of the mountain.

The Cavers all yelled at once, pressing knives and spears against their hostages’ skin. The cacophony of voices was like a brilliant roar that bounced around the room, ricocheting off the rock walls.

“Unless you know you can kill them all at the same time, think this through,”

Quill said.

The Caver spoke again.

Blodwyn said, “They are going to kill one of us now to demonstrate that you have no options.”

Mykal knew Blodwyn wasn’t defeated. He was beaten, hurt, and poisoned, yes. Not defeated. He was a strong man. They’d get out of this. Maybe Karyn could heal him. He knew she could. She just needed the chance, the time to use her powers.

Somehow the Cavers got a jump on them. It looked as if Blodwyn and Anthony put up a fight, but were outnumbered.

The situation wasn’t much different now. There were too many Cavers for he and Quill to handle, especially considering the fact that their party was held hostage.

Quill stood up. “I will fight in Mykal’s place.”

“Uncle,” Mykal said.

Blodwyn told the leader.

The Caver spoke.

“Mykal will fight,” Blodwyn said.

The leader nodded at one of his warriors. The man poised over Anthony raised his spear.

“No, wait!” Mykal said. He thrust his arm out. A bolt of electricity crossed the cavern and struck the warrior. He fell backward, away from Anthony. His body shook violently as currents passed through him. Urine ran pooled around him.

The chief struck Blodwyn in the head once more. Blodwyn dropped. The chief stepped over him, grabbed his hair and hoisted Blodwyn to his knees. He shouted the entire time.

Blodwyn attempted to translate; his words slurred.

“Tell him, I’ll fight,” Mykal said.

“It’s a fight to the death,” Quill reminded him.

“I understand that,” Mykal replied. “Tell him I will face his warrior.”

Blodwyn sighed. He told the leader.

The Cavers cleared the open area amidst the stalagmites, dragging their victims with them. Others removed the dtunned Caver, and Anthony.

“This isn’t a good idea,” Quill said.

“Do you have a better one?”

Quill remained silent.

THEY STRIPPED AWAY Mykal’s weapons. The gold dagger held their interest. The leader snapped his fingers. The dagger was given to him. He looked it over for a moment, and then slid it carefully between skin and loincloth. Mykal did not want to let that dagger out of his sight. If they left the mountain without it, all of this was for nothing.

Mykal saw that the knives, like the spears, were made of sharpened rock. The weapons were crude, but obviously deadly. Though Karyn had not stopped crying, she did so silently. Tears streamed down her face. Her eyes were red, and her nose running.

Galatia looked helpless. It confused Mykal. Her power hadn’t prevented the attacks, nor been used to protect any of them. How could she let this happen?

Judging her, nor questioning her unquantified abilities would change nothing.

Coil remained silent, arms behind his head. Would he be ready to move, and attack if the opportunity presented itself?

Quill’s bow and quiver were discarded. He was forced to his knees, and surrounded by three Cavers who looked more than willing to spear him, repeatedly.

Anthony remained unconscious.

Mykal feared he was dead.

Once standing in the center of the cave, he saw more Cavers than he could count in a short time. Perhaps it was these numbers, so many enemies, that had prevented Galatia from acting? He wasn’t sure he could disarm those around his friends, and then everyone else at the same time. Someone would likely get hurt.

He wouldn't be able to cope with that outcome.

"Who am I to fight?" Mykal said. He held his arms out, palms up.

The Cavers took a half-step backward.

He liked that. The fear, the respect, worked in his favor.

The leader spoke.

"You cannot use magic in this fight," Blodwyn said. "If you use magic, we will all be killed."

Mykal locked eyes with the leader. "I don't need to use magic."

Blodwyn translated.

A large man stepped into the center of the cave. He sneered at Mykal, chin down, blue eyes glowing under the shadow of his brow. His hands were already balled into fists. Although a foot taller than he, it was the man's sheer mass that intimidated Mykal. The warrior had arms bulging with muscle. His wide neck disappeared into the hunched arches that comprised of his shoulders. Thick veins throbbed at his temples. When he snarled, his mouth revealed rows of pointed, triangular teeth.

The two remained a few feet apart. They circled each other, staying out of range while sizing each other up.

Mykal felt ready for anything.

The warrior charged. He bowled into Mykal, slamming his shoulder into Mykal's stomach and wrapping his arms around his back. Driving him into the ground, the air was driven from Mykal's lungs.

The warrior moved until he had Mykal's arms pinned using his knees. He landed punch after punch striking solar plexus, ribs and chest. Claustrophobia overcame him. He couldn't move, or breathe. It was like he was being buried beneath a rock slide. The warrior's fists were boulders crashing against his body. He knew ribs were going to start cracking under the constant onslaught.

Mykal kicked out with his legs, trying uselessly to buck the warrior off. He twisted his body as best he could. Nothing worked.

The warrior locked hands around Mykal's throat. His thumbs pressed against his windpipe.

Mykal couldn't remember the last breath he'd taken. He felt light-headed. He

was going to pass out.

No. He was going to die.

His eyes closed. His body went limp.

Karyn screamed. “No!”

The warrior pressed hard against Mykal’s throat for a moment longer.

And then, making his first mistake, eased the pressure, loosened his grip.

Mykal threw up his hips, and twisted to the right. He raised his arms, and pushed. The warrior rolled off.

The fight hadn’t turned in his favor, but at least Mykal managed to get to his knees. He coughed, and fought hard for breath that wouldn’t come. He wasn’t giving up that easily.

The warrior looked angry. He snarled, speaking words in his incomprehensible language.

When the warrior charged once more, Mykal dropped to his stomach. The warrior flew over him, arms wrapping around air. Mykal leapt to his feet, though it cost him. His brain needed oxygen, and his chest ached. He was dizzy, off balance. He lifted fists, taking a defensive stance.

The warrior stood. He grinned, and raked his jagged teeth over his lower lip. Blood rolled down his chin, scarlet against white.

Mykal sucked in a deep breath, finally. He cringed. It felt like needles jabbing into his lungs.

The warrior raised his arms, held them in mimicry of Mykal’s stance.

They circled each other. When the warrior came close, Mykal threw a jab with his left. He connected with the warrior’s chin, smearing blood. He tagged him with another.

The jabs didn’t hurt the man. Stung, maybe. The rhythm from the lessons returned. Mykal bounced on the balls of his feet. Jab. Jab.

The warrior watched Mykal’s feet while they danced, and mimicked the steps, unaffected by the punches. It was as if he were more concerned about learning a new way of fighting, than by the fight itself. He was even smiling. He looked up at Mykal, and appeared...happy.

Mykal smiled back, and then stepped forward with his left foot and swung

hard with his right. The punch landed hard against the warrior's temple. He stumbled, legs wobbling, but he didn't fall.

His smile vanished, though, and he growled once again.

Mykal threw two more jabs, fast, hard, catching the warrior off guard.

While he had his opponent stunned, Mykal stepped in again. The uppercut slammed into the warrior's jaw. Blood sprayed from his mouth. Too much blood. Mykal knew the warrior must have bitten his tongue. Those chiseled teeth might have severed the tip clean off.

Mykal didn't want to lose the edge. He moved in closer, and pummeled the body. The blows lifted the warrior off his feet. Blodwyn called the style of fighting boxing, said it was an ancient form once used for entertainment.

The warrior certainly wasn't having fun.

Mykal threw a roundhouse, hoping for a knockout.

The warrior wasn't having it. He ducked under the swing, wrapped his arms around Mykal's waist and lifted him in the air. Mykal gripped his hands together and pounded on the warrior's back. The punches did little, and when he was slammed against the rock wall, he groaned. At least one a rib snapped. Maybe two, or more.

Mykal set his feet against the rock, and using the muscles in his legs, pushed off, wriggling free of the warrior's grasp. He spun around, arm straight, and clubbed the warrior in the back of the head. He dropped low and swept the nearest leg. The warrior fell back, with a resounding, "Oomf."

Mykal stood, cupped a hand over his fist and dropped down, elbow crashing into the warrior's chest. He rolled onto the Caver, straddling his ribs, close to his throat and threw punch after punch into the man's face. The nose broke immediately. Blood spilled.

When the threat was eliminated, Mykal stopped, pushed himself up and walked away from the warrior who lay wheezing, and writhing in pain.

The leader of the Cavers threw his arms in the air and spoke.

"You have to finish him," Blodwyn said. "It is a fight to the death."

Mykal looked back. The warrior had rolled onto his side, was curled into a ball, attempting to recover from the beating.

“It’s done. I’ve won,” Mykal said.

“It’s to the death,” Blodwyn said. “You must kill him, Mykal. We’re all dead if you don’t.”

Mykal shook his head, looked around the cave.

All eyes were on him.

The gathered warriors began tapping ends of their spears on the rocks. It was slow at first. The tempo increased. Faster. Harder.

The leader was still talking. He said the same thing over and over.

Mykal wasn’t going to kill the warrior. The fight had been fair. He’d won. The man was beaten. “I can’t kill him,” Mykal said, but no one was listening.

Karyn was staring at him. His eyes plead with her for help. She had none to offer.

He looked at Galatia, who nodded at him.

Coil’s lips were pressed together. His eyes said it all.

He couldn’t do it.

Wouldn’t.

Someone threw a homemade knife into the ring. The warrior’s hand snaked out and retrieved it. He was on his feet, moving fast.

Karyn screamed out a warning.

Mykal’s hand reached toward the Caver’s leader. The gold dagger pulled free, slicing the cord that tied the garment around his waist, and flew across the cave. The hilt slapped perfectly into his palm as the Caver lunged.

The two men fell together to the ground.

“Mykal!” Karyn cried out.

The warrior pushed himself up, and off of Mykal.

His hands at his midsection. The dagger’s hilt was the only thing visible. Trembling, he gripped the handle and pulled, his body shaking as the dagger’s blade was withdrawn from his flesh. It clattered to the ground when he dropped it. The sound did not echo.

He lifted one leg, as if to stand, but fell over.

His life spilled out from the open wound. Eyes open, the Caver shuddered once, and was then was gone.

Mykal retrieved the dagger, moved from under the warrior's legs. He dragged himself closer to the man he'd killed. Hot tears ran down his face streaking the dust there. They streaked through the dust covering his body. He looked into the man's lifeless eyes.

"I didn't mean to," he said. Almost nose to nose as he whispered again, "I didn't mean to."

CHAPTER 37



*A*nthony was dead.

The leader of the Cavers was visibly upset. He barked out commands in his foreign tongue.

Blodwyn's first rose into the air. He spat words directed at the leader. His first shook the entire time he spoke. The anger drained what energy he had left. His head dropped forward, chin to chest.

The leader said something else. It was short, and to the point.

Blodwyn whispered. "We are free to go."

Mykal stood. The Cavers backed away from him. None of them expected the young man to defeat their champion. His magic demanded fear and respect. They continued tapping the ends of their spears on the rocks.

"Karyn, you've got to help Blodwyn," Mykal said.

Coil noted, "He's not looking good."

"I'm okay," Blodwyn said, though covered in sweat.

Mykal glared at the leader, seething. "You have medicine for the poison. Give it to him."

The leader locked eyes with Mykal, but remained silent.

Mykal said, "Wyn, tell him to give you the medicine."

"Just get us out of the mountain, Mykal," Blodwyn said.

Mykal looked to Galatia.

"I can help once we're out of the caves."

"You're certain?" Mykal said.

She nodded. "I am. We must hurry. The longer we wait, the more the poison spreads."

"You stay close to me," Mykal said, and Karyn nodded.

"Take my things," Quill said, and handed Mykal his recovered bow and quiver. He lifted Anthony and slung him over a shoulder.

Mykal handed Galatia Blodwyn's staff, and hung the extra quiver and bow over his back. Coil helped Mykal carry Blodwyn, each to a side. They got Blodwyn to his feet, and draped his arms over them. "Get us out of here, Coil," he said.

When Coil tried going back the way they'd come, the path was blocked. Two warriors in white and red stood in front of them, their spears crossed in an X.

The leader grunted. His words were sharp, and hostile.

Blodwyn said, "They won't let us return that way. We have to move forward. One of their men will lead us out."

Mykal didn't care where they exited, as long as they didn't have to spend any more time below the mountain. "Fine. Let's get out of here."

The Caver guide beckoned, and started up a narrow, winding path. Mykal and the others followed close behind. "Hang in there, Wyn," he said.

"I'm okay," Blodwyn said. "It's okay. You did good back there."

Mykal didn't want to talk about it. Not yet. He wasn't ready. The reality had not set in. He hoped to hold it off as long as possible. He would consider what had happened after the journey concluded. Doing so now would tear open the wound raw, and painful. "Save your energy, Wyn. No talking," he said.

Quill grunted behind them. Anthony was not a small man. He couldn't be light to carry. Once out of the mountains, they could bury him properly.

Mykal ignored his own throbbing pain. Lugging Blodwyn exacerbated those injuries greatly. His broken ribs made difficult breathing almost impossible.

Galatia and Karyn were silent. They walked side by side, directly behind Mykal.

"Can you help Blodwyn now, Galatia? He's not doing so good. He has no strength at all," Mykal said. He noticed Blodwyn dragging both feet, when he'd been trying to walk moments ago. "I know nothing about this poison, nor do I

know anything about healing. Please, do something.”

Coil lit a torch from a sconce.

Before he asked a second time, he heard the faint sound of her whispers. They floated to his ears. Behind overlaying his normal vision he saw those colors which denoted her sorcery. Mostly red filaments of seemingly solid light zigged and zagged. There was some blue, and a touch of yellow. Those weren't as bright, and were more translucent. The lines were distracting, somewhat occluding his mundane sight. Blinking did nothing but enhance the opaqueness of each strand.

Galatia's voice was lyrical, none of the words recognizable. They soothed Mykal just the same. He grew calmer with each syllable uttered.

Blodwyn's toes stopped dragging, and took some of his own weight. Mykal noticed Coil was watching him. Their load became lighter, as Blodwyn regained his strength, his balance. Soon, as Galatia's intonations came more quickly, her words more loud, Blodwyn lifted his arms off Mykal, and Coil's shoulders, and began walking under his own power.

“I'm feeling—”

“Shh,” Mykal said. “Let the magic work. Don't interrupt it. Let Galatia finish her spell.”

The colors overlaying Mykal's sight twisted around each other, braiding into one thick, unbreakable strand.

“I'm feeling much better, Mykal. I can walk now, thank you.”

“If you grow tired, there is no shame in asking for help,” Mykal said.

Blodwyn smiled, and patted his chest. He appeared confused, and then said, “I am not sure if I've ever felt this good.”

Mykal looked back at Galatia. “Thank you.”

“My staff?” Blodwyn said.

“I have it,” Galatia said.

“You are a most powerful curer,” he said, and took back his staff. Mykal watched him eye the staff, and hold it, as if reunited with a long lost friend. It was strange. For now, he left the exchange alone.

“Not nearly, but thank you,” she said.

“Back there, before we left,” Mykal said, “what was it you said to their leader?”

“The price has been paid, your game played. You must let us go. Have you no honor?!”

“I’m more curious to know how you came to speak their language,” Coil said.

“If there is time for stories, perhaps that will be one I chose to share,” he said.

The guide stopped. He stood by the rock wall and pointed. It had been a direct path, more or less. They walked by the man, but only Blodwyn offered up a thank you.

It sounded like what he said would translate into *thank you*, anyway. Within fifty yards they saw an exit, a large gaping hole leading from the caves to the outside. Mykal wanted to run for it. He could not wait for fresh air.

The sun was just coming up. Directly overhead, the sky was still shrouded in the near-blackness of night. Stars twinkled. To the east, the shades of blue lightened. Billowing clouds were splashed in brilliant pink where sunrays touched them. Some of the pink spilled over, turning closer sections of sky soft blush.

Quill set Anthony down, placing him gently on a flat rock.

“I did not think we were this high up,” Karyn remarked.

While they were far from the distant summit, they were indeed overlooking the old empire. From where they stood, a cliff’s edge before them, they could see Crimson Falls, and the beginning of the Isthmian Sea. Far to the right were the treetops of the Cicade Forest. On the left, the Muye Mountain range.

“It seemed like we were down close to the core of the world. We descended the entire time. It doesn’t seem possible that now I feel like the clouds are within reach,” Mykal said.

Karyn stood in front of Mykal, and placed her hands on his hips.

Looking deep into her beautiful eyes, Mykal stood speechless. He wanted to react, to lean forward and kiss her. Before he moved, though, he felt it. She was not being flirtatious. She was using her magic, her healing.

His insides vibrated. He cringed as broken bones shifted. He almost shouted out loud, but instead bit his tongue as a burning sensation built within him. He thought her hands might melt through his skin. His cracked ribs shifted back into place.

“I’m almost done,” she said. “Shh. I’m almost done.”

Her magic was not visible to him as Galatia’s was. Whatever she did was obviously that much different than whatever Galatia did.

“I have had a really good time, but this is it for me,” Coil said. He was already backing away. “You people have a lot on your plates. I wish you all the best. It’s time for me to leave, okay? I don’t really want any part of this anymore. You all take care now. And if you are ever in Ironwall, please, stay away from me.”

Mykal raised a hand to wave goodbye, but Coil didn’t linger. He leapt over a boulder, and was gone.

“He’s going to return home with some interesting stories,” Blodwyn said. “Makes me wonder how many people will listen and believe his tales, and how many will assume he’s gone stark raving mad.”

Mykal couldn’t recall a time he’d ever felt more tired. His eyes burned. They wanted to close. He knew that if he laid down and rested his head on a rock, he’d fall asleep within moments.

“We’ve just one more item to find,” Galatia said.

Mykal didn’t want to look for anything else. He envied Coil. The chance to hop over a rock and head home was very appealing. If a war was coming, who was to say when for sure? It may not happen tomorrow, or next month, or next year.

Even if it took two years, though. Was that acceptable? If he had the chance, and the power to prevent countless deaths, how could he walk away? What kind of a man would he be? Not one that could look his grandfather in the eye.

“And where are we going?”

“Castle Deep. There are catacombs below the castle. The chalice we want is there,” Galatia said.

“Of course it is in the catacombs. Why wouldn’t it be buried below an empty

castle? Spiders, and crazy warriors. This one probably does have ghosts haunting the place, not like the Cicade that has archers with lethal aim,” Mykal said.

Karyn placed a hand on his forearm. The comfort she provided was a powerful thing. She could heal broken bones, and calm the beat of his heart.

They collected brush, and branches for a proper pyre.

Quill started the kindling on fire. Anthony’s clothing caught. It wasn’t going to be enough. Mykal pressed his palm against air, felt the resistance, and the intensity of the fire grew. There were crackles and pops as skin heated up, blistered, and blackened. The pungent odor of cooking flesh billowed around them.

“He died saving my life,” Karyn said.

Quill sat on a slanted rock across from the body, elbows on knees, hands folded in front of him. He stared at his friend, lost in thought.

Mykal stood beside his uncle. He almost set a hand on his shoulder. He wished he had comforting words. There was nothing he could say. Nothing that would sound meaningful. He kept his mouth shut, and instead sat on the ground, and quietly watched as flames spread, walking over the top of the corpse. The white smoke became grey. The pillar of smoke rose several feet before wind took hold and spread it thin. The steady wind bent the fire, and carried the ashes away.

Karyn began humming. The tune was a Grey Ashland burial hymn.

Anthony died protecting them, defending them. He paid the ultimate price. There was no way he could ever thank the man for what he’d done.

He killed a man. The death marred his soul. The warrior died at his hand, life spilled from the wound he’d inflicted. How could he ask forgiveness, when he was sure he could never forgive himself? It wasn’t mere guilt. He knew right from wrong. Maybe he could have incapacitated the warrior, or used magic? He was a wizard, after all. Powerful magic lived inside him. He could have found a way to end the fight with magic.

He missed his grandfather.

Karyn finished the song, but continued to hum. Those around the fire stood with heads bowed, paying their last respects.

Mykal did not wipe away the tears that fell. He just let them roll down his cheeks.

KING HERMON CORDILLERA attempted to stifle excitement as he sat in the saddle. Stopping for the night made the most sense. They could pass through the forest during the following day and, with any luck be on the opposite side before noon. They'd not made it far, with most of the men on foot.

Ida rode beside him. It was a moment before he realized she had fallen forward, and was not riding the horse, as much as being carried by the beast. He reached over and took her reins. He brought their convoy to a halt and dismounted.

Standing next to her horse, the Mountain King shook her leg.

When she did not respond, he snapped his fingers. Sebastian and Helix stepped forward.

"Get her down from there," King Hermon said, standing aside.

The Voyagers brought the sorcerer to the ground.

"Is she ill?" the knight, Lanster, said.

King Hermon said, "Wake her."

Sebastian knelt by the woman's head. He took her by the shoulders. "Witch," he said, shaking her. "Witch, wake up."

King Hermon bent over, and slapped her face. "Sorcerer! Sorcerer, I command you to open your eyes!"

He raised a fist preparing to strike.

Her eyes opened.

He reeled backward, as she sat up.

Ida turned toward him. "I have good news. We are not going into the forest."

The Mountain King shook his head. "What does that mean. It's right there!"

"We will never catch the wizards if we continue along this path. You wanted to head them off. Going through the forest will not accomplish anything other than lost time," she said. "Boys, if you'd help me to my feet."

Hermon saw the looks on their faces. No one wanted to touch the sorcerer. He did not blame them. Slapping her face had been the first time there had ever been skin on skin contact between the two. The palm of his hand felt dirty, like he needed to wash it with a cloth, and soap, or removed it at the wrist.

“We need to get back to the Shadow,” she said. “Now.”

“The Shadow? Woman are you mad?”

“They are looking for a chalice,” she said.

“Where are they?”

“Right now,” she pointed. Her finger was aimed at the Zenith Mountains.

“They are nearly across the mountains, just above Crimson Falls.”

“And where are they going to search for the Chalice?”

“Castle Deep?”

“You think? Or you know?”

“It’s what I have managed to gather. It is where I believe they will be heading.”

Castle Deep. He could not recall the name of the king who’d sat on the throne in that Constantine Realm. It would come to him. Eventually. He had been but a child when the castle was attacked, a northern kingdom that boldly skirted the old empire boundaries. There may have been riders seeking allies, but without an emperor to unify the lands, no one offered aid. The same had happened in the north western lands, in the Evidanus Kingdom. It was more than nonsense. When he ruled, and the surrounding kingdoms were under his command, no enemy from the north, south, east, or west, would dare attack.

The fear of repercussions alone would prevent hostile incursion.

His military might be the reason, though.

The magic that he would direct would demand respect across the entire world.

“Your highness,” Ida said. She pointed toward the forest.

More riders.

“Lanster?” King Hermon said.

“They are my men. They were dispatched to the Cicade.”

Everything was working in his favor. “Wonderful,” he muttered to himself.

“Your highness?” Ida said.

“Stand her up,” King Hermon said.

A full ten minutes passed before the riders reached them.

“Sir Lanster,” one of the knights said. Obviously confused by the gathering.

King Hermon faced Lanster. “Have your men dismount.”

“Off your horses,” Lanster said.

“Sir?” the knight said.

“Down. Now,” Lanster said. His voice lacked its usual snap, but he was their commander, and they were compelled to comply. The riders dismounted.

“Voyagers, take the extra horses. One extra man will ride with each of you.”

One knight prepared to draw his sword. King Hermon pointed at the action. “Lanster?”

“Stand down,” Lanster said.

“But, our horses.”

“We are commandeering your horses,” King Hermon said.

“Who is this man that he thinks we follow his orders?” The knight pointed at Hermon.

“This is the Mountain King,” Lanster said.

“Treason!” the knight said.

“Kill them,” King Hermon said.

Lanster stood still.

“Sorcerer!”

Ida aimed her hands at Lanster, and his men. She twisted her hands left and right. Her fingers moved as if weighted marionette strings dangled from each fingertip.

Lanster drew his sword. “They’ve given up their horses.”

“Kill them,” King Hermon said.

Ida winced, twisting her hands at the wrist. Bones snapped as her hands rotated all the way around.

The knights defended themselves. Swords clashed. The sound of metal on metal rang hollow across the plains. Sparks arched off blades. The spilled blood covered dirt, blades of grass and tall weeds.

Shortly, only a few men remained standing. That was unfortunate.

“Ready your men, Lanster. Sebastian, we must sail to the Balefire River. That will bring us to the Constantine Realm,” he said. The Mountain King gritted his teeth at the thought of the wasted time, the lost resources. The wizards were not going to escape him.

CHAPTER 38



The only way across the Zenith Mountains, was up. The climb was complicated. The rock was cold, and icy in spots, making it difficult to maintain handholds. Ropes, spikes, and picks would have been useful, but unfortunately they didn't have the gear. The wind whipped around them, as if sent to prevent interlopers from ascending its height. Gravity continually threatened to pull them down. They didn't have ropes, and that made Mykal apprehensive. Odds were against them reaching the east whole.

Mykal had Karyn climb above him. He wanted a chance at catching her if she fell. This was the only way he would at least be able to make an attempt. He assumed she knew his thoughts. It was in her eyes when she agreed, while telling him she'd never climbed a mountain before.

"Neither have I," he'd told her.

It was slow going. Crossing the mountains would take several days, which presented obvious problems that, for the moment, Mykal chose to ignore.

Karyn took inordinate amounts of time placing each foot- and handhold. He looked up, always up. Heights ate away at his confidence. If he convinced his mind he wasn't scaling the face of a mountain, he could at least pretend to believe the lie as long as he didn't look down. The key lie in ignoring the mantra he found himself repeating, "This is crazy. This is crazy. This crazy."

Mykal relied on the strength of his fingers and forearms from years of swinging a hammer repairing fences, and using a pitchfork to bale hay for the livestock to move him up the mountain.

He needlessly worried about Blodwyn. Hours ago he feared his best friend was near death. He knew magic was powerful, or he was in the process of learning that truth, but didn't have complete confidence it could remove the poison from his system. It had, though. And now Blodwyn was climbing the side of the mountain as easily as if he were walking a trail through the woods. In fact, Blodwyn was near the summit.

Galatia was not far behind. Her lithe body moved with ease, like a spider crawling up a wall. Her hands reached up, and no matter where they planted, they remained. She dug her toes into small crevices, used the sides of her feet when necessary, and lifted herself from one spot to the next farther along.

"I'm not sure I can keep going," Karyn said. The wind stole the sound of her voice and sent it sailing away.

"What?" Mykal said.

"I can't do this!"

"Yes, you can," he said.

"I can't."

"There's no turning around. Climbing down will be harder than going up," he said.

"I'm too tired," she said. Her creeping process was completely halted. "I can't."

"Climb," Mykal said. "Don't stop moving. Don't stop now."

"Mykal," she said. He heard the pain in her voice. Her strength was sapped.

"Climb!" He shouted.

She grunted, and groaned, but her right hand reached for another hold further up the mountainside. She fit her fingers into a lateral crack in rock. Her legs bounced up and down, and then she moved a little higher, her left hand finding a protrusion to grasp.

"That's it," he said. "Keep going. Keep climbing!"

Daylight had vanished by the time they finally reached a plateau.

They were down to their last sips of water. They had been on the go for nearly twenty-four hours straight. They needed sleep. Mykal shook his arms, and kicked out his legs. The muscles were already tightening up. There had to be an

easier way across.

Karyn hugged herself, trembling.

She needn't say a word. Her anxiety was evident in the way she looked at him. He didn't believe in lying. Things looked bad, and would likely get worse before they got better. If they ever got better.

Blodwyn waved Mykal over. He leaned his weight on his staff. "I want to make sure you are okay," he said.

"My arms feel like rubber," Mykal said.

Blodwyn shook his head. "It's not what I meant."

Mykal knew what his friend meant. "I knew it was a fight to the death, Wyn. I knew I might have to kill a man. When the fight was over, I mean clearly over, I figured it was done. I mean, it was their tribemate, their warrior. I was trying to spare his life."

"It's their ways. The rules needed following. Denying them that is an insult," Blodwyn explained.

"I will never forget that moment."

"And you shouldn't. Taking the life of another is never something you should forget. Or take lightly. It is often a terrible, horrible experience. I think when you used magic to grab the dagger it was overlooked, because another had thrown a blade into the ring. You evened the odds. Otherwise, I don't think they would have let us leave."

They stood in silence.

"Wyn? Have you ever killed anyone before?"

His expression tightened, jaw set. "I have had to defend myself a time or two."

"Is that a yes?"

Blodwyn sighed as he shook his head. "That is a yes. I think about the lives I've taken every day. There is not a night I don't dream about them. They will haunt me forever."

"I will dream of that warrior?"

"You may. There is no guilt in not dreaming of him. I hope that he stays out of your dreams. You've suffered enough," he said.

“Thank you.”

“Mykal,” Blodwyn said. “This is not over. I fear many more lives will be taken before this ends.”

“We’re really on the brink of a war, aren’t we?”

“I’m afraid so.” Blodwyn said. “I am afraid so.”

“GALATIA,” Mykal said, talking as quietly as possible. “We need food. Have you any magic than can help us?”

She offered up a thin smile, and then closed her eyes. Her arms rose in the air. When she spoke, the words were harsh, gravelly. Her fingers wiggled toward the sky. She let her head roll around on her neck, slow, and easy.

Mykal felt the charge spark inside him. “Quill,” he said. “Ready your bow.”

Quill didn’t hesitate. He retrieved the bow and nocked an arrow. Setting one boot on a rock, he trained the arrowhead at the sky.

Black lines glowed behind Mykal’s eyes. They seemed taut, and then vibrated as if strummed by an unseen hand. There was no sound though. Then the vibrations slowed. No. That wasn’t accurate. They still quivered, but suddenly the movement played out in slow motion. Mykal saw clearly the trailing image of each moving strand.

The caw of ravens was followed by the sound of many wings flapping. A flock of birds flew from the shallow valley toward where they stood.

Mykal watched Quill, waiting for him to lose an arrow. “What are you waiting for? Are they too fast to hit?”

Quill lowered the bow some, and cocked an eyebrow at his nephew. “How do you suppose we retrieve them once I shoot them from the air?”

“Turn around. Face the mountain. Everyone, move aside.”

Quill did as instructed.

Mykal pointed at the birds, and with a fast motion, pointed toward the mountain. The ravens followed where he led them with his finger, as if chasing down prey. Quill, without hesitation, loosed arrow after arrow. The large black

birds plummeted to the plateau.

“Looks like we’ll break fast together tonight,” Quill said.

“We’ll get sick,” Blodwyn said. “You can’t eat bird raw.”

Mykal looked around, checking the limited expanse of the plateau. There were no twigs, no grass. The only thing he saw were rocks that must have tumbled down from the peaks over the years. He picked one up, then another.

When Mykal set the stones together on the ground in a circle, Quill stood with his arms crossed, laughing. “This is where farmers miss out. School might not be for everyone, but you would not have passed basic sciences.”

Mykal snapped his finger. The rocks caught fire. The first few attempts caused rocks to crack. One exploded. Quill laughed, unimpressed. Mykal didn’t give up. Eventually, he got the amount of magic needed correct. The flame burned on the rock perfectly. Mykal winked at his uncle, and didn’t bother masking his half smile.

“Well, I’ll be.” Quill dropped his arms to his side.

While the birds cooked over the fire, Quill removed the arrows from his and Anthony’s quivers and then climbed further up the mountain.

“Where is he going?” Karyn asked.

Mykal shook his head. He had no idea.

When Quill returned, the leather and suede quivers were over his shoulder. Both stuffed full of something. He dropped off the face the last few feet, and clapped his hands together, smiling. He removed the bags and set them near the fire. “Collected some snow. We need more water.”

Mykal smirked, and offered over a two finger salute. “Well done, uncle.”

Galatia stood off to the side, alone. Her arms were straight at her side, and she watched everyone else interacting. Mykal walked over and stood beside her.

“You did a really amazing thing with the Ravens. I know I am speaking for everyone when I say, thank you,” Mykal said. “Hey, are you okay?”

“I have a confession,” she said.

“A confession?”

“I have never been a powerful wizard. My magic, for whatever reason, has always been limited. It was partly why I tried saving the king’s son centuries

ago. I had something to prove to myself. I also wanted the fame, the recognition. What happened instead was worse than I could have ever imagined. I am responsible for the wars against wizards. I might as well have committed the countless deaths and executions.

“And I’ve always known it. I never wanted to believe, but I’ve always known it. It’s kind of funny really, because once again, I was kidding myself. I saw you, this young boy, this new wizard, and I thought ‘I’m going to mentor him. I’m going to train this kid in the ways of magic.’ Not for *you*, not to benefit *you*. For me.” She jabbed a finger into her chest. “Another shot at proving I’m worth something. Then I see you, I see what you can do...without any training?” She laughed, as if amazed. “I see your immense power, and I am in awe. I am humiliated because I’m disappointed in myself, and I’m in complete awe of you.”

She was crying.

Mykal placed a hand on her arm. When she hugged him, her tears hot and wet on his neck, he wrapped his arms around her. His spoke softly, so that only she would hear his words. He knew the others were aware that something was taking place, but no one looked directly at them. Except Karyn. She seemed concerned. He tried to tell her with his eyes, and a very slight shake of his head, *don't worry*.

Ravens are large birds, but with very little meat. After plucking away as many feathers as possible, it made dining that much less challenging. Everyone was so hungry, the extra effort didn't stop them, and no one complained.

While they ate, Mykal was tempted to ask Blodwyn to share a story, specifically how he learned to speak the Caver language. He was more than curious. The last week left him feeling off balance. Everything he thought he knew about Blodwyn, his parents, and himself, had been, at least partially, wrong.

He'd been misinformed, not given the whole story.

Though some might feel angry about these revelations, he did not. He was just curious now, and perhaps a little desperate for answers.

He refrained from asking when he saw Karyn fall asleep sitting on her rock

by the fire. A half-eaten raven—her second—dangled loosely from her fingertips.

“We should get some sleep,” Mykal said.

Blodwyn nodded. “He’s right.”

The temperature dropped drastically after the sun set. They huddled close around the fire. The combined body heat between them helped. Karyn snuggled back against Mykal.

“Please hug me,” she stirred enough to mumble. “I’m so cold.”

CHAPTER 39



Crossing the Zenith Mountains took four days. The cold nights, and windy days made the trek brutal. They did find sections where they were able to skirt around, rather than having to scale further up the mountain side. The paths were narrow. Rocks were loose. Footing was treacherous, but it was faster. Mykal felt like unless he used magic his blood and bones would never again warm.

When at last they descended the eastern side of the last mountain, they saw salvation. Sanctuary. The rising sun lit the sky. In the distance Mykal saw Castle Deep. It seemed close, reachable, but would still be a two-day walk. He didn't look forward to it. His entire body ached, his thighs chaffed.

When they reached the foothills, mammoth peaks behind them, the plush forest, and green trees offered protection against the wind, the temperature had risen gradually as the elevation lowered. Mykal's sore feet suddenly felt wonderful walking on soft ground, and cushioning grass. The sharp rock, and walking carefully along narrow passes, was behind them. The palms of his hands were scraped raw. The further away from the mountain they walked, the more he looked back in disbelief.

We crossed Zenith. Never had he imagined he'd be where he was. If only the circumstances were different.

"Have you felt it?" Galatia said, walking beside him.

"Felt what?"

"The magic. Not now. Not today, but back when we were in the cave, and

then again climbing the mountain the first day.”

“When you called the ravens?” Mykal said.

“No. Not my magic,” she said.

“I don’t know what you mean.” Mykal could not pull his eyes from Castle Deep. It sat on top of a hill, stone wall encircling the ruined marketplace of the keep. It was much smaller than Grey Ashland, as best he could tell from this distance.

“When I use magic, do you know it? Can you feel it?”

“I sense it. And then, it is like I tap into what you are doing. I see it like moving colors in my mind.”

“Remember I told you that I sensed magic being used? It was why I came out of hiding, to find out what was happening. The others must not be hiding anywhere near. Even so, I’d bet they’re aware of the sorcery used recently. I’m sure of it. When we summon them, I don’t think it will be a surprise,” she said. “But the one I sensed before, she has been using magic. As much as we have been. You don’t sense *her*?”

“I think I only sense when you are using magic, because I am right there watching you. I might not sense it at all. Can you teach me how?” he said.

Her smile was thin, as though she thought he was asking for help out of pity.

“You said when you see me use magic, you tap into it, you see it as colors inside your mind?”

“Exactly.”

“The way you do that, tap into my magic? You need to leave those senses open, even when sleeping. It’s like leaving one eye open even *while* you sleep,” she said.

“I don’t know how to do that.”

“Pretend you think I am doing magic right now. Okay?”

He nodded.

“Now, what would you do?”

“But you’re not doing magic.”

She laughed, and flippantly waved her arms about. “Pretend I am.”

Mykal closed his eyes.

He felt it then. He saw it. It was the first time. Two strands of brilliant blue snaked from his mind. “Whoa. I think, I did it. I tried sensing it.”

“And are you still trying?”

He closed his eyes. The blue strands were gone. “No.”

“Do it again, reach out, but never stop. It will become as natural as breathing. It takes practice though, discipline. Do it now,” she said.

He closed his eyes.

Blue strands swirled. After a moment, he opened his eyes. He looked at the castle, and then at Galatia,

“Well?” she said.

He held up a finger, and closed his eyes. The strands were still there, still searching. “It works. I’m doing it. Thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. However, when we have some time, I would appreciate spending time with you. Maybe we could show each other what we know and build our abilities together?”

“I like that idea.”

“Beyond the castle, there is an ancient library. It is where I planned to go after we have the chalice. It would be the perfect place for summoning the other wizards. There are more books on magic inside that building than anywhere else, collectively. We can spend some time researching, and practicing.”

BY NOON on the second day off of the mountain, the foothills were long behind them, and the ground was mostly level. They would reach the castle’s moat by dusk. The humidity was back. It wasn’t as welcome a change from the cold as Mykal might have expected. He wished he could find a happy medium when it came to temperature. He didn’t like it too hot, or too cold, too windy, or too humid. If he learned anything, it was that he had no say in the matter. Endurance was what it came down to; endurance and stamina. He currently felt as though he had neither.

They rationed the water collected from a creek last night, but Mykal still felt

dehydrated, and worn out. He looked forward to sitting down and taking off his boots, though not the odor he knew would be there. There was also a good chance that once his boots came off, they might not fit back on.

Mykal, on many occasions, felt the desire to comfort Quill. Blodwyn told him to give the man space, and time. Blodwyn said when Quill was ready to talk, *if* he ever was ready to talk about Anthony's death, would bring it up on his own. Blodwyn explained most soldiers didn't discuss losses from battle. It was a personal nightmare they kept close to their hearts. Death was personal, and private.

It took a few days, but slowly, Quill came around. He started talking more, and joking around when appropriate. Mykal still worried about him. He never mentioned Anthony.

Mykal wasn't sure how he would deal with death. Losing his mother, and then his father were the worst pains he'd ever felt. He did not think there was room in his heart for more suffering.

Grandfather and Blodwyn were his family.

And now Quill.

"Castle is pretty beat up," Blodwyn said. "The wall looks mostly collapsed along the north-west side. Can you see that?"

Mykal looked where Blodwyn pointed. "Just barely. Is the place really haunted?"

"Supposedly. The way I understand it, those inside the keep kept waiting for help to arrive when they were under attack," he said.

"But no one ever came."

"And so when they were slaughtered, they died waiting. Their spirits are said to roam the entire keep seeking revenge on anyone that enters."

"Revenge?"

Blodwyn cocked his head to one side. "For being too late to help."

CHAPTER 40



The stagnate moat surrounded the castle. The drawbridge was down. The wood worn, and in need of repair, did not look strong enough for a dog to cross safely. The chains for raising and lowering the drawbridge were rusted stiff. The walls hadn't only collapsed in spots; it was riddled with missing blocks throughout. Crumbled towers leaned in places like steps. Clouds of mosquitos hovered above the surface of placid water; some dragonflies perched on reeds, others zipped back and forth.

On the ground, just to the right of the lowered bridge, rising from of the dirt was a blue rose with a bright green stem, and leaves. Mykal was tempted to reach for it. The tip of the rose suddenly blackened. The darkness spread down the pedals as if plagued. The breeze whisked away the charred ash as the entire flower was blown destroyed.

“Did you see that?” he said.

“See what?” Karyn said.

“The rose? The blue rose?”

Karyn stood silent, looking where Mykal pointed. “I don't see it.”

“It's gone now.”

“The rose is gone?”

“Never mind,” Mykal said, but couldn't take his eyes from the spot.

“This place is...” she said, her voice trailed off.

“What?” Blodwyn said. “You sense something?”

“If we go in there, everything changes,” she said.

“Changes?” Mykal said.

“There are spirits inside. They know we’re here.” Karyn shook her head, slowly, as if trying to remember something. “I just, I don’t feel good about it.”

Quill said. “You have two of the three talismans. Do we need the third? I mean, isn’t that kind of greedy?”

“If we don’t retrieve the chalice, this King Hermon will find it,” Galatia said. “He has one powerful wizard on his side already. A second fighting the war for the Osiris Realm could prove devastating for King Nabal.”

“While I have always harbored suspicions, it seems fair to say that Hermon Cordillera is evil, with a madman’s charm. He is dangerous. We cannot let him possess anymore magic,” Blodwyn said.

“Just asking,” Quill said. “And this chalice, it’s down in the catacombs below the castle?”

“Below the castle the old kings are buried in sarcophagi,” Galatia said.

“Sarcophagi?” Karyn asked.

Blodwyn said, “Stone coffins.”

Karyn closed her mouth and nodded. She’d given her warning and it didn’t look like she planned on repeating herself. It was in her mannerisms, though. And Mykal did not take the warning or her instincts lightly.

“I’ll go and retrieve the chalice,” he said. “Alone.”

“Not this time,” Galatia said. “The enemy inside is not like any we’ve faced. You will need protection while you search.”

“They’re spirits,” Quill said. “Dead. They can’t harm the living. Just creep us out. *Boooooo*,” he wiggled his fingers, “and all of that. They should pass right through us as if they didn’t exist, is how I understand it.”

“What *you* understand is not accurate,” Galatia said. “The spirits trapped inside those decaying walls can keep you.”

“Keep us?” Mykal said. “What does that mean? How can they do that.”

“By killing you,” Galatia said.

“You’re not all going in there with me,” Mykal said.

“I am,” Quill said. “We’re in this together.”

“I’m afraid he’s right,” Blodwyn said. He tapped the end of his staff on the

soft ground. “You’re being able to retrieve the chalice is far too important for us to sit out here and wait. Something tells me this might be more dangerous than facing Cavers.”

Mykal looked over. Galatia just shrugged.

Mykal sighed, shaking his head.

THE DRAWBRIDGE GROANED under their combined weight as they walked over the rot-riddled planks. The steady hum of dragonfly wings surrounded them. The sun sat above them; the sky darkened, storm clouds rolling toward them from the west, over the mountains they’d just crossed.

Mykal walked into the keep first. He was not nearly as skilled with a bow as his uncle, so he kept his bow and quiver over his shoulder and let the blade from his sword lead the way. Karyn stayed right behind him. Next came Quill, who kept an arrow nocked, while his eyes scoured the area searching for any sign of a threat. Blodwyn held his staff with both hands. He took careful steps, pivoting this way and that. Galatia’s fingers looked frozen, stuck in odd positions on her hands, as if itching for a chance to throw fireballs.

The keep was flat, dirt and crushed rock. There were abandoned vendor carts here and there. Nothing for sale today, though. Straw canopies over the carts were mostly gone, wheels were broken. The walls of the fortress were in worse repair than they appeared when viewed from without. The parapet was equally decayed and missing sections. Parts were charred black from fires burned out long ago.

“This is too creepy,” Quill said.

“I don’t like it either,” Karyn said.

The sound of their voices fell flat, as if muffled. No one else spoke, perhaps as unnerved as Mykal was by the unnatural way the sound behaved.

The castle was at the far north west of the keep, atop a small hill. A stone staircase led to the main doors. Loose and chipped steps crumbled underfoot.

Doors that stood twenty feet high were decorated with iron hinges and iron

doorknockers. They party stood dwarfed by the entrance.

“Do we knock?” Karyn said.

Mykal shook his head. He leaned a shoulder against the door. “Locked.”

Quill handed Karyn his bow. “On three,” he said.

They pushed. The doors did not move.

“The wood everywhere is rotted, but not here,” Blodwyn said.

“Stand back,” Galatia said.

“Do we want to drain our energy opening doors?” Mykal said. He had considered using magic, but wanted all of his strength ready when needed. They didn’t have any more food, so rest would be all the young wizard could rely on.

“These won’t deplete me,” she said, smiling.

Mykal and Quill stepped aside.

“Whoa,” Karyn said.

The door on the left was ajar.

“We must have loosened the, uh, hinges,” Quill said, retrieving his bow, again nocking an arrow. He shouldered his way into the castle. He whistled.

Again, the sound fell flat.

With both doors open, Mykal expected some natural light to fill the foyer. It didn’t. The room was as grey and dark as the storm clouds coming over the mountain. The main room was damp, dank. Black mold shared space with moth-eaten tapestries on the walls. Giant cobwebs draped the empty torch brackets. Wooden benches and planks of wood that had once formed a table were tipped over, smashed to kindling.

Mykal couldn’t shut his mind off. The horrors of the attack filled his imaginings. The raiders must have been relentless, merciless.

“How do we find a way down to the catacombs?” Mykal said.

“In a rush, or something?” Quill said. He stepped sideways around the main room. On the far left was a staircase that led to higher floors. “Not over here.”

Mykal flicked his wrists, turned around, aiming at where torches did occupy brackets. Fires lit the room. Shadows walked across the darkness whenever anyone moved. “That’s better,” he said.

“You think so? Made the whole place a little spookier,” Karyn said.

Blodwyn walked the room, patiently tapping his staff on the slabs of rock floor.

“What are you doing?” Galatia said.

A hollow tap, tap. He bent low and wiped away dust, dirt, and dead skin, revealing a large rectangular hatch in the ground. The handle was a loop of metal. He pulled on the door, lifting it up, and walked it over to the other side, laying it down. “That is one heavy door,” he said.

“The catacombs,” Quill said. “I’ve a feeling this will not be much fun.”

“You should go.”

“Not first,” Quill said, looking at Karyn.

She pointed to herself. “I didn’t say that.”

Galatia hadn’t spoken, either. She stood in the center of the room. A young girl had come down the stairs. Dressed in a long white sleeping gown. The child held tight to a rag doll, hugging it to her chest. In the firelight, and shadows, it looked as if she could not hold still, but had not taken a step. Long, straight black hair hung past her shoulders, covering much of her face.

“Do you live here? Where are your mother and father?” Quill asked.

Mykal held out a hand, stopping Quill from asking more questions. “We will not be here long. We are searching for something. When we find it, we will leave you to rest in peace.”

“You should go,” she said, her head nodding up and down. “You should not be here. Where were you when we needed you?”

Her voice became deeper. Louder. She nodded her head faster. “Where were you when we cried for help?”

She lowered the doll to her side, held it by an arm barely sewn to the shoulder. Straw stuffing protruded from the armpit. “Where were you when they killed my family?”

“Ah, Mykal?” Quill took steps toward the door in the floor.

“We were not called to help. We did not know of the attack. That was a long time ago. If we had been asked, we’d have come and helped,” Mykal said. He spoke slowly, hoping the child did not feel threatened by their presence.

Her voice changed. It was like boulders tumbling down the face of a

mountain. She raised her head and looked directly at Mykal. "You should go."

Most of her face was blistered and raw. It was as if she'd died, burned alive in a fire.

The large front doors creaked, before slamming shut.

"Uh-oh," she said, and sounded like a little girl, as she brought the doll back into an embrace. She squeezed it, swaying left and right. Giggling, she ran up the stairs.

Mykal chased after her.

"Mykal, we don't have time!" Galatia said.

Stopping on the second step, Mykal asked, "What about the girl?"

Galatia said, "She was a ghost. Her spirit belongs to the castle."

"I saw her, Galatia. She was a ghost, but seemed as real as you or I."

"Try getting that door open," Quill said, talking to Blodwyn. "I don't like how this leg of the adventure is starting. Give me something I can kill, surround me with enemies, and I'm good with that. A ghost in the body of a child, though? What do we do against that?"

"We are here for the chalice, and nothing more. We can't correct a wrong committed decades ago. Just like Mykal explained. The fight was not ours," she said.

Mykal looked up the staircase, half expecting to see the child standing at the top. He feared he would dream of her and the doll. Her scarred face would haunt him while his list of nightmares grew. Undisturbed sleep might be a luxury he could no longer relish.

Gritting his teeth, Mykal turned away from the stairs. Movement caught his peripheral vision, but he didn't look back. "Let's get this last talisman, and be done with it," he said.

"The doors are closed, as if sealed shut," Quill said.

"No matter," Mykal said. "Grab some of those torches from the wall. We're going down those stairs, not out that door."

CHAPTER 41



The torch light barely penetrated the dark. Mykal concentrated on his breathing. The rock staircase was slick, the steps uneven; some were a few inches below the one above, some a foot or two apart. A few steps were three feet long, others, only inches. It was as if the stairs had been carved by workers drunk on ale.

“Are you following that ruby of yours?” Quill said. His face was half in shadow, half alive with the reflection of dancing flames.

“We need to save our strength,” Galatia said, again issuing the importance of conservation. “If we cannot locate it, we shall call on her.”

“I think we’re at the bottom. Hand me a torch,” Mykal said. He knelt down and moved the light around. There were no more steps. He stood up, holding the torch high. He could not see the hatch. Above them was a darkness so complete he feared he might hyperventilate. He breathed in through his nose, and out through his mouth. The gloom closed in on him. It swirled around him. He closed his eyes for a brief moment. His legs trembled.

“Mykal?” Blodwyn said.

“I’m okay.” He’d climbed to treetops, and mountain summits, snaked his way through caves, and faced spiders. In all of his life he had never imagined the phobias he’d overcome. Grandfather would be proud, he knew, but he drew no strength from such accomplishments. Instead, he felt weak, and drained. Overwhelmed.

He filled his lungs with pungent air, and stepped from the final stair. “Careful

now,” he warned. “Stay close.”

The walls were mud and rock, arched, as if the tunnels were hand-dug by men. Water dripped from above, and streamed down the walls. It seemed as if the catacombs were on the verge of collapse. The thought of being buried alive threatened Mykal’s loosely-held composure. It beat too quickly behind his ribcage.

“It’s a maze,” Mykal said.

“We won’t go straight. That will lead us away from the castle, out of the keep. We must head toward the center. It can’t be far. Around a corner or two, maybe. The Kings would be buried just below the castle,” Galatia said.

Mykal went right. The tunnel widened somewhat. They could fit two, maybe three wide, but remained single file. He continued on cautiously. If more spirits haunted the catacombs, he wasn’t confident he was ready to face them. He knew for certain he did not want to run right into a ghost, or through one, for that matter. Each step was calculated. He stepped with a toe, before planting his entire foot, the way one might test water temperature before leaping into a pond.

Other, more narrow veins spliced off the main path. Left, and right. Mykal ignored them.

And then stopped. “Oh, boy.”

Standing in front of an out of place wooden door were three knights. They were not in full suits of armor, but stood guard in helms with visors lowered, and chainmail under shoulder pauldrons and breastplates. Their broadswords at the ready, and although faceless, each appeared ready to defend the chamber beyond the closed door.

Quill did not hesitate. He loosed three arrows faster than a man could swing a sword. The broadhead clanked against plate, and the shafts shattered.

The knights stepped forward, spread apart as far as the cavern would allow. The mail clinked, and clattered. The hollow flatness of the sound was in and of itself alarming and unnatural.

Mykal raised his arm, palm out, fingers up. He pushed with his mind. A blue web sprang from his hand. It passed through the knights, achieving absolutely nothing.

The arrows had bounced off them, so they were there. They had to be real. Magic passed through them, as if the knights were an illusion.

Blodwyn wasted no time and attacked with his staff. Mykal, with his sword, joined the fight. Quill, without a sword, stepped forward and swung his bow like an ax.

Blodwyn dropped low; he swept with his staff and upended the knight on the left.

Mykal spun around, swinging his sword with all of his strength and added momentum. The blade chopped through the neck of the knight in the center. A bloodless helm fell from the shoulders and bounced to the floor of the tomb.

Quill's bow was useless. He dropped it, and instead drove his shoulder into the knight on the right, wrapping his arms about the wraith's thighs. He slammed the knight against the door, and the mail collapsed into itself. The empty suit dropped to the ground, as if no man had ever donned the pieces of armor.

Blodwyn, Mykal and Quill looked at each other.

"They were watchers, keeping guard of the tombs. Perhaps meant to scare away thieves and intruders, nothing more," Galatia said, as a possible explanation.

"Nearly worked," Quill said, retrieving his bow, and slinging it over his back.

Mykal stood at the single door. He pressed his hands against it, the wood damp, rotted. He set his ear against it. He didn't hear anything on the opposite side, but hadn't expected to. The handle jiggled, but the door didn't budge. It was locked, not surprisingly. Closing his eyes, he ran his palms over the wood, and on the left side, sent electricity surging into the hinges. His power hummed and sizzled.

"Mykal!" Galatia said.

"I want this to be done," he whispered, unsure if anyone heard his words. Smoke rose from where his hands were pressed. He leaned his weight against the door, pushing.

The door fell in, slammed on the ground. A cloud of dust plumed around its edges, filling the chamber.

Moving through the dust, and coughing, Mykal stopped at a rock table. “A coffin?”

The others surrounded the slab of rock.

“Is this it? Is the chalice inside?” Quill said.

“It’s unlikely. There will be more kings buried in other sarcophagi,” Galatia said.

“I don’t like that word. It sounds so harsh. Dangerous,” Karyn said.

“Galatia can call on the orb for help,” Mykal said.

“Let’s check this, first.” Blodwyn leaned his staff against the table and bent at the knees. He placed his hands on the lid. “Anyone care to assist me? It looks rather heavy.”

“Opening graves?” Quill said. “Don’t see how anything could go wrong doing that.”

Mykal, Quill, and Blodwyn stood side by side and on three, pushed.

Rock scraped against rock.

The pushed again, harder. The lid moved, revealing a triangular view inside the rock coffin exposing white bones beneath decayed royal robes. The bowed jaw of the skull offered up a ghastly smile of yellow and blackened teeth, perhaps not at all happy to have his eternal rest disturbed.

“It’s not a king,” Karyn said. She had tears on her cheeks.

“Karyn?” Mykal said.

She pointed to the folded skeletal hands on the corpse’s chest. “That’s a Queen Stone ring. My mother wore one. This is a queen. Not a king.”

Mykal placed a hand on her shoulder. “Okay. It’s not here. Let’s seal it back up.”

They pushed shut the lid.

“What now?” Quill said.

“Wait,” Blodwyn said. He had walked around the chamber, and now stood at the back wall, his staff leaning against it. He reached up and dug fingers into mud. They fit between a wedge, and as he scraped along the edge, and down a side, the rectangular shape was revealed.

“Well, I’ll be,” Quill said.

Blodwyn used the top of his staff to clean away mud. There was a handle flat in the wood. He fit his hand inside, and twisted. A latch caught. He looked back at everyone, eyebrow raised. "It's open."

They entered a large cavern. Eight stone caskets were inside. Two at the far end, side by side, two to the left, two to the right, and two directly in front of them. In the center stood four statues, the crowns depicted kings. Each faced a different direction, north, south, east, and west.

"We can't do this," Karyn said. It was a whisper. Everyone must have heard her, but no one reacted.

The men pushed open the lid on the first casket. There were bones, and gold and jewels, but no chalice. They replaced the stone slab. The lids became more difficult to move. The stone was so heavy. The men panted, breathing heavily, but didn't stop, or slow down.

The sixth one opened held what they were looking for.

Mykal removed it, looking into empty eye sockets, in an attempt to show some sort of respect. He lifted the chalice, and inspected the lack of craftsmanship. It was little more than a large gold cup. "Could this be it?"

Galatia held it in both hands. Turned it around and around, and then placed it in her pack along with the mirror. "It is," she said.

Mykal removed the dagger. "Might as well keep them all together," he said. "What is it?"

"We've completed the tasks. We've collected the items. Tonight we can hold a ceremony and call the other wizards," Galatia said.

"Will they come?" Quill said.

"Even if they are far, far away they must be aware of a disturbance in the old empire. So much magic has been wielded, recently. It would be impossible to *not* sense. Yes, they will come when we call. I know they will."

"Let's get out of here. I don't want to be down here any longer than we have to be," Quill said. No one argued.

They exited the large chamber, and the queen's room, then stopped.

"Did you hear that?" Mykal said.

It sounded as if something metallic was dragged across the ground, and then

dropped.

“Have to be near deaf not to hear that,” Quill said.

The sound came again. Closer. Louder.

“What is it?” Karyn shivered.

The torch Galatia held went out.

“There is no draft down here,” Quill said, and prepared another arrow.

The sound. Scrape. Drag. Thud. The flame on Karyn’s torch flickered, rose with a whoosh, and extinguished.

They were plunged into utter darkness.

A fireball appeared. Galatia held it in her hands. It lit the section of catacombs they were in. And Mykal wished it hadn’t.

Men, women, children ... surrounded them. The young girl was there with her burned face; doll in one hand.

“Mykal,” Karyn said.

“Close your eyes. Hold onto my tunic, and close your eyes. Don’t open them.”

Blodwyn twirled his staff around. The spirits watched him, a curious look on their faces.

“You should not be here. You cannot leave.”

Voices swirled inside the catacombs. Not one of the spirits spoke. Not one mouth moved.

Scrape. Drag. Thud.

Quill loosed an arrow. It passed through a man in torn and tattered clothing.

“No point in going upstairs.”

“We’ll get lost down here!” Blodwyn said.

Mykal held out his hand.

The red orb appeared.

“Get us out of here,” he said. The orb launched forward. “Follow me!”

The spirits reached for them as they ran past, and through them. Quill shuddered, and moaned as he ducked and dodged touches from the dead.

CHAPTER 42



“*A*re they rabbits? I have no idea why we’re standing here,” the Mountain King said, staring at the large round opening in the ground.

The moon was full and bright, lighting the night almost as brilliantly as a midday sun.

Ida wrung her hands, her upper lip quivering.

“Am I talking to hear myself talk?” the king said.

“They are coming, I can hear them,” she said. “I can feel them.”

King Hermon sat on his mount, his hands on the saddle horn. He looked around. The Balefire River coursed behind them. Castle Deed was to their north. Owls hooted in tree branches. “I don’t hear them.”

“We should get ready,” Ida said. “Any moment and they will emerge.”

“You are sure?”

“I am.”

King Hermon directed the men with a gesture. “You know what we must do. It needs to be done fast. Sebastian, you and the Voyagers get behind the hole. Lanster, you and everyone else behind a tree. Stay still. Be quiet. If I can’t hear them approaching, I surely do not want to hear you hiding.”

The men moved into position.

And then King Hermon heard them. They were not quiet about their approach. One man pulled himself out of the hole. Reached in and helped pull out the others. Three men, a woman and another, younger woman. This would be

simple.

He watched them bend over, hands on knees, gasping. Some coughed. He had no idea what they'd run away from. He stifled a laugh. *Wait until they see what they've run in to.*

Sebastian and the other Voyagers didn't wait. They attacked.

Two men immediately fell on the woman. They gagged her mouth and pulled a sack over her head. While they tied her hands behind her back, the others engaged with steel.

Metal clashed against metal.

Arrows pierced flesh.

Lanster and King Nabal's knights charged. The bound woman was scooped onto horseback and brought to King Hermon, dropped at his feet.

"I will kill her!" King Hermon held a blade at the back of her neck. "Drop your weapons!"

The fighting stopped.

"Him," Ida said, pointing at the young man with the sword.

"Young wizard, you will come with me," the Mountain King said.

The girl moved fast. She grabbed the dagger from the male wizard's sheath. She spun around and drove the blade deep into his chest. The boy-wizard stared at her in disbelief. His eyes wide.

Blood spilled from his mouth. His hands went to the hilt. Before he could remove the blade, he fell over.

"Lanster. Check the boy!" King Hermon said, pressing the tip of the blade hard against the sack.

"What have you done?" The man with the bow and arrows dropped to his knees by the boy.

Lanster kicked the man away and set two fingers on the boy's neck. "Dead."

"You're sure? He's dead?"

"I know dead," Lanster said.

King Hermon looked at Ida. She furrowed her brow and shook her head.

"No matter. We have this one," he said. "Now give us the talismans and I will be on my way."

“We have no talismans,” the old man with the staff said.

“Is that so?” King Hermon said. “Kill the man with the bow!”

“She has them,” the young girl said, pointing at the wizard at his feet. “In her bag. She has the items you want.”

Ida pulled the bag away from the woman and dug around inside. “They are in here.”

“We have what we need?”

Ida nodded.

The Mountain King stared at the dead wizard. “A shame. Perhaps his death is for the best. Sebastian, you and the living Voyagers follow me. Lanster, you and your men kill these vermin, and then kill yourselves. I have no further need for your services.”

AS SOON AS the others rode away, Blodwyn moved like lightning. He swung his staff. It connected with the side of Lanster’s head, knocking off his helmet. He whirled around, and struck again. The other soldiers came at them.

Quill rolled over, picked up his bow and loosed arrow after arrow, until his quiver was empty.

Swords slashed and sliced. Blodwyn blocked blow after blow. He countered with thrusts, and whacks.

Quill used his blade, and fought close, stabbing easily at a range that all be rendered a broadsword useless.

Blood flowed. Screams finally ceased.

Completely drained of energy, Blodwyn and Quill stood among the strewn bodies.

Karyn had rolled Mykal onto his back, and was laying on top of him.

The dagger was beside his head.

“What were you thinking? What have you done? Look what you’ve done!” Quill shouted, stomping over those slain toward her.

Blodwyn grabbed his arm. “Wait.”

“Wait?” Quill scoffed.

“Watch.”

Karyn didn't move. She stayed splayed across Mykal's body. Her legs lined with his. Her arms, matching his.

“What is she doing?”

“I think she is... bringing him back from the dead,” Blodwyn said.

When Mykal coughed, and gasped for air, Blodwyn and Quill ran forward. They lifted Karyn off him.

“Hey, nephew, welcome back,” Quill said.

“Did I go somewhere?”

“I think she's dying,” Blodwyn said.

Quill helped Mykal up. They stood around Karyn.

Mykal knelt, and cradled her head in his lap. “How was she hurt? Who—”

“Mykal.” Karyn's eyes were open.

“Did she kill me? Did you stab me?”

“I couldn't let him have you. You're too important. You can save Galatia and the others.”

That man had kidnapped Galatia. “What others? What's wrong with you?”

“I was meant to save you. And I have. It took more out of me to do so, than I expected,” she said, offering up a thin smile. Her lips quivered. “He was right, but this is how it should be. You. Not me. I told him I'd save you.” She coughed.

“Who? Who did you tell?” Mykal said, brushing hair from her eyes.

“The man in my dreams. The man with no eyes.” Her hand went to her chest. She unfastened the opal broach. “My father gave this to me. I want you to have it. It is all I have left from him.”

Her eyes closed.

“Karyn,” Mykal said. The broach was in her hand; his hand covered hers. “Wake up. Karyn. Don't do this. Please. Don't leave me.”

“Mykal? Mykal, she's gone,” Blodwyn said.

“No. She's not. She used too much energy. She's resting.” She just needed time. Bringing him back wore her out.

“Mykal?”

He wasn't giving up. He wasn't setting her down. "I can save her. I can make this right."

Mykal closed his eyes. She had saved him. He could save her. He could rescue her from the grave. She wasn't going to slip away that easily. Concentrating, he conjured forth his power. He felt his own strength flowing from his entire body into his arms, down to his hands. The energy pulsed through his skin, and fired like lightning from his fingertips. A white-blue aura encased her corpse.

He cried, tears fell down his face. His lips moved but no words escaped them. His magic came from his mind. He willed her eyes open. He commanded her heart beat.

Her eyes remained closed. Her heart stayed still.

He did not know how much time passed. Minutes. Hours.

When he thought he might lose consciousness he stopped. He pulled her up close, arms around her. "I can't save you," he said. "I can't do what you did."

"She did what she needed to do. She kept you out of King Hermon's hands. We need to keep moving, son. We need to figure out what to do next." Blodwyn squatted across from Mykal. "This is not the end of everything. This is only the beginning. A war is coming. Many lives will be lost. There will be a time for tears. I'm afraid that right now is not that time."

"What are we supposed to do? Go after them?"

Quill shook his head. "We're going to bury the lady. Then, I think we should call on the one person who might be able to help us most."

"Who is that?" Mykal said.

"Your father," Quill said.

"I think there may be one other person we should contact," Blodwyn said.

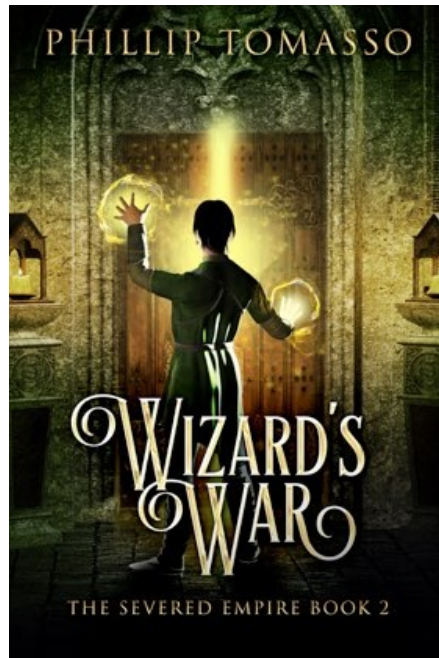
Mykal was speechless. Quill knew where his father was? He was going to see his father again.

"Who?" Quill said.

Blodwyn stared at Mykal, an unspoken apology in his eyes. "Your mother. She has been living with the Voyagers."

Next in the Series:

Wizard's War



To stop the Mountain King, the realms across land and sea must unify. But time is not on their side.

Mykal and his friends must warn King Nabal of the Mountain King's invasion of Grey Ashland and the rest of the Old Empire. This battle will involve more than knights and swords; magic has become the weapon of choice.

New to his craft, Mykal is unsure of his abilities as a wizard. His skill and resolve will soon be put to the test, as the flames of war threaten to engulf them all.

Wizard's War

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Phillip Tomasso lives in Rochester, NY, and is an Award Winning Author with over 18 published novels. After nearly two decades of working at the Eastman Kodak Company (1990-2008: the last 10 spent as an Employment Law Paralegal), Tomasso landed a job almost seven years ago working full time as a Fire & EMS Dispatcher for 911. When not writing, or reading, he enjoys playing guitar. He can keep the rhythm, but is a horrible singer. Admittedly, and also regrettably, Tomasso sings when he plays guitar. Tomasso's three grown children are his main inspiration. Currently, Tomasso is hard at work on several new novel projects. Be sure to stop by his website, and sign up for his blog to be kept up to date on his happenings, and follow him on Twitter for his often witty, if not more than often repetitive tweets. One of his favorite things in the world is emails from fans who have read his books, (and one of the saddest is receiving story ideas. He will not accept, or write story ideas if sent to him; will delete the email and pretend like he never saw it in the first place).

AN INVITATION TO READING GROUPS

I would like to extend an invitation to Reading Groups/Book Clubs/Schools across the country. Invite me to your group and I'll be happy to participate in your discussion (either in person or via Skype, Zoom or telephones with a speaker). You can arrange a date and time by emailing me at PTOM3@HOTMAIL.COM. I look forward to hearing from you.

To learn more about Phillip Tomasso, visit his [author page on Next Chapter's website](#).