



Prologue

Cara squinted through the gale, cursing the day she accepted her Gift of magik. For all the good her golden healing magik was worth, nothing stopped her body shaking from the deep chill. Her ears—pale, pointed, red-tipped—poked out from auburn hair frosted with rime. She rubbed her thumb and forefinger together absently to encourage a sliver of feeling.

Air whipped around the summit of the mountain and Cara's feet skidded across the slick, spiraling path. She climbed while flanked by two Silver Elvish guards from the castle nestled into the base of the bare mountain. A Silver man and woman shuffled a few paces ahead, heads bowed against the gale.

If Cara dared look down the unforgiving cliff to her left, she could just see the lush green valley below between breaks in the unrelenting storm.

At the base of the mountain, carved stone outlined the fortress of Ûnsigra where the rock had been manipulated by elvish scariyai Gifted with mineral magik. The castle housed one of the greatest scholarly institutions in the realm and offered its services to human and elf both. Those willing to learn were granted sanctuary. It was for the potential

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knowledge within those stone walls that Cara bothered volunteering for this trek up the mountain. That is, if she survived this perilous hike.

She squinted at the two guards clad in smooth iron. Through the flurry of snow, she made out gold leaves inlaid into their metal shoulder plates. Steel glinted at their hips and elegant wood bows were string across their backs, hewn from the Greywood forests in the south. Their backs were straight with the tell-tale pride of the eastern Silver Elves, their noses always tilted up in the presence of Amber Elves like Cara.

Beneath the guards' forged metal was fabric, tightly sewn to defend against the cold. Two braids circled their heads in the style traditionally worn by Northern Aideillians.

Cara wrapped her thick cloak tighter. Neatly cut wraps and tinctures in small glass vials pressed into her ribs, threatening to throw her off balance. Every muscle ached. She found herself repeating an old Farindor nursery rhyme to pass the time of a forest that walked and a queen who commanded it. She would give anything for the softness of the forest floor. Anything to be rid of the precarious mountain trail and blustering winds. The additional weight from all the options she wouldn't use only made her body scream more. The head scholar of Ûnsigra had insisted that her pockets be filled with the best academy had to offer. *Just in case*, he had said, nose up and beady eyes staring down at her through narrow spectacles. His reasoning was that a healer needed all instruments available to her. She should not rely on the Gift of magik alone, channeled as it was through a little gemstone.

A tiny pop sounded under Cara's armpit as a flute of nectar cracked from the force of her shivering. *These vials will be the first to go*, Cara thought, tucking in her chin, and pressing on. Ûnsigra medicine—all

Aideillian medicine, for that matter—fetched a handsome amount of gold rykes at market, more that she could expect to see in a year’s wages.

The delicate figure dropped back to Cara’s side. Madame Kyenz-eihra, the woman Cara was hired to aid, rested a hand on her swollen belly and shuddered. The elvish woman was in her late thirties, an age considered early adulthood for the Silver Elves. If all went smoothly, Madame Kyenz-eihra would look the exact same in eighty years, maybe longer since she was Gifted. But none, her lips trembled from the climb and her breathing came in long stressed pauses. Her husband slowed his pace until he was able to wrap an arm around her back to keep her from slipping down the mountain.

Though Cara couldn’t alleviate her own discomfort, she linked her arm through Madame Kyenz-eihra’s. As a healer, she felt the woman’s pain as her own, despite the many layers of hides and furs between them. A prick of warmth at Cara’s sternum was followed by a golden light that passed from Cara’s arm to the other woman.

“Madame Kyenz-eihra,” Cara said encouragingly. “Violet, you can make it. Just a little further.”

The Silver guards, having trudged on ahead, paused to look back. Cara waved them on through the snow. “We’re coming.”

The Ûnsigra guard had offered a feeble escort to protect the pregnant Silver Elf and her husband as they scaled the cliffs of Keystones, the name of the ghastly mountain. Recent riots in outlying castles along the Auran River had consumed the fort’s resources, before even accounting for the ongoing thirty year war waging between Aideil and its western enemy.

A particularly vicious wall of snow and wind slammed into the band of elves. Cara shifted Violet closer to the cliff wall and away from the deadly drop. In doing so, Cara felt a string unravel around her waist and

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winned as a bound parcel of dried herbs slid away, vanishing before she could untangle her arms and grasp it. Both women had prayed that the storm would ease up prior to the climb, but the four-hundred-year-old blizzard hadn't answered their pleas.

Some Aideillian law decreed that in order for a first-born child of elvish nobility to be declared legitimate, the mother was to bathe in the faërfalls at the top of the mountain, the pools tucked away, deep within the rock, accessible only from a single tunnel that opened at the pinnacle of Keystones. The faërfalls would offer a glimpse into the bloodline's future. An assurance to the High Council that there would be Gifted children, or reason to convict. A successful journey wiped past transgressions clean and would situate the Kyenz family back into high society after the scandal of their union.

If Aideil didn't have such a stringent class system that restricted love, Cara would never have had to put on more clothing than a merchant peddler had in the back of their wagon at a winter market. But tradition was tradition and the long-lived elves were not about to change their ways now. As it was, Cara found herself counting the rykes each step forward made her and her twin sister.

The path ahead widened, the slope tapering off to near flat.

Stepping onto the plateau, the snow froze, each flake floating suspended in the air. The blizzard raged a few paces behind them, but on that stretch of ice-coated stone was an eerie cloud. Even Cara's breath hung in a suspended frozen sphere in front of her nose.

If the maps were accurate, they'd find a cave nestled in a nook a few lengths ahead. From what Cara could see, there was only a dark silhouette of sheetrock that promised ancient magiks and prophecies.

Cara glanced at the woman at her side and suppressed a shudder of emptiness as her body regenerated the healing magik she had used to soothe Madame Kyenz-eihra. Vialett didn't look particularly fond of the weather either, her face mirroring Cara's own thoughts.

Vialett's mouth moved, and Cara nearly missed her murmured words. "No matter what the waters reveal, Sky give me strength to raise this child in love, without the prejudice that will be forced upon them. Give me the strength to shape them with integrity and grow them into a being worthy of serving the Old Throne."

The words were tinged with sorrow. It was a prayer to the High Elvish gods of old, reminiscent of a time long past, when magik flowed into all living beings and a High Elf sat on the Old Throne of Alagana.

The distance to the mouth of the cave shortened. Cara bit her tongue to keep from whispering the words in Ancient Elvish that Vialett would have to say to request entrance. The woman knew her duty. Cara need not pester her, and risk angering the Guardian. If the Guardian be willing, Cara and Madame Kyenz-eihra would enter the mountain alone. There was some magik woven into the stone that only female elves could enter without physical Trials. Men endured all manner of tests until they were broken. *Thank the Old King I wasn't born a man*, Cara thought with a shiver.

A cold grey slab of stone angled into a pitch-black crevice. The entrance to the cave of Keystones tunneled into darkness so solid that it gave Cara vertigo. A mottled wolfhound sat on a slight ripple at the base of the entrance. The Guardian of Keystones. The sketches the scholars had shown her when she volunteered did not do justice to the sheer size of the beast. Its paws were rough and splintered from centuries of patrolling the mountain. Patches of fur had been seared off with fire that

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burned to the bone. Decades of souls darkened its eyes and a long tail of thick black fur wrapped across its feet. On its haunches, the wolfhound towered four heads above the two Ûnsigra guards who both dropped to a knee and bowed their heads.

Cara shrank back, releasing Viallett's arm. The hound's inky eyes had the same color as the ocean floor. Within the course of a slow blink, the wolfhound saw into her. The creature was magik itself. Every fiber of its being was woven from the magik that built the realms. And it devoured her thoughts. It inhaled her darkest secrets and fears. How she was too young to be accompanying a Lord of Aideil and his wife on a journey that could bless them as surely as it could condemn them. Cara's twin sister's face flashed before her, laughing, then crumbled to ashes. Then it was over. No physical pain. The wolfhound retreated from her mind and its attention shifted elsewhere.

She felt a brief squeeze on her arm where Viallett comforted her. The two women shared every uncertainty of what lay ahead, and approached the Guardian of Keystones.

Viallett dipped into a low bow, her knee brushing the snow. A snowflake melted on the blue gem of her earring with the faintest pulse of magik. Cara shifted her gaze away from the conduit of a Gifted water lily. The Silver Elvish woman took care to look directly into the Guardian's eyes, likely experiencing a similar analysis of her past. Cara flinched down into a similar bow a moment later.

"Guardian, anointed by trial and set to protect the faërfalls of the Sky," Viallett began. "I, Viallett Kyenz-eihra, ask pardon for the blessing of Sight upon my child and bloodline to be."

A deep rumbling echoed off the planes of stone as the wolfhound replied. "And this is all you ask?"

"Yes." Her voice did not waiver, a feat that Cara would not be confident of in herself. *Another reason to return to Hågenveibr Forest*, Cara thought to herself.

The wolfhound shifted its weight forward. Dense muscle clenched as it rose onto all fours. The Guardian lowered its head level with Vialett's. The woman met its gaze, her breath fogging in front of her.

Cara felt the shift then, from a Trial to an aura of peace. The scarred eyes of the Guardian did not threaten them, as they did not threaten it. The wolfhound opened its jaws. Long pearl-white canines curled down inches from Vialett's forehead. There was a shuffling of footsteps behind them as Lord Kyenz started forward, stopped by the two Únsigra guards.

A delicate paw rested on Vialett's shoulder. Cara's body was frozen to the spot, but she gathered a kernel of healing magik into her chest. Just in case.

The tips of the wolfhound's canines brushed against Vialett's wild hair. Its warm breath melted the ice that had built up around the crown of her head.

"To you, my little water sprite, you may enter." The wolfhound's voice was of nature and of the wind, soft and deep. The voice of ancient magik. The tiny sapphire that pierced Vialett's right ear glowed in response. Cara felt her own amber gemstone warm as well.

Both women released a long breath and stood as the Guardian stepped to the side, the cave open.

Looking back, Cara glimpsed the three male elves shifting snowdrifts to form a shelter. The Guardian of Keystones circled the mouth of the cave, resting, finally, as motionless as the mountain around it.

The Silver Elf and Amber healer left the white light of the mountain, engulfed in an atmosphere of oppressive darkness. Light by torch was

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futile due to the strong draft that spiraled around them at regular intervals. The two relied on touch to guide them along ice-coated walls.

Their journey twisted and dipped, carrying them deep into the mountain. Soon Cara became truly lost. The walls gradually lost their icy coating. The stone tunnel dried, smooth rock emanating warmth. A pale blue-green light radiated where their hands touched, casting shadows that danced on the walls around them. The passageway narrowed drastically. Their thick cloaks were left abandoned in the dim light.

The heavy silence made Cara twitchy and restless. She preferred the constant buzz of life as it existed in the forest. Insects and rustling and the scraping of tree branches. This silence seeped into her mind. "What do you imagine is at the end of this tunnel?" she finally asked. "What will it look like? I could never get a definitive answer."

Vialett took a moment to think. "I suppose..." Her words drifted off as the path took a sharp left turn. Ahead, the tunnel emanated its own light, clear and crystal.

Beyond was a vast cavern. The ceiling glittered with the reflections of luminescent water ripples and stones. Stalactites reached down toward undisturbed water that flickered with greens, blues, and purples. Silky ribbons of water fanned out from minuscule holes up above and tumbled over rocks at the far end of the cave. Whenever a tendril of water landed on a rock, a soft burst of light emitted from that spot. The falls were divided into one main pool and then a multitude of separated pools of various depths.

It was like nothing Cara had ever dreamed of. She felt her magik sing and soar through the currents of energy that flowed through the space. Each pool flickered a different color. A single vial of this water would prove invaluable, leading her kingdom into a new era of medicine

and magikal studies . This had to be one of the only places left that maintained its magik over the centuries, when every other aspect of life dulled and magik faded.

Vialett unwound her forest green wrap. She handed the fabric to Cara and stood before the pools with not but a breast bind and loosely fitted cream under layer.

She made her way into the waters. The rocks ignited into color under her feet, a speckle of light dancing across the stone. When she was waist deep, Vialett dipped her head beneath the surface. The pool spiraled with pearly coils of magik and encased her body.

Cara's eyes were transfixed. Threads of magik and swirls of color reflected in her eyes. She fingered a leftover glass vial she hadn't surrendered in the tunnel with her thick fur coat. It was the greatest honor in Aideil for a healer to be accepted for the Keystone Journey, and a rite of passage for the famed Farindor healers. She was the youngest healer to have been selected and Cara vowed to take in every detail to share with her twin.

After a smooth dip into the water, Cara tucked the filled flute of water in her belt. With so much raw energy around her, Cara pinched a strand of magik from a drop from a stalactite. She expanded her range of power and linked to the Silver Elf. Her amber ring glowed in response. To monitor what Vialett saw and when Cara needed to pull her from the waters, she needed to keep a constant stream of linking magik flowing. Once they left the mountain, Cara would never speak of what she witnessed through the eyes of the pregnant elf, as was the agreement.

Cara counted the minutes as they passed, only wanting to dip into her bond with the water lily and encroach on the privacy of the vision if utterly necessary. Some elves ventured too deep into the waters and were lost to the mountain.

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She rubbed the cloth of her tunic between her fingers. Time was up. Viallett didn't come out of the pools of her own accord. Bubbles surfaced, disrupting the pool's glassy surface.

Cara abandoned her clothing at the lip of the pool and dove down. She wrapped her arms around Viallett and kicked up. Later, she would wonder how deep these pools went for Viallett to have been so far down.

She snapped her fingers once they were at the edge of the water, simultaneously laying down the shivering elf. A spark of daisy yellow magik ignited. Cara's palms heated, and she blew on the spark until her hands glowed with a vibrant golden light.

The healer placed her hands on Madame Kyenz-eihra's stomach and circled across her torso in runic patterns. Her blood raced from fear, a knot curling in her stomach. A kernel of doubt seeded—was the rune correct?

Cara allowed for the panic to take hold and she poured more of herself into the magik. More power flowed through her hands than she had ever accessed, almost as if the waters themselves were amplifying her Gift.

She swallowed and dragged a finger up from the diaphragm to Viallett's chin. The familiar aching chill of expending her stored magik spread up her shoulder, leaving gooseflesh in its wake.

Viallett's eyes flew open with a ragged breath. Alive, Cara released her own breath. She felt Madame Kyenz-eihra's skin warm and cheeks flush. The elf leveled a steely gaze on the healer and Cara saw crackling strength in the woman's eyes. The water lily shoved the vision down the bond and burned it into Cara's mind.

"She must never come to use magik, or she will destroy us all."



Chapter One

Spring bloomed in the elvish capital of Aideil in all manner of glory. White and light pink flowers nestled in dense beds of moss while warm light streaked through the thick canopy above. Vines raced up the trunks of trees that towered up and out hundreds of feet into the air, the branches fading away into the clouds.

Eyolin waved away a cascade of pollen falling from the archway above her and swerved to avoid a wooden wagon teetering precariously on the road that spanned the width and length of the tree branch. Normally, the limbs of the city were wide enough to carry two to three wagons comfortably, but that morning every avenue and bridge was packed with merchants hoping to establish themselves among the deep pockets of the elvish aristocracy. For today was a day of celebration. Or it was for the rest of the city's residents.

Tiny birds dipped and fluttered overhead, dropping tiny trinkets for children to grab madly at. Eyolin's hand plucked one from the air and examined the little soldier with his fist raised victoriously. She tipped it into the cupped hands of a young child with slenderly pointed ears and silver hair.

Cheers and raised voices yipped and hollered from each of the five levels of the city, from the gates on the ground, to the fifth tier bridges that were nestled near the crown of the trees.

Two more birds carrying beiythron-made children toys rustled a wall of flowering ivy. Eyolin shook her head in a muffled sneeze, her light brown curls poking out of their loose braid. She would rejoice the day when the bark of the city wasn't coated in a film of glittering allergies. There was a time when Eyolin and her sister would have dragged their mother out into the market on the first day after the new moon of springtime. It appeared slowly as a figure moving toward her through fog might. Her raven-haired sister in a cream-colored fitted blouse fastened down with handmade armor and an old, beat-up cloak. A bag of spare change for the postman and a red strand of licorice. That was before—all before.

A dull throb pounded the back of Eyolin's eyelids, and the mist cleared. She thought of her family distantly, as though those memories were a dream, and she routinely woke up to cruel reality. She had a loving home once, a mother and a sister and a father. But one day they were all gone.

A posse of young Academy students barreled past her, ducking beneath the wagons in a coordinated slide. The boy at the back, an elf no more than twelve, poked a slim blade into the canvas cover of the merchant's wagon, retrieving a fat plum, before disappearing into the throng. Eyolin smirked to herself; she would have done something similar.

Bracing a hand on the wagon to prevent her feet from slipping over the edge of the branch, she maneuvered against the flow of stalled traffic.

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Officers in spotless armor blocked any progression further up into the city's tiers, demanding papers and declarations of wares.

Eyolin pulled her hand out of her pocket and bit into a plum with a smile.

A shop window flew open in front of Eyolin as she turned a corner, the wooden shutter missing her head by a hair. If not for the natural swiftness of a Silver Elf, she would be nursing a nasty bump.

She straightened and glared at the shopkeeper. Any ill-mannered retort dissolved on the tip of her tongue as she met the gaze of an old man with wrinkled, human skin, showing his years plainly in the crow's feet that peeked out of the corners of his eyes.

"Careful, little one. Almost got you before the big parade." He spoke in a rasp and blinked a handful of times to clear his milky eyes.

Eyolin glanced inside the shop and her stomach flipped. Rows of letter boxes lined walls of honey-colored wood. She cursed herself softly for allowing her feet to carry her to the spot of her latest daydream. Twelve years she had avoided the postman's shop, the very smell of damp paper a bitter reminder of a life lost.

She fiddled with the two bronze rykes in her pocket. It was enough, she knew, to cover a search of archived letters. Or enough to send a bird out to locate a sister who did not want to be found.

Her eyes snagged on the scars in the wood that stuck out like blood on blanching wool. Nausea swelled and this time the memory could not be pushed down.

Two scariyai worked on the exterior of the post shop, their vibrant cloaks glinting with silk patterns unique to the magik-wielders they adorned.

Each of their hands glowed a dim, luminescent green as they wove a protective nature spell to keep the trees that supported the city alive and healthy.

The larger of the two scariyai released a breath and stood, brushing off the bark from his knees. He turned his head and beamed down at seven-year-old Eyolin, her head still a bit too big on her small body.

"Mageiyro, Mageiyro!" Eyolin squealed, hopping and grinning.

"How is my little warrior today?" Mageiyro asked. He held her out at arm's length in a good-humored assessment and nodded. Eyolin pulled her fists into her sides and stood tall.

"Ah, yes. Magnificent form. Crotha," he conceded. Eyolin released her fists having been given the formal command to relax and bounced back and forth in pride. "You should be very proud of your little sister, Arden. She has the makings of a fine soldier," he added with a wink. "Though your progress at the Academy is not to be overlooked. Your aptitude for knives and cryptology is most impressive."

The figure of Eyolin's older sister Arden came into view. She had their father's long, angular face with almond eyes and a lean, stringy figure. Even at her young age, Arden scowled with years of accumulated distaste.

Eyes narrow, she responded, "Very fine, Scariyai Mageiyro. Though Academy discipline is sorely lacking. Nothing gets done."

The scariyai regarded them both before speaking. "Things were different when magik was stronger in the world. Elves had their Gifts as an outlet, with a purpose. Now Gifts are mere trifles, if that, and used for the petty vices of war, a disgrace. An elf's blood needs drive, to create."

"Enough blood has been spent." Arden had Eyolin by the arm and was directing her into the shop away from the knowing gaze of the magik-wielder.

"Indeed."

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Eyolin blinked her eyes to clear the past from the present, finding herself to have slid down the outside of the post shop with her knees tucked to her chest. These images were too clear, too lifelike to be a dream, weren't they? But they existed only in her mind. A result of too many years spent on her own.

The whinnying of a pony brought Eyolin's attention back to the tree-road. A dark-skinned Amber Elf wrestled the steed forward, the animal unused to the web of bridges and branches. Their saddle was piled high with tent fabric and woven baskets of the grassland kingdom of Aniöm. Farther down the road, a tanned Gold Elf from the seas of Velesah strode with an entourage of lesser magikal servants with skin the color of the plum Eyolin had stolen. A syket, if Eyolin remembered correctly, though she had never seen one in person. She couldn't get a good look at them, for large sacks weighed down on their backs.

She lost sight of the sykets as a barefooted couple spun into the avenue, breathless and disheveled. A sickly sweetness wafted off them. Eyolin recognized it as dwarvish spirits. The couple's joy carried them through the crowds toward the heart of the market where the parade was set to end in a giant celebration.

Trumpets blared twelve times and Eyolin bolted, arms pumping with a sudden burst of adrenaline. The events following the fanfare were bound to bring patrons, and she would be thrown out of her slimy bar of employment in an instant if she didn't show up on time.

Glancing up through the tiers she realized there was no way she would make it to the middle tier before the soldiers got there.

Without another thought, Eyolin dove into a narrow cranny between a spiraling staircase and a low hanging bridge linking two tiers of the city. She squeezed through, shuffling sideways as she went. The bark

was rough against her scratchy clothes, the knees already thinning to the point of needing a patch.

Her hand reached up instinctively, finding a notch in the wood where she could start the climb. If only her mother could see her now, she thought bitterly. Her little girl scrambling up the side of a tree of Mainwood like an animal. There was a law somewhere about climbing unregulated parts of the city, but frankly, she'd never been caught and therefore, the rule didn't apply.

Eyolin rested a third of the way to the middle tier, her grip on the wood unwavering. Every avenue, branch, and bridge were packed shoulder-to-shoulder with the citizens of Mainwood. Soldiers in glistening armor led groomed horses through the throngs, their grins wide and helmets off. Perhaps a dozen scariyai walked in their patterned robes, having little use for the metal of the scarox and foot soldiers. Not when their elemental Gifts could shield them much more efficiently. Eyolin glimpsed a scattering of scarox with what looked like an entire armory strapped to their backs.

Ever so slowly, the militia spiraled up the tiers. Those they passed dipped their heads with tears of gratitude on their cheeks. Children searched the ranks of soldiers from the shoulders of their mothers, scanning for a familiar face. Eyolin tore her eyes away, her arms shaking from holding her body flush against the tree and climbed the last lengths to the middle tier.

Eyolin dipped her head behind the counter of the pub, only half a horn late, and twisted a platter of sparkling elvish wines and olives onto her shoulder. A basket of crisps sat half-eaten at her back as she moved

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toward the packed tables of customers taking a break from the hypnotic symphonies of celebrations out in the main square.

She passed a table of Aideillian officers lounging along the far wall. Their attire, clean but worn and scratchy, singled them out as members of an outlying township or castle rather than the elaborate elite who lived and trained in the capital. Mainwood was the heart of the kingdom. Without it, there would be no governance. No order.

A pile of roughly polished helmets toppled over, the sound making her flinch. She needed focus. Eyolin drowned out the buzz of business, listening instead to the exchange of words at each table. She was behind on paying the owner of the bar her due in exchange for his silence and discretion. He'd caught her stealing from him. When she'd begged her tears dry he'd offered her a chance. Just one. She'd been living that chance for years, despite how taxing it was on the meager earnings she made.

She did quick arithmetic. One more moon and she would have enough to purchase a decayed plot that sat on the lowest elvish tier of the city. It had once been a family home until the magik that sustained the branch died. It was possibly the only place in that tree-city where magik had no foothold. And that was precisely where she wanted to live.

She'd prepared lies about a tragic journey from the war-ridden grasslands and her aspirations in the welcoming branches of Mainwood. A new name. A new identity. Every detail was prepared for the moment her chest of rykes was full. No more seedy half-elvish men whose jowls were larger than even the laziest of hounds. One more grand lie.

Two slender Silver men slid past Eyolin and out into the thoroughfare of afternoon revelry, their torsos tapered and clothed in spider silk, the overlapping panels fluttering in the gentle breeze. Nobility, Eyolin noted from the star insignia that adorned the cuffs of their sleeves. The lineage

of an elf was strength, for with it one could claim the power of the stars—of the gods and High Elves of old. Of magik.

Eyolin stopped finally at a table of three men with their boots propped on the flat space between them. Their helmets lay discarded by their chairs, along with their weapons. Half-elves, Eyolin deduced with a sniff. And of the kind a woman wouldn't want to run into at night. There was a stark divide between the elves of the higher branches and those who lived below. Most would say it was due to the concentration of magik that prolonged the lives of the three elvish races. Others said that humans were only ever meant to be ruled, hence the lack of magik they attracted.

A human woman employed by the barman straddled the soldier on the left. She wore a dress that consisted of two panels of black fabric, connected by a strip of cloth bound around the waist. The woman ground against the officer and tossed her hair from side to side. The officer heeded her little notice, being rather engaged in the smooth conversation in the Aideillian dialect with his companions.

"They're waiting for us to turn our backs on them, Huebeck and Īsteldûr," said the one in the middle, looking particularly bug-like with his pointed ears sticking out from his head, his face consumed by wide eyes.

Eyolin's ears perked up and she schooled her features. Odd that they would mention the kingdom of Īsteldûr, whose ruler had started the forty-year War of Uhura only to vanish and surrender the fortnight prior, leaving Aideil and her allies victorious. Eyolin had to admit that there was something off about it all but couldn't bring herself to care.

"You don't think the peace will last?" the third soldier mumbled, almost as if to himself.

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"You didn't see Annjeih Castle, but I was there," the middle bug replied, hungrily. "They were winning. You must've not heard the commanders talking about deserting, running somewhere—I don't know, into the mountains."

"The Mendian Mountains? But those have been cursed ever since the dwarves disappeared," the right soldier said through a mouthful of olives.

"Why not go to Huebeck? Surely a bunch of fine Silver Elvish deserters would be welcomed into the underground sand cities. Everyone there is a mercenary or a murderer."

The soldier on the left spoke up at last, his fingers circling the woman's lower back as she ground harder—closer to a dog on a tree, Eyolin noted absently. "If they survived the labyrinth of tunnels filled with unimaginable beasts, the warlords of the desert would mount their heads on spikes for their sand-caea to feast on."

"Not to mention," the bug chattered eagerly, "Huebeck and İsteldûr have always stood on the same side of conflict. Magnogogue would doubtlessly go to the High Lord of Huebeck for aid. Wouldn't want to get caught there as an Aideillian."

"Magnogogue has been receiving aid from other sources of late," the soldier with the woman said. "Other realms whisper in his ear, pulling his soul from the land of the living."

Eyolin dropped off the sparkling wines and dipped away from the table, filing away the snippets of information to be traded later. An empty vial slipped beneath her belt, the clear powder it once contained now dissolved in the three flutes of wine already near empty in the hands of the soldiers.

"You truly are my best investment," the owner said with a clap on Eyolin's shoulder as she returned to the bar to refill her tray. She fought back the urge to cringe away from the film of slime on his meaty palms. "I don't care what you do or how you do it, as long as you keep our patrons paying."

Eyolin turned away from his wink with a pinched smile and slipped away before he remembered her dues. He believed she spiked drinks to keep people addicted and buying. The untraceable and illegal powder simply muted an elf's ability to keep their mouth shut. Words bought power. When one was incapable of keeping secrets, what was said could be converted into gold rykes. Eyolin only drugged elvish men who couldn't keep their hands to themselves, those who treated the staff with self-righteous biases. She excelled at identifying the good ones from the rotten. And if she got it wrong and they grew a spine the next day, it was a bar in the largest city of Aideil. Getting drugged was bound to happen.

She twisted through the crowded space toward a table near the entrance. The elves there wore sleek dress robes in black, beige, and dark green, their silken hair brushing past their shoulders. Young fourth or fifth tier aristocrats, Eyolin figured. Ages anywhere under two hundred from how smooth their skin was. They observed other tables and the crowds beyond the open widows with haughty prejudice, leering down straight noses.

"Anyone up for a trip to the ground?" The elf in black asked.

"On market day?" the beige-robed elf replied. "And risk a slapped wrist for tormenting the humans? Say when, brother."

Sensing his intention to stand, Eyolin stepped down on the corner of beige cloth pooled on the floor. She kept her weight on the ball of her foot as she bent the tray toward the table.

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The elf stood as she anticipated, pitching backward as he stumbled on the caught robe. Eyolin fumbled the tray, feigning clumsiness, the short glasses of amber liquid clattering across the table. Hands moving swiftly, she righted each of the three glasses before they could spill all over the robes that cost the equivalent of her entire savings.

A long string of flavorful expletives tore out of the elf's pretty little mouth and Eyolin hurried to put on a frightened face.

The beige-robed elf's face reddened with fury, his eyes falling on the bowed barmaid.

It was the man in dark green that met Eyolin's gaze from where she stood bowed over the table. Her heart leapt to her throat; the fear no longer wholly fake. He was the same perfectly molded Silver aristocrat that she encountered daily, every surface decadent and flawless. Black hair and crystal blue eyes almost white. But there was a hungry glint that bore into her, raking across every decision she ever made and acting as executioner. He knew—something. Anything, if it damned her. Her most guarded secret felt projected on her outstretched hands.

When the beige-robed elf gripped her by the back to the neck, her breath hitched. Still, the white eyes of the seated man bore into her. She was lost in them. They betrayed an endless sort of wisdom, one that Eyolin could never comprehend.

Eyolin felt the grip on her neck tighten and her back straightened involuntarily. The corner of the beige robe was still lodged underneath her muddy shoes. The elf was yelling at her, yet she didn't hear one word. She was lost deep within the gaze of the severe blue-white eyed man.

A rush of fear as chilling as a frosty wind raised the hair on her arms. The ice settled on her skin as sure as snow and prickled painfully. Some-

thing wrong oozed from the elf who held her captive with his penetrating look.

It was an inner voice almost lost to her that confirmed what perturbed her so.

Magik.

She flicked her eyes around his collar and hands. No gemstone was immediately visible, though the marking of a Gifted elf could be beneath his green robe.

Eyolin had enough sense to jerk away from the fuming elf holding her by the neck, flicking her arm back to dislodge the man. She swiped the tray from the table and batted the shoulder of the standing elf. She disappeared into the crowd before any of them could pursue.

She meandered back to her table of drugged soldiers an hour or so later, their laughter heightened as they swapped war stories.

There was not only one but three human women swaying in front of the soldiers. A growing stack of bronze rykes piled on the corner closest to the scantily clad women.

"What do you think of the news of the border cities?" It was the bug-eyed elf who spoke, always the inquisitive one. "You think it's Īsteldûr?"

The man on the right eyed the women with his bottom lip between his teeth. Eyolin watched his hands slide up and down his thighs with barely contained restraint. This wasn't the proper venue for what he wanted to do.

"Raids and kidnappings isn't a tactic the great necromancer is likely to sully himself with. He's more of a..." the elvish man tore his eyes away from the three human whores in front of him, noticing Eyolin tiptoeing up to the table. His eyes narrowed, void of the prior haze of bliss.

"More of a what, sir?" Eyolin chirped before her mind could catch up to her mouth. She hastily cleared away the empty wine glasses, replacing them with full ones. She turned to leave when his voice stopped her again.

"Magnogogue," he replied, his eyes shadowed. "High Throne of Īsteldûr, the last true Gifted fire scariyai. Some might even call him the Heir of Matthieus, of the Old Throne." He paused, letting the words sink in as if Eyolin should have any idea what he was talking about. A bunch of High Elvish religious hokum and old news.

"Oh, he's the necromancer," Eyolin guessed, her tone a tad condescending. "We still won. He's gone, crawled back into whatever hole in a volcano he came from."

Once again, Eyolin winced internally. Her mouth ran off on her. This man was too far involved with this line of inquiry for her to pull back now.

"One of many, girl," the man growled. "The border between the realms is slipping. For centuries now, as magik grows weaker, things drip into our realm from the others. With Gifts fading, where else does power turn to? Dealing with the hell realm comes at a cost. But where will we be when those that dip into dark necromantic arts learn to not only create tears in the realms but also control what comes out?"

Eyolin felt the eyes of the white-eyed aristocrat boring into her skull. Magik may fade, but it will always exist. The five realms were created from magik. From magik life comes, without it nothing remains. It was the first thing they taught her during her two short years at the Academy. The reason anyone exists at all. And the reason so many do not. Magik.

The soldier flicked a ryke from the top of the stack meant for the whores. Eyolin snatched it from the air, not daring to take her eyes off him.

"To cease your questions," he spat. A gold ryke balanced in between his knuckles. Eyolin eyed the metal coin hungrily but backed away with a slight bow. He pressed the ryke into the thin strip of cloth at the nearest whore's waist. "We're leaving. The girl here will clean up."

His two companions sputtered into their nearly full glasses of sparkling elvish wine. The man on the right whispered into his whore's ear, her face blushing. She maneuvered around the crowded table to the wall, her arms straining under the weight of the soldiers' helmets and belts.

Eyolin melted into the crowd once more, losing sight of the trio tipping back wine like water.