

PROLOGUE

Rain poured over the palace drumming in time with the heartbeats of those sleeping inside. The wind howled as the Queen tossed her sleep. Visions flickered before her faster than could be understood. Milamare moaned.

Light flashed behind Milamare's eyelids. She jolted awake, breathing heavily. The images faded from her mind before she had a chance to catch them. She frowned and let them pass.

Rain pounded against the shutters. She reached across the bed and found it empty. Encharido must have been called away to deal with the refugee crisis. At least she hoped. She prayed it was unrelated to the country's new fear of magic.

Milamare stepped out of bed, her head still muddled. Thunder crashed outside. She rubbed a hand over her forehead and pulled a robe over her belly that was just starting to show. The court doctor was expecting another healthy boy, but she knew better. Her village healer had told her she carried twin girls strong in the Power. She rubbed absently at her stomach.

The lightning flashed again. A sharp pain formed behind her light eyes. She pressed a fist to her temple and massaged. Something twinged at the edge of her consciousness.

Milamare lit a candle and moved into her sitting room. Diana had fed the fire enough to burn through the

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night. The room was warm as she entered. The flickering flames bathed the room in shadows.

Staring into the flames further aggravated the pain growing behind her eyes. She gritted her teeth and pressed against her eye once more.

She muttered to the life growing inside her, “Is this your doing?”

Dread washed over her, weakening her knees. She clutched the edge of the credenza to her standing. Milamare asked, “What is it, girls?”

The wind outside picked up and screamed. Milamare could feel her Power strain against her control. It wanted freedom.

The shutters crashed open. Milamare jumped back with a yelp. Cold rain pelted the floor. The wind blew it into the fire, sending steam hissing into the air. Her Power pulled free and the wind gusted around her. The fire flickered out, plunging the room into darkness.

Milamare stood in the wind and rain, anxiety welling in her chest. She pressed a hand to her stomach. The lightning outside flashed, blinding her.

All at once, the memory of her dreams flooded her mind. Visions of portals to Mythral opening across the world. Dead walking. Destruction left the wake of both. A Necromancer with yellow eyes siphoning Power from others to bolster his own.

Visions flashed before her eyes in no particular order. Events changed, but the destruction of Ethota was certain. Milamare sank to the floor, breath gone from her lungs.

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It was hopeless. Those visions were more than a nightmare. They were too strong. She felt present in them. While she had never experienced the talent before, several of her ancestors were said to be gifted with Sight. The gods were blessing her with the future now.

Ethota was doomed.

She banded her arms around her torso, hugging her unborn children. She felt a faint flutter of movement inside. Then another.

The movement comforted Milamare. She could not give into despair. She could not roll over while her people were in danger.

She steeled herself and pushed herself to her feet. Milamare seized her Power and swept the shutters closed. Water pooled on the floor, but that was a problem for another time. She pulled her robe tight around her and relit the candle.

Milamare hurried from her room. She walked down the dark hallway, still full of activity. She ducked her head, avoiding the bows and enquiring stares of her servants.

Tomorrow they would gossip wondering where she was wandering to in the early hours of the night. It made her miss the village she had grown up in. She often felt like she didn't belong.

She brushed a hand over her stomach once more. She hoped her daughters felt more at home than she did. She hoped they would be accepted like Einar seemed to be.

Milamare stopped in front of a heavy door. She held up her hand but hesitated. She rubbed her raised hand

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against her forehead then rapped her knuckled firmly against the solid wood.

She didn't hear any noise from inside. She knocked again, more insistent. The door slit open a few moments later. A small round face hid in the shadows of the room. Only his eyes stared out at her like an owl.

Milamare blinked at the child.

A woman's voice came from inside, "What are you doing up?" The woman came into view. She glanced at the open door, "Your Highness?"

She put her arms on the child's shoulder and steered him back into the chambers, "Go back to bed, sweetheart."

The woman watched the child disappear. She turned back to Milamare. She stepped into the hallway and pulled the door mostly closed.

Milamare said, "Celindra. I need your help."



Milamare stroked the feathers of the falcon. It nipped playfully at her fingers. She guided the animal to window with the others. Rain continued to pound the stone outside. The birds squawked and jockeyed for better perches. Milamare stroked the disturbed creatures, calming them.

Celindra laid out herbs in a pattern on the ground. She held each to her lips and murmured words before placing them at points in a rune Milamare did not recognize. She lit the candles one by one. Lightnight

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crashed around them, but it never seemed to startle or rush the easy movements of the woman.

Celindra shoot out her punk stick. Smoke rose obscuring the woman's dark face. The light flickered in the room. Celindra looked up at the sky, "It is time, Your Majesty."

Milamare stood in the center of the rune. Celindra handed her a twig of sage. She slicked a minty oil over the queen's temples, "Focus on your intention. Lead my magic to its destination."

Milamare held the sage to her mouth and let the earth smell wash over her. She held in her mind the glimpses of the destruction and those who could stop of it. She envisioned a group of nine children – Mythral children- imbued with the power to prevent the visions she saw. She wasn't sure what form it would take, but trusted Celindra to make her desire a reality. She trusted the gods to guide their actions.

Celindra spoke a string of old Elva words. Milamare the Power in the room shift. The children inside her shifted as they too felt the magic swirl around them. Milamare did not dare deflect her thoughts from her task.

Celindra drew runes on the floor in soot around the queen. She held up two pinion features, plucked from the falcons and let the smoke from the candles coat the barbs. Celindra placed one feather at Milamare's feet and pressed the other between the queen's eyes.

Power swirled around the room. The life inside her moved rapidly inside her. Milamare felt her Power flare. The windows crashed open. Rain cascaded across the

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floor. The candles flared. Celindra continued muttering in old Elva.

Suddenly the woman pulled away. The flock of falcons rose as one and disappeared through the open window.

The room quieted. Celindra brushed the soot from her hand, “It is up to them now.”



A bird landed on a window ledge of a small house on a quiet street. It looked like any other animal except for a strange glow in its eyes.

A baby lay nestled in a cradle with a mobile of musical instruments circling lazily above her. She slept soundly with her parents nearby.

The bird tapped on the window with its beak twice. The light faded from its eyes and it took flight.

The glow settled over the child like stardust. The glow sank into her walnut skin, growing brighter and brighter.

A sharp flash of light encompassed the room as the glow disappeared.

The baby’s mother awoke and checked on the sleeping infant. She did not stir except to suck her thumb. Her mother reached over and rubbed the child’s back reassuringly, “Sleep well, Meredith.”

CHAPTER I

Akamon stood in the trees. His concentration focused perfectly on the spell he was conjuring. Black magic seeped up from the ground around him. The magic took the form of different creatures.

Akamon gave them an unspoken command. The creatures moved to different points around the forest and waited. The air reeked with the scent of the Elvateth. She was carrying something very dear to Akamon. He would find out who those humans were.

Jennica crept forward along the path. She muttered in elva connecting with the forest. The wind whistled urgently to her ears.

She had more acute senses in the human world. Everything in the realm had a voice. They were always speaking. None of the humans seemed to hear them. Whenever Jennica visited they assaulted her with their voices.

The wind tugged at her hair. Jennica ignored it. It pulled sharply at her. She realized it was trying to speak to her. She let go of her mental block. She listened carefully. The wind whispered, "Danger! In danger...Black magic!"

The wind whipped away from her, leaving the forest silent. Jennica slowly surveyed her surroundings. A shadow sat by a tree that did not belong. Jennica stared at it for a moment. The shadow pulsed. Jennica sprinted away as the shadow leapt toward her.

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The panther was stealthy. It kept pace just behind her. Jennica gritted her teeth. It was toying with her. The beast would attack her, but only after it tormented her.

Jennica whispered to the wind. She asked for it to rampage. The wind whispered listlessly around her. She cursed the human realm.

Her Power was useless. She could hear the voices, but she could not command anything as she could in Ethota.

Jennica raced down the dirt path. She had to make it to the *glaret*. If she could only get there in time. Jennica ducked behind a large tree. She grabbed her bow. She nocked an arrow.

The panther darted into the trees. Jennica didn't relax her bow. She watched the shadows. A shadow shifted in the trees. Jennica stepped out from her hiding spot. She carefully aimed and released.

The creature leapt from the tree. Her arrow slammed into its eye. The panther exploded. Black magic seeped into the ground.

Jennica gripped the bow in her fist satisfied. She listened to the wind. It beckoned her. She raced along the path. She would be able to make it before the *glaret* closed.

Akamon cursed. He clutched his walking stick, his knuckles turning white. Pain coursed through his body. He muttered curses under his breath.

Akamon ordered his creatures out amongst the trees. They quietly surrounded the fleeing girl. Akamon wanted those papers.

Jennica skidded to a stop. The spot did not look much different from the rest of the trail she had been following. Jennica tossed sand into the air before her.

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The air shimmered and pulsed. Jennica whispered words in old Elva. The portal opened. The old growth forest called to her. She took a step toward her home.

A growl pulled her back to the park in which she now stood. Another shadow creature stepped from the tree. The black magic creatures stepped out of the trees. The wolf howled at her. It swiped at her with its large paws.

Jennica glared at it. This was not the first time she had encountered its ilk. She took another step toward the open portal. A spider jumped in her path. It hissed.

Jennica pulled a small bronze ball from her belt. She kept her eyes locked on the two creatures before her. She cupped the bronze ball in her hand. She tapped it three times with a single finger.

Jennica glanced at the portal behind the spider. It reared at her. Jennica took a step backward and launched the ball into the portal.

The spider screeched. It released a web of silk after it. The ball slammed into the portal crackling as it passed between the worlds.

The black line of silk burned on contact with the pulsating portal. The spider writhed as the fire burst up the web and onto its abdomen. The spider fell.

The wolf leapt. Jennica stumbled backward. The wolf fell atop her. Jennica kicked the beast off her. She rose to her knees muttering in old Elva. She raised her arms above her head and dropped them.

The portal closed with a bang. The wolf sprang at her. Jennica rolled out of its way and jumped to her feet. The wolf clamped its jaws around her leg. Jennica fell to the

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ground, howling. She thrashed in its grip. Blood flowed from her lacerated leg.

Akamon stepped out of the trees. He waved his hand. His phantom creatures froze in place. They seemed to melt into the background like shadows. The wolf dropped Jennica.

Jennica pulled herself to her feet. She grimaced. Akamon simply looked in front of her. The spider moved to block her.

Jennica limped back. She frantically searched for an escape. With her damaged leg, she would not be able to outrun the creatures.

Akamon sneered. He moved with unexpected speed. He seized her by the neck. He demanded, "Where did you send it?"

Akamon dropped her. He turned his back to her, "Tell me and I won't have to harm you."

The wolf snapped its jaws in anticipation. Jennica rubbed her throat. She steadied herself on her damaged leg. She said, "Why would I ever tell you?"

Akamon spun. A dagger appeared in his hand. He pressed it into her neck. She gasped as the cool iron bit her skin.

He growled, "Let's try this again. What did it say?"

Jennica said nothing. Akamon laughed, "I am not afraid of hurting you, Princess."

Jennica winced as he nicked her skin. Jennica glared at him. Akamon threw her to the ground. The wolf stepped on her chest. It lapped at the trickle of blood on her neck

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Jennica turned away in disgust. He kneeled down at her side. He pressed the dagger to her throat once more, "Tell me or pay the price."

Jennica said, "Poor Akamon. You will search the world, but you will never find what you are looking for."

The old sorcerer's yellow eyes burned hot. He muttered in an old language. The creatures disappeared, pulling into a black ball hovering in his hand.

Akamon said, "Ah, yes. You should be afraid, Princess."

Jennica whispered to the wind. The wind whispered back. It cried for her.

Akamon pressed the black ball to Jennica's face. She screamed. Her screams echoed throughout the park.

Akamon stood over her limp body. He stared down at her and smiled.

CHAPTER II

Valerie slipped across the street. She ducked into the shadows. She shouldn't be out at this time. The donors said after six. But after six wasn't safe. It hadn't been for a few years now. How could they know?

Sure there were the gangs. There had always been gangs. But why would they take interest in a young social servant?

Valerie cursed for not asking for an earlier pickup. At twenty-three, she shouldn't have to take care of the homeless children of Detroit. She supposed she should be thankful for the city's shrinking population. That meant fewer people to care for. And fewer people to hide from.

Still, new kids arrived every day seeming to need food or clothes. Valerie didn't know what she was going to do. She sighed.

The violence had gotten worse the past few years. She thought that their town was going to be an exception. There was no way that the gangs could touch them. But they moved in. Their bloody wars caused people to move out. They fled to more civilized and boring places like Kansas. Businesses closed because they couldn't keep repairing the damages.

The police force tried cracking down. People just ended up dead on both sides. It was all just senseless death. Valerie was sick of it.

The government denounced the violence in the city. The National Guard was sent in to keep the peace. They essentially facilitated the evacuation of the city. The gangs moved in and took control.

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Valerie looked both ways as she crossed the street. There was no one around. No exposed predators.

Valerie slipped into the truck. She checked the back seat for unwanted guests. Some would call her paranoid. She knew this was the way to stay alive.

She turned the key in the ignition. Her headlights flashed on immediately. Valerie cringed.

She had one of the whiz kid mechanics dampen the noise of the engine so she could take it out during the night. She wished she had remembered to take the lights off automatic. She may as well have lit a beacon to her location.

Valerie switched the lights off. She slumped in her seat, looking around outside for any movement in the shadows.

Nothing.

Tonight seemed to be pretty uneventful.

Valerie slowly turned the car onto the next street. She kept the headlights off. She was careful as she passed into the next territory.

It was not difficult to tell. Brightly colored paint – delineating the gang - was splattered across the building front.

Valerie finally brought the car to a stop in front of a small building with a hand painted sign that read Helping Hands.

The building used to be an alternative bookstore slash coffee shop slash art shop. Now the store front housed around 30 homeless or forgotten youths. Valerie helped keep this makeshift youth home running along with some of the other senior members.

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She wrapped her knuckles on the side door. From the other side, she heard Jude ask, “Two become One?”

She replied, “As One become Two. Open up, Jude. I had a good run.”



Valerie stirred the eggs in the pan. She licked her fingers as she added pepper to the breakfast. She covered the pan, turning down the heat. She stretched and poured herself a cup of coffee.

Valerie called down the hall, “Soups up. Let’s go!”

She sat down at the kitchen table, waiting for her charges to arrive. She sipped her coffee, letting the caffeinated beverage wake her.

The sound of thundering feet alerted her to the oncoming children. The sound of bickering voices reached her before they did.

Jonny and his little sister Sara came through the door, arguing vehemently.

Valerie said, “Hold it!”

The kids quieted. She said, “What is going on?”

Sara said, “Jonny stole my pencils!”

Jonny said, “No, I didn’t! They are mine.”

Sara shook her head, the movement shaking her whole tiny frame, “No! I had the superhero ones!”

Valerie said, “Enough! Arguing siblings don’t get Back-to-School-Breakfast!”

They reluctantly fell silent. Valerie said, “Jonny, how about you give your sister half of the pencils? And I will

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get another pack. That way you both have them? Sound like a plan?"

Jonny swung his bright green backpack off his shoulder and slapped five unsharpened pencils into Sara's hand. She stuck her tongue out at him. Valerie said, "Don't push it guys. I haven't held up my end of the deal yet."

Sara snapped her mouth shut. She put the pencils into her pink ballerina backpack. They sat down at the table. Valerie asked, as she flipped a pancake onto a plate, "Where are the others?"

Sara shrugged as she absently kicked her feet. Jonny said, "Ruby is hogging the bathroom. She always takes forever!"

Valerie slid the plates of pancakes and eggs in front of the two kids. She pulled out the jug of orange juice. Sara whined, "I want milk!"

Valerie said, "And what do we say?"

Sara said, "Please?"

Valerie nodded, "You got it, Little Miss."

She put the drinks in front of the kids. She yelled down the hall, "Ruby! Carson! Ava!"

She heard a response from the bedrooms down the hall.

Valerie sat down and took a bite of eggs. She said, "They better hurry or you guys are going to be late for school."

Sara said worriedly, "Not on the first day! Jonny told me my teacher is mean."

Valerie shot a look at the boy. He looked down sheepishly. Valerie said, "Your brother is trying to scare you. Your teacher is good. I promise."

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Valerie looked up as her assistant, Josh, came into the room still in his pajamas. He rubbed his eyes. Valerie said, "Coffee is done."

He grunted in response, looking blankly around the kitchen. He pulled down a plate from the cabinet and began serving himself eggs. Valerie snatched the plate from him, "Hey! Those are for the kids!"

Josh said in a gravelly voice, "If they wanted eggs, they would be in here."

Sara and Jonny giggled quietly. Valerie shook her head at them. He said, "Besides, I'm the boss."

Valerie raised her eyebrows at him, handing him back the plate. He sat at the table, "Oh, you know what I mean."

Valerie took a sip of coffee and stood next to the door. She said, "Uh-huh."

She looked down the hall at the closed doors. She took a deep breath and yelled, "If you are not here at the count of ten, I'm letting Josh eat your breakfast!"

She heard movement from the room on the right.

"One...Two...Three..."

A door opened. Ava ran from the bathroom and into her room. She heard giggling between her and Ruby.

"Six...Seven...Eight..."

Another door opened. Carson sprinted toward the kitchen, his vibrant red hair bouncing. Ava trailed him. She stumbled on her untied shoelaces and was forced to stop to tie them. She frowned, pushing up her glasses.

"Ten."

Ruby exited her room slowly. She was done up in makeup and wearing heels. It looked more like she was headed for the catwalk than high school. All three

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teenagers stood before Valerie in the kitchen. She asked, "Aren't you guys forgetting something?"

Carson shrugged. Ava shook her head. Ruby scrolled through her phone. Josh said, his mouth full of eggs, "Backpacks."

Carson groaned. Ava smiled, moving to fix herself a plate. Ruby scoffed, "I'll get it later."

Valerie gave them pointed looks, "Eat up."

Valerie watched as the children chewed their pancakes. She smiled from behind her coffee cup. They were good kids. She was proud of the progress they were making.

She whisked away the plates. Carson said, his mouth full, "I wasn't done!"

Valerie said, "Go! Come on. You don't want to miss the bus!"

The kids ran in opposite directions, grabbing their school supplies. Josh ushered them out the front door.

Ava bumped into a girl with a knit hat. The girl stepped back, looking mock horrified at the drops of split drink.

Ava said, "Sorry Meredith! Got to get to school."

Meredith shook off her wet hand, "Learn a lot! Give them Hell."

Valerie propped open the door. She said, "I was wondering where you were at."

Meredith shrugged, "I just didn't like my hair today, you know?"

Valerie tossed her curly locks, "Can't relate."

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Meredith continued unabashed, “So I had to find my hat. It was under my bed. Silly cat must have drug it under there. And then I had to get my morning fix.”

She inhaled deeply though the lid of her disposable cup.

Valerie smirked, “Addict.”

Meredith raised a single eyebrow, “You’re one to talk.”

Valerie sighed, pushing away from the door. She said, “Come on. We have a donation to unpack.”

CHAPTER III

The horse stamped its hooves restlessly in the cool air. Donichello's breath fogged in front of him. He hated waiting for his wife to return from the human realm. These missions had grown dangerous the past year. Each time she left it felt as if there was a hole in his life. He wasn't always sure if or when she would return. Worse yet, their daughter did not understand why Jennica was away for so long.

Donichello placed a hand on the horse's flank, whispering reassurances. She would be home soon.

Jennica had been passing between Ethota and what the Elves called Mythral for almost a year now. The gods had tasked her with joining the two worlds.

For years, natural portals developed and closed across Ethota. The portals would appear for a time before closing again and opening in a new place. The portals were seemingly random, but Avery assured him that they were developing a map. Jennica scoured the realm studying their properties. Her life had been constant motion since her sister took the throne.

Donichello sighed and stared at the *glaret*. The portal shimmered under the moon. It was unstable.

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It faded in and out. Jennica had to return soon or she would be trapped in Mythral.

The horse snorted and stamped its hooves once more. Dread filled Donichello. It settled in his stomach. Jennica could be impulsive. She had cut her returns close, but this was not like her. She should be here by now. Donichello held onto the horse's reins. He scanned the forest around him. Could she be playing a trick on him?

He saw nothing but blackness. The forest stared back impassively. He dismounted and wandered toward the dark tree line.

The *glaret* gurgled and popped. Donichello whipped back around. The portal exploded with light. The horse kicked and reared. The creature yanked the reins from Donichello's hands. It ran down the path away from the noise.

He blinked, fighting against the green spots. The shimmer of magic was no longer present. The portal had sealed itself. Jennica had not returned.

He took a step toward the closed *glaret*. His boot sent something rolling across the uneven ground. In the low light, a small bronze ball glinted and dinged off of rocks.

Donichello scrambled after the orb. He picked it up. It didn't have any dents or grooves. It meant nothing to him, but it was the only clue he had. Something had gone wrong.

Donichello pocketed the orb and whistled for his mount. The horse reluctantly returned. Donichello mounted.

The moons had just begun to set as Donichello approached Mestchester. He did not stop as he burst through the city gates. He galloped through the quiet gates of the four boroughs.

He pulled back at the closed palace gates. A guard stared at him from under his helmet. He said, "Announce yourself!"

Donichello pulled his hood back. He shouted a greeting. The guard scrambled to open the gate. His horse frisked impatiently. Donichello nodded to the men as he raced past.

Donichello dismounted as servants rushed him. He handed the reins off to the stable boy and asked to be shown to Sammaria. The servant shied away from him.

Donichello brushed past him and continued to the queen's quarters. Her maid Narcissi was exiting the halls as he approached. He demanded to be shown to Sammaria.

Narcissi bowed low. She led him to the queen's personal shrine.

Donichello did not wait for Narcissi to speak with the queen. He threw open the doors and walked briskly up the aisle.

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Sammaria turned away from her offerings. She watched him passively as he moved toward her.

Sammaria said, "Donichello, my brother. It has been too long."

Donichello stared at her. He suddenly felt at loss for words.

Sammaria guided him to a bench. She sat saying, "You look weary. Come take a rest."

Donichello shook his head, "I don't need rest. Is Jennica here?"

Sammaria cocked her head. She said slowly, "I have not seen her in weeks. Why?"

Donichello replied, "She didn't come home."

Sammaria pursed her lips, "This may not be a problem. It has happened before. There is much that she needs to do. This is uncharted water."

"She always lets me know."

Sammaria eyed him, "True."

Donichello reached into his pack. He pulled out a bronze orb. He handed it to Sammaria, "This is the only thing I found."

Sammaria felt along the ball. It was completely smooth, "What is it? Are you sure it is from her? It looks like a toy."

"I am not certain. Jennica went in search of what she called the Papers. She said it would be sealed in a place with no doors. If she could not return, she would want this passed on to Averyon."

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Sammara asked, panic creeping into her voice, “Is there a reason she would not be able to return?”

Donichello replied, “She told me she felt like someone was watching her.”

Sammara asked, “Who could do something to her?”

Donichello replied, “Her Power is useless there. You know that.”

Sammara said, “Still, she is Elvateth among humans. How could she be overpowered?”



Averyon sat next to the fire. Girls twirled with bright scarves. He watched them and took a long sip of the draft in his cup. Still his eyes searched the room.

He thought about how his life had changed the past few years. Two years ago, he had mocked the village storyteller, not knowing it was the sister of the queen. She had not punished his insolence. Instead, she asked him to join in her divine mission to reunite Ethota and Mythral. That was one of the many duties he had come to do for the royal family.

His eyes kept trailing back to the girl in the center. Her dark hair glistened in the low light. She gyrated along to the sound of the drum. The

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brightly colored skirt she wore billowed as she spun.

Avery sat back as the dark haired girl's eyes flirted with him. He looked past her to the man sitting at the table in the shadow. His dark face looked around suspiciously. He raised his hand for another glass of ale.

This was the reason that he was here. The man's name was Rutendi. He was a diplomat from Ancefra. Intelligence had placed him as a close personal friend of King Malcom de' Jenginald. If anyone had information concerning retaliation plans, this man would know.

Officially Prince Morlyn had been denounced for the assassination attempts on Queen Sammaria and Princess Jennica. However, King Malcolm was a vengeful man. He saw the death as an insult to his country. Two years had only increased the king's fury. Talks of compensation and peace had all but disintegrated.

This diplomat had come seemingly unbeknownst to his king. He came claiming to have information regarding the plans to assist Queen Sammaria. He bore news of an Ancefran blockage on Dragonian trade routes.

The man had spent the day speaking with the queen. He had tried to fill her head with reassurances that Ancefra would never attack this

country. That King Malcolm wished to only send a message. Once this blockade was executed and lifted, peace could be declared. Sammaria had sent Avery to find out why this man was really here.

The dark haired girl spun once more. She bowed to the clapping crowd along with the two other girls in her troop. Avery winked at her. She turned up her nose at him. The dark haired girl walked over to Rutendi and sat down.

The man seemed uncomfortable at first. However, Yari had a way of making a man feel at ease. Her exotic life allowed her to talk to all classes of people. Everyone who dined with this girl felt special to be graced by the famous dancer.

Rutendi leaned forward enthralled by the way Yari's lips lilted over her words. He fed her fruit and bought her expensive wine. Avery could see the magic she spun. This was not magic like the Elementals. This was the magic of making a person feel like they were the most important thing in the world.

It wasn't long before Yari was sitting on Rutendi's lap. She was no doubt telling him about the time she had hunted stags in Ancefra. Avery noted that her hands slid into his jacket pocket and out. A piece of paper was folded in her hand. She slipped it under the plate of finished food.

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Avery approached the table. He picked up the plate and left the inn. Avery slipped the paper into his pocket. He would read this sealed envelope when it was safe. For now, he had to make sure he was not followed. And that Yari returned unharmed.

Avery picked his way across the streets to the inn where he and Yari were staying. He had met this woman six months ago in Pilleetain. She had tried to seduce him and steal his coin purse. Instead of turning her in, they had agreed to a partnership. Avery called on Yari whenever he needed pockets inconspicuously emptied.

Avery stepped in the doors of the inn and walked up the stairs to his room. This was not the nicest inn in the town. However, it was quiet. People would not think to look for a gentleman here.

Once behind latched doors, Avery opened the document Yari had lifted. The document contained the official de' Jenginald seal.

The diplomat's claim that he had sneaked out of Ancefra had been a lie. This was addressed to Rutendi. It allowed the man to raise a rebellion in the king's name. It gave permission to kill Sammaria and claim land.

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Avery folded the paper. He slipped it into his coat pocket. He flexed his fingers. He would have to tell Rekasi at once.

Avery jumped at the rap on his window. He waited for the accompanying taps.

It was Yari. He unlatched the window and she vaulted in. She smiled saying, "Did you get what you needed? Is that man going to destroy the country?"

Avery stared at her blankly.

She said, "You are going to have to tell me the purpose of all this eventually. Maybe I'll stop answering your pleas."

Avery said, "You know all you need to. How many times do I have to tell you to stop pressing?"

Yari rolled her eyes and slid out of her skirt. Avery turned around.

Yari sighed again, "I know how you watch me dance. People would love to watch me change."

Avery said, "We are professionals, Yari. The only thing I want from you are the documents people hide."

CHAPTER IV

Donichello stepped into the room. The bed was covered by long drapes. Donichello pushed one aside and perched on the edge of the bed. Miliama lay quietly in the bed, her chest rising and falling.

Donichello watched his daughter sleep. She looked so much like her mother. She had inherited the Aeradal jaw and shape of eyes. But beneath her fluttering eyelids were the sweetest pair of brown eyes Donichello had ever seen. She had inherited his Earth Power. Miliama rolled onto her side. Her pointed ear poked out through her thick brown hair, a color somewhere in between her two parents.

An enormous weight settled on his chest. How was he going to tell his three-year-old daughter that her mother was not coming home? The tears he had held back for so long finally gave way. They rolled down his cheek.

“Daddy?”

Donichello looked down. Miliama stared up at him with her brown eyes. The human word sounded strange on her lips. He was surprised she remembered it. She asked, “Why you cry?”

Donichello wiped the tears from his cheek. He said, “I’m not crying, Sweetie.”

DARRAH STEFFEN

Miliama stared at him. She had the same intense glare as her mother. Donichello smiled in the dark. She asked, “Where’s Mother?”

“Come here, Love.”

Miliama crawled out from under the covers and sat on her father’s lap. She wiped a tear from his cheek.

“I need to tell you something.”

Miliama looked up at him, her eyes curious and trusting.

He looked at the paintings on the wall, “You see Miliama. Mother isn’t coming home.”

Miliama asked, “Home? Is she going to the beach?”

“No she...”

He stopped, shaking his head. How could he make his child understand?

Miliama shuddered in his arms. A strange sensation gripped his chest. He looked around. A cloudy mist surrounded him. Miliama held his hand. She pulled him forward.

They walked across dry grass. The forest around them did not look like Dragonia at all. Footsteps crunched the dry grass.

Donichello picked up his daughter and pulled her down behind the brush. An elderly man passed their hiding place. He growled behind him, “Bring her in.”

KEEPERS OF KNOWLEDGE

Two men emerged from the trees. Between them slumped a woman. Her legs dragged along the ground. Her head rolled to the side. Donichello caught a glimpse of her face before the men pulled her into the castle before them. Donichello whispered, “Jennica!”

The door slammed shut. Miliama screamed. Donichello tried shushing her. He picked her up. She continued to scream.

The same pulling sensation gripped his chest. The scene swirled before him.

Miliama wailed. He opened his eyes. Miliama was sitting on his lap. Her mouth twisted as she cried. Donichello’s body grew weak. She had inherited her mother’s ability of Sight.

He hugged her to his chest, “It’s alright. Open your eyes. I’m here.”

She looked up at him. Her eyes rolled back into her head. She was burning up.

The door creaked as it opened. Donichello looked up. He pulled Miliama tighter to his chest.

Sammaria stood there uncertainly. Her long, blonde hair framed her face. She pulled at her night clothes clinging to her with sweat. She asked, “What’s happening? I was told there was screaming.”

Donichello said, “She is burning up! What do we do?”

DARRAH STEFFEN

Sammaria moved to her niece's side. She felt her forehead.

Donichello said, "She pulled me into a Sight State. I don't think it's ever happened to her before."

Sammaria looked at Donichello, panic in her eyes. He knew she had seen this before. She said, "Get me some water. We need to cool her down."

Donichello raced from the room. Sammaria stripped Miliama down. She wiped the sweat from the small girl's body.

Miliama moaned. Sammaria fanned the girl's face. She writhed on the sheet before releasing a moan and laying exhausted. Sammaria did not respond when Donichello returned with a dish. Sammaria bathed the girl with the cool water. Miliama seemed to move closer to the water. She breathed, "Mother!"

Her back arched. She screamed, "Away!"

Her eyes flicked open. They rolled forward and seemed to go dim. Donichello watched as they began to glow a bright white. She was entering Sight State again.

Donichello held Sammaria back. Miliama's mouth started moving. Her voice seemed to be lost for a moment. She said, "Chains! Evil! Stop! Daddy! He's hurting Mother!"

Miliama rolled to her side and convulsed.

KEEPERS OF KNOWLEDGE

Donichello squeezed his eyes shut. Salty tears ran down his face.

“Akamon, stop!” screamed Miliama.

Donichello and Sammaria looked at each other with wide eyes. Sammaria said, “There has to be a mistake.”

Donichello said, “Sight State does not lie.”

A sob worked its way out of Donichello’s throat. Miliama fell silent. He closed his eyes.

Sammaria said his name. He opened his eyes and looked at her. She said, “Let me go.”

He looked down. He was gripping her forearms so tight his knuckles were white. He let go. The image of his hands slowly faded from her skin. He said, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

Sammaria watched him. She said, “It’s fine.”

Sammaria washed the sweat from Miliama’s body. Sammaria said, “She is still burning up. We need to get her temperature down.”

Donichello whispered his daughter’s name. Sammaria said, “Hold this to her forehead.”

Donichello held Miliama’s soaked nightgown to her forehead. He said, “Please come out of this.”

Sammaria shook her head, “I don’t understand it. She’s getting worse.”

Donichello asked, “Is she going to die?”

Sammaria shook her head, “I don’t know!”

DARRAH STEFFEN

Miliama arched her back moaning and laid still.

Sammaria checked the girl's pulse. The rapid thready beat pulsed under her fingers.

Sammaria swept to the door. She spoke to the maid standing guard. The girl looked terrified. Sammaria sent her on her way.

She turned back to Miliama. Sammaria said, "I called a healer."

She handed Donichello a new nightgown. Donichello put the dress over his daughter's head. Miliama's eyes flicked open. She screamed as her eyes met her father's.

Sammaria screamed, "Let go!"

Donichello felt the pulling in his chest. They landed in the middle of a city. A cry pulled them towards an alley. Someone ran down the street. As they got closer, Miliama broke from Donichello's grip and ran toward her. She squealed, "Momma!"

Donichello grabbed his daughter and pulled her back.

He recognized his wife. He reached out for her. She fell to the ground. Donichello watched in horror as a dark figure appeared above her. She looked up frightened. The man said, "Everything you fought for now dies!"

He pulled out a dagger. Jennica's eyes widened. The man's hands were almost dust.

KEEPERS OF KNOWLEDGE

Jennica braced herself, “It’ll never die. You’ve already lost. Can’t you see that? Look around you. You have no power anymore.”

The man cackled. Miliama whimpered and hid behind Donichello.

The man looked around the alley. Jennica started to back away. The dark figure’s eyes rested on Miliama. The man chuckled a dark laugh.

Donichello shielded his daughter. Confusion penetrated him. He thought they were invisible.

The figure said, “I don’t think you understand. You failed.”

The man seized Jennica and pulled her forward.

He hissed, “We have a visitor. Someone very dear to you I believe. You won’t be able to resist me when I use her.”

The man dropped Jennica and walked toward Donichello and Miliama. Jennica looked at her family. She called Miliama’s name.

Miliama screamed, tears running down her face. She pulled on Donichello’s hand. He pulled her back as she tried to run to Jennica’s side. Donichello picked her up, running from the alley.

The man’s footsteps grew louder behind him. Jennica cried out in old Elva, “Rilas.”

Relief flooded Donichello as the scene blurred in front of him.

DARRAH STEFFEN

Donichello opened his eyes. His daughter lay still next to him. Her chest convulsed with shallow breaths.

Sammaria steadied him. Donichello gripped her arms. He said, “Jennica-”

Sammaria said, “Later. Miliama needs to stop going into the Sight State. Uncontrolled it could kill her. We need to stabilize her breathing.”

An idea formed in Donichello’s mind, “Where’s Armanda?”

“In the Star Room.”

Donichello rushed out of his daughter’s chambers. He sprinted to Armanda’s room. Donichello pounded on the door till she opened it. Her face was alarmed as she opened her door.

He seized her wrist and pulled her down the hall, “Miliama needs you. Come!”

They sprinted back to the girl’s room. Armanda examined Miliama. She controlled the air intake and release of the three-year-old.

Miliama’s body shuddered. Her pained face became peaceful. Her breathing turned to normal. Her eyes flickered open.

The glossy eyes returned to normal. Donichello sighed in relief. He hugged his daughter close.

Donichello whispered, “Thank you Kiro! Oh, Kiro thank you.”

