

Mage of Monsters

ELITE MAGE

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Michael William Goodman

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DEDICATION

Welcome back, readers. I hope this is your second adventure into Micah Ridel's life and the Elite Mage series. Thank you for coming back into my worlds. I'm looking forward to sharing this new adventure.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I want to thank my wife for always supporting me. I also want to thank my father, who acted as my editor and publisher. Thank you for putting up with all the edits and changes that I made throughout this book.

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CHAPTER

1

Our footsteps echoed off the grimy walls of the dimly lit alleyway, the only sound that could be heard over the huffing and puffing of my partner running next to me. I was impressed that he was keeping up so well; we had been running for a few miles now. Sweat beaded on my forehead, but now was not the time to take a break. We were closing in on our prey.

The sun beamed down from high noon but never seemed to fully light up the slums that we sprinted through. It was a strange curse that hovered over the area like a cloud of misfortune affecting the buildings and people. We hurdled past a few unlucky souls that had been relegated to these musty streets. A low hiss vibrated off the dirty walls just ahead of us, followed by the loud shriek of a bystander letting us know we were getting close.

"You go right, I go left," I said, slowing down and looking at my partner. His face was beet red, and he was drenched in sweat.

Jason looked as average as they come, and not in a bad way. He has a plain face with shaggy brown hair and matching eyes. When I first met him 6 months ago, he was a police officer who quickly became a friend as we worked together to catch a serial killer/eco-terrorist organization plotting to destroy the city.

"Alright. Be careful," he said breathlessly before taking off to the right side. I felt a tiny hint of pride as I watched him run off in the opposite direction. As a police officer, he kept fit but still had a thin frame, and his stamina was, let's just say, a weak point. In the last six months, he had put on over 50 pounds of muscle and seriously increased his stamina.

I turned away from him and shot to the left. Without having to slow myself down for Jason, I increased my speed tenfold. I hurdled a few broken crates that blocked my way, glancing from side to side for any clue of our prey. We were pursuing a juvenile basilisk that had been 'accidentally' released from captivity by an amateur black-market dealer.

Luckily, it was only a baby, but it was still far from harmless. Since its release three days ago, eight people have been attacked. Half had partial petrification, and the others had minor scratches and bite marks. One guy got his index finger bit off by the little monster, and since it ate the finger, he was going to have to make do without one less digit.

The escape happened in the business district behind a rather well-known black-market front. The only reason that it hadn't been shut down yet was because they were good at hiding their deeds. Thanks to the little escape artist, the police force was already raiding the place. But that was their job. Mine was just to get the creature off the streets.

We had been tracking the basilisk by following the attacks, which took us into the slums. Word reached us after the first attack and we have been searching high and low since then. The first real lead came half an hour ago when we ran into a dwarf who swore up and down that he saw it running in this direction. I was initially skeptical since he looked drunk at noon on a Tuesday, but it looked like he had been telling the truth.

"The little bastard can run," I said under my breath as I came to a stop at the end of the alley. It opened into what I assumed was a road once, but the few remaining cobblestones were cracked and uneven. Given that it was midday and the street was empty, I doubted this road got much, if any, traffic.

I closed my eyes briefly and reached inside of me, feeling for a source of power. I found it in my head, a small core of energy that pulsed, giving off a warmth to it. The mana core felt like a tsunami of power held inside of a flimsy balloon, just waiting to break free.

Mana was something that was all around us. It moved in and out of everyone and everything, even the air we breathe. It was the power of the world itself. Some people, like me, were able to tap into this power through a source inside the body that acted as a channeling point. We called these spots mana cores. Not everyone had a core; even if you did, it took a lot of time, practice, and skill to use.

Being able to use mana gave us the power to do

unimaginable things. We could create fire from our hands, move the very ground around us, and even affect the weather. It didn't make us all-powerful. We were still bound by the laws of physics and the world, but we were able to accomplish many incredible things.

Most people's core is located in the lower abdomen or around their hearts. Mine was a little unique. It was in my head. Thanks to this, I had the unique ability to see the flow of mana in the world around me.

I tugged gently on the core of power, pulling a thread of mana, letting it wash over my eyes. A warmth radiated from them. As I opened my eyes, the world became sharper and more defined. The dimly lit street seemed brighter and livelier. I could see the details of every brick on the crumbling houses and see the dust accumulated in every crack. I didn't just gain the ability to see better. Tendrils of colored mists, invisible to the normal eye, floated in the alley. Greens, blues, and yellows danced across the walls as the mana floated through the world before me. It was incredibly beautiful to see the world in its purest form. A world only I could see. I shook my head and looked around. This was not the time to sightsee.

I scanned the slums, looking for anything out of the ordinary. Since basilisks used magic to petrify their victims, there was a chance that I could see traces of its magic. I looked for any mana that seemed like it wasn't supposed to be there. A small smile spread across my lips as my eyes fell on a patch of silver that sparked and sputtered from the ground. Compared to the free-floating ambient mana of the world around, this was stuck to the ground like a footprint.

"Got you," I said, stepping toward the odd mana.

There was another patch further down the alley across the street—first one, then two, and more. I began to run again, sprinting through the slums, following the footprints left behind by the creature. At first, the patches of mana were weak, almost translucent, but as I picked up speed, they began to get clearer and easier to see. I was gaining on the little bastard.

I couldn't help but sprint faster, trying my best to catch up

to the basilisk as excitement bubbled up inside. This was the fun part of my job. Sure, the investigating, searching, and learning were all good, but there was a part of me that lived for the fight. The moments when I had to face off against the bad guy and fight, most times for survival. It was thrilling and, honestly, what I looked forward to the most.

It took another 10 minutes of constant running before I finally saw a glimpse of the monster. A scaled tail disappeared into a broken window as I rounded the corner and turned down another alley. I slid to a stop in front of the building.

I closed my eyes, pulling a stream of mana into my right arm as I raised it over my head. Magic works by visualization. Two mages could cast the same spell, and the results would differ based on how they imagined it. What I wanted was fire, a warm sputtering fire of oranges and reds like a sparkler I played with as a child. Once the image of that flame was burned into my mind, I spoke.

“Firebolt,” I commanded the magic. An inch above the palm of my hand, a bright flame came to life. There was a tug of energy as my mana turned into fire and shot into the air. It cleared the short buildings, exploding into a small fireworks show. That should be enough to get Jason’s attention.

I turned back to the house. There was no time to wait for him to get here. If I waited, the little creature could escape again. The house looked abandoned. Old, partially rotted wood covered the mismatched, broken windows. A door was barely hanging on its hinges, too weak to creak anymore. I grabbed the rotting wood, gently pulling it to the side. The rusted hinges groaned in pain. A small split appeared on the single hinge holding up the door. I pulled the door further, just enough to get inside. Somehow, the old metal held on for dear life. I released the door and slipped in, not trusting it to open wider.

The floor creaked under my feet, threatening to give out. Nowhere seemed safe to step. It sounded exactly the way you would expect an old, rundown house to sound. The boarded-up windows offered less light than the dim streets outside. Even with the mana in my eyes enhancing my vision, it was

still difficult to see anything.

I slowly moved deeper into the abandoned house. The inside was even more run-down than the exterior. Hugging the walls seemed slightly safer than trudging through the center of the collapsing room. I didn't feel like sneaking through the home empty-handed and reached into my jacket pocket, pulling out a tool I created specifically to catch the little creature.

The basilisk was a monster that lived in dark, damp places like caves or sewers. Because of this, they adapted large, wide eyes to help them see in little to no light. It was also how they used their petrification magic. That means that the basilisk relied heavily on its vision, and because of that, it was also its greatest weakness. The best way to catch it was to temporarily blind it.

The magical tool I created was made from an old lightbulb. The smooth glass surface had been meticulously scratched into a pattern of old runes. I filled the inside of the bulb with a glob of hardened amber filled with a fine powder. The powder was a mix of dried fire salamander liver and the ground-up wings of a large firefly native to Cavalon, one of the adjacent worlds to both Etherra and Relexit where we were today. While I had never seen one in person, the fireflies could grow to the size of a medium dog, and their glowing end was as bright as a lighthouse.

With the tool in hand, I walked deeper into the dark house, looking around for any signs of the monster. The building was all but empty; only a few broken cabinets stood in what I assumed was once a kitchen. It was on top of one of the decrepit cabinets that I finally found the little beast. The mana in my eyes showed a large blob of silver sputtering magic that popped and sizzled in unison with an angry hiss.

I released the magic and blinked back the water that welled up in them. Eyes were never meant to be enhanced like that, and while I could do it, holding it too long caused pain with the potential of damage. I stayed frozen in place as my vision cleared, and I got my first look at the basilisk. It was a small creature, maybe about the size of a basketball, but long and

angular. A pair of thin bird legs held its scaled body in the air like some sick, twisted cross between a snake and a chicken. It had a yellow beak filled with razor-sharp teeth that had taken the poor man's finger during its little vacation. The creature was weary of me and rose up, opening the bat-like wings on its back and letting out a vicious little hiss.

"No reason to get so pissy. I wasn't the one that went around biting and petrifying people," I said to it in a gentle tone, holding the light bulb in front of me like a treat offered to a dog. It hissed in response, reeling back, keeping its distance from me. It may be a beast, but it wasn't stupid. It knew I wasn't a friend.

I jeered at the creature as it backed deeper above the cabinet. It may be a monster, but I didn't want to kill it. My goal was to capture it alive with as little damage to it and myself as possible. The magic flashbang would do the trick, but then I would need to climb up there and grab it. I was shocked that the cabinets were holding this guy's weight, there is no way I could get it easily.

"Come on, you little bastard," I said louder. It sank into the shadows of the cabinet.

We were in a stalemate, neither of us wanting to make the first move. I racked my brain for something to do. Since I wanted it alive and well, most magic was thrown out of the window. I could grab it with raw mana, but if the creature thrashed too much, it would get hurt.

BANG!

Both the basilisk and I jumped at the sound of the door snapping from its hinges and crashing to the ground. The crash was followed by a yelp that could only come from Jason's mouth, echoing through the silent house.

The basilisk let out a nasty screech and launched off the cabinet at me, using its wings to glide through the air. As soon as it moved, I pushed mana from my core, down my arm, and into the bulb. I felt it absorb my mana, draining from my body like a sponge. The runes etched into the glass began to glow a bright white as the amber blob inside cracked.

I tossed the bulb into the air, clamping my eyelids shut as

tight as possible. A bright flash of light lit up the room, hurting even through my closed eyes. The basilisk screamed from somewhere in front of me, followed by a loud thump on the ground. Jason screamed from behind me, cursing about the power of the sun, letting me know my plan had worked.

"You alive back there, Jason," I asked over my shoulder as the light began to fade, and I opened my eyes.

"Fuck! A little warning would have been nice. I can't see a damn thing." There was evident anger in Jason's voice. I bit my tongue. There was a part of me that wanted to snap back and tell him that he was the one that barged in here, but we had bigger things to worry about.

The basilisk was on the ground, squawking in pain as it flopped around. It was kind of annoying that a week of searching was done in a flash, literally, but hey, my job was done.

"Jason, give me the bag," I said, turning to see Jason bent over with his hands over his eyes. He rolled the bag off his shoulders and tossed it at me, blinking rapidly. The bag sailed to the left and hit the wall before thudding to the ground. I couldn't blame him since he was temporarily blind.

I walked over to it and unzipped the top, upending the contents at my feet. A silver chain-linked blanket clattered on the floor. It had a good weight to it and was often used in catching smaller creatures. I had taken this off a black-market dealer specializing in magical beasts a month ago when I busted him for the illegal sale of live mandrake root.

I opened the blanket like a net and tossed it over the basilisk, which was still flopping around like a fish out of water. I scooped the creature up inside before closing the top of the bag.

"It is done?" Jason asked, blinking aggressively and waving his hand in front of his face.

"Yup. I got the little bastard." I said, walking over to him. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah, vision is coming back, so I think I'll be fine." He was a little bitter still, but we got what we came for.

"You sure you are good?" I asked, looking him over.

“Yeah, just help me up,” he said, holding out a hand. I grabbed it and pulled him to his feet. “Thanks.”

We both exited the building. Loud crashing behind us made us both spin around. The basilisk hissed angrily in the bag that was now thrown over my shoulder. The poor excuse of a kitchen that we had just left crashed to the ground in a plume of dust.

“Perfect timing,” I said, glad that we hadn’t been caught in that mess.

“Agree.” Jason was still squinting, but it looked like his vision was coming back quickly. I walked slowly so he could keep up. After a block or two, he was back to his big-eyed self. “You taking that away?”

“Yeah,” I said, not looking at him. There were a few things that Jason and I disagreed on. Even if he quit the police department, that didn’t mean that he lost the pride that came with the job. Because of that, he disliked the less-than-legal things that I was allowed to do as part of my job. This was one of them. “Meet you back at the office?”

“Fine,” he said quickly and turned away, heading back toward the city center.

I liked having him around, but sometimes, it was easier to move without him. I also needed to stop by the police station and let the police captain, Captain Eleanor, know that the threat was gone. He may not have said anything, but I could tell that since leaving, Jason has avoided meeting any of his old colleagues. I watched Jason round the corner before I took off at a light jog, feeling the basilisk hiss angrily from over my shoulder as it was jostled around.

The uneven and practically nonexistent streets began to slowly come together as I headed toward the ‘nicer’ parts of the city. Still in the slums, it was sad how much nicer the road and buildings got as I ran. After a few minutes, the ghost town started to come alive, with people moving in and out of buildings. While the streets might be getting livelier, this was still the slums. People of all races shuffled through the streets. An elf with pointed ears and flawless hair was dressed in torn oversized clothes while an ogre stumbled by either drunk or

high, possibly both.

I rounded the final corner onto the nicest street I had been on thus far and where my destination was. The Spider's Nest was the largest and nicest bar in the slums. It seemed to stand out compared to the broken down and deserted buildings that sat to either side. It had a fresh coat of black paint and not a speck of dust in the patio filled with tables and benches.

I wasn't here for a spot of day drinking. The Spiders Nest wasn't just a bar; it was a black-market headquarters. It also happened to be owned by an acquaintance of mine, Black Widow. Well, acquaintance was a bit of a stretch. We had made a deal when I first arrived in the city to help each other out from time to time. We had a business relationship at best.

When I said I was returning the monster to the proper place, that was kind of a lie. There was no reason to turn it over to the authorities; they wouldn't know what to do with it, and since it had attacked people, it would most likely be killed. On the other hand, giving it to Black Widow meant that I would get a little bit of money out of it as well.

Now, others might find it odd that someone who worked for the government and directly with the police force was also working with the black market. And they would be right, for most cases. I was a little different. I was an Elite Mage.

Elite Mages were the special forces of everything magical. We were tasked by the government to handle all magical threats. Everything from magical terrorism to the purchase and sale of magical goods fell into our jurisdiction. That gave us a lot of special privileges, including the ability to use the black market from time to time. And maybe getting some extra cash for returning the basilisk was stretching the reach of my power a bit, but it was harmless.

Since it was midday, the popular bar was relatively empty, which I preferred. Unlike the rest of the slums, the outside area was clean, with ten picnic tables that would be filled with customers in a few hours. The light purple door, which always seemed to be unlocked, pushed open with ease. As I entered the dimly lit bar, I was met with a wave of musty smoke.

The bar wasn't completely empty, but there were less than

ten customers. Behind the bar was the only redeeming part of the Spiders Nest, the beautiful Arachne Sasha. She was a sight for sore eyes. Her long black hair was draped over her shoulders. Her lower half was the back end of a spider with eight spindly legs that helped her bounce between the thick webs that connected the first and second-floor bars.

"Morning, Sasha," I said, walking up to the bar.

"Good morning, love. What brings you in today?" She asked sweetly. She was always flirtatious with me, and I can't say that I didn't like it.

"I brought a gift for the Widow," I said, gesturing to the blanket I was carrying. "It's the basilisk that was causing a scene the past couple of days."

"I see. The Widow will be pleased." Sasha snapped her fingers at a man who sat in the corner. He stood up at the motion and walked over to us. He was an 8-foot-tall ogre with grey skin and rippling muscles. Small tusks stuck up from his bottom lip, giving him a constant sneer. I had met him once before when I raided a rival black market dealer's place six months ago, but we had never exchanged names. Without a word, he reached over and took the bag from me, glancing inside at the hissing monster.

"Thanks," I said to the ogre, who turned away without a word and headed out the back of the bar. "He isn't one for talking, is he?"

"Ignore him. He does that to everyone," Sasha said, giving me a glass of water. I took it gratefully.

"Do you know if the Widow has anything for me?"

"She does. I believe she is awake. I can go ask her real fast," she said; I nodded.

With incredibly nimble movements, her spider half twisted upside down, grabbing a thick web that dangled down from the second floor. She effortlessly scaled the web and disappeared from sight. I waited patiently, sipping my water and looking around the near-empty bar.

It was spotlessly clean, even if a deep-rooted smell of cigarette smoke seemed to have permeated all porous surfaces. The bar sat in the center of the room with a 360-degree surface

to order drinks. I leaned my head back and looked up to the second-floor bar from which Sasha had disappeared. There was a large mirror that circled the rim of the entrance to the other bar. I could see myself in the reflection. My dirty blond hair was a few weeks past due for a haircut, and I was a little messy from chasing the beast around the slums. I noticed that I was a lot tanner than when I first arrived in the city. I had spent a reasonable amount of time outside, both chasing bad guys and enjoying my first taste of freedom after the four years I had previously spent at the Elite Mage Academy.

"She will be down here shortly," Sasha said, scaling the thick web back to the ground. Her movements were silent and smooth. I thanked Sasha and made small talk. The other patrons in the bar were giving us a wide berth, so I had pretty much all her attention.

Her spider half had brown fur and looked closer to a jumping spider back on Etherra. Some people disliked Arachne due to their appearance, but I had never cared about things like that. Sasha was a nice woman, even if she worked for a registered villain. Though, I wasn't one to talk since I worked with her as well.

"I hope I didn't make you wait too long." The voice of Black Widow came from behind me and made me turn around. The 9-foot-tall Arachne, with the massive black widow's lower body and a pale goddess's upper body, came walking toward me. Her beauty made Sasha look average, and I look like a slug. If it weren't for her terrible personality, she would have been incredibly attractive. Her jet-black hair was pulled back in a neat bun with an ornamental dagger sticking through it.

"Not at all," I said, turning with a smile. While I was not friends with the Widow, there was no reason to be harsh right now. Although we had some tension in the past, we were stuck together, so we let bygones be bygones. "I heard you had something for me."

"Yes, right here." She said, twirling a beautiful wooden cane that was behind her back.

"They managed to fix it?" I said with excitement, taking the

cane from her. Besides the large blue crystal at the head of the wooden cane, it looked rather average. Of course, that was so far from the truth. I pushed mana into the cane and watched the light brown wood come to life.

The grains along the wood started to bend and twist like snakes. I gripped just below the crystal and pulled lightly. Without so much as a sound, a beautiful thin blade slid effortlessly out of the cane. I carefully inspected every inch of the blade.

Six months ago, while clashing with a religious fanatic group that was hell-bent on summoning a tree monster into the city, the beautiful sword got damaged. We managed to stop the summoning ritual when Jason shoved the blade's tip into the center of a magical focal point. The backfire from stopping the spell destroyed the tip of the sword. Whoever Black Widow got to fix the blade did an amazing job. It was perfect.

"Up to your standards?" She asked with a knowing smile. I wanted to come up with a snarky remark, but honestly, it was flawless, and I had to admit it.

"Keep the one who fixed it on your payroll. I have a feeling that I'll be needing his services often," I said with a smile. I sheathed the cane. As soon as I released the magic, the wood froze in place, becoming as solid as a tree. I gave an experimental tug on the cane; the blade was locked in place.

"Anything else I can do for you?" Black Widow asked. She always asked this. Our little agreement was on a quid pro quo basis. The more she did for me, the more I had to do for her. I always needed to keep it in the back of my head when asking for favors.

"No," I said flatly. She gave a disappointed shrug and turned to leave. I waved to Sasha and left the stuffy bar.

The bar was on the outskirts of the dangerous part of the slums, and I was lucky enough to catch a passing taxi. It shortened the hours-long walk I had anticipated to a 30-minute ride in a drake-drawn carriage. It was a beautiful open-top wood carriage pulled by two sleek ground drakes with dark brown scales that glinted in the sunlight. Ground drakes always looked more similar to the pictures I had seen of

velociraptors than dragons. But they were descendants of the great dragons and the best mode of transportation anywhere on the Elven planet of Relexit.

It was sad how fast the bumpy ride turned into a smooth glide as we left the slums and moved toward the center of the city. Old buildings shifted into bustling businesses with endless foot traffic. Even the air seemed clearer. A salty, fresh breeze filled my lungs from the ocean below. I stood up in the carriage and looked around as we rounded a side road and entered a busy one.

The street we turned onto was the longest and widest road in the city. It cut the city in half from the gate at the top of the hill to the water that led into the ocean. Cerulean was built on a large hill overlooking a bay with dual peninsulas that hugged the water. It was a port city that got most of its trade and business from the multitude of ships that trickled in and out of the harbor.

The carriage rocked to a stop with a deep hiss from the ground drakes, now irritated that they couldn't keep moving. I thanked the driver, dropping a little extra in the money tin, and got out. The building where my office was located was in a decent part of town, a long way from the slums that I had just left. The thick salty air hung heavy in the street, occasionally blown away by a fresh breeze off the water. We were only a 30-minute walk to the pier and fish market.

Although I had only inherited this office from the previous mage, it was in a perfect location. There were a few apartment buildings scattered between offices and small shops. It was quiet and calm, which was exactly what I wanted. Just one block away was a busy street filled with restaurants, shops, and customers. It was the perfect combo of near and far from the hustle and bustle of the main city.

The simple four-story stone building was filled with dozens of offices, all of which were written on a board outside the building. I hadn't used any of the other services in the building, but the occasional screech from an exotic pet shop or the roar of a Dwarven insurance agency echoed in the halls. Every office but mine was displayed in the front. No one came to me

for help anyway.

I entered the building, sidestepping a gnome that pushed out, grumbling about the price of a haircut. He was only 3 feet tall with ivory skin. A thick scar ran from near his neck through his thick white beard and to the back of his skull, cutting off one of the forked tips of his ears. If I had to guess, I'd say the old gnome used to be an adventurer of sorts. He pushed past, not even bothering to see who he almost ran into as he stomped out of the building.

The first floor, like every other floor, was a tile hallway with wooden doors leading to various businesses. Most of the offices were shut, but some were open for customers. I immediately entered the staircase to the left of the entrance and headed up to the fourth floor, where my office was. Office 4C was sandwiched between an insurance company for Elven-made carriages and a professional photography studio. They were friendly people, although I had only seen them in passing. I had left a bad first impression with a flash bang and the rotting corpse I found in my office on the first day in the city. Since then, most of the people in the building stayed far away from me.

The door to my office was closed, but I could hear some sounds coming from inside, letting me know that Jason had arrived safe and sound.

"I'm back, Jason," I said, opening the door.

"Oh, thank god. I've been too scared to move." His voice was shaky.

My office was decent sized, and from the doorway, all I could see was the small receptionist's desk, where Jason was glued to his chair with his eyes locked on the far end of the room. I drew the blade from the cane with a quick flash of mana and entered the room, following the path of his eyes. Most of the walls in the office were filled with shelves and filing cabinets, except for two large windows. One behind the dark wood desk that sat at the end of the room, and the second to the left of it. Thanks to that and the height of the building, we got ample sunlight all day long. Yet somehow, even with it still early afternoon, the area around my desk seemed dark. It

took no time at all to find the cause of the darkness. Standing on top of my desk near the window was a massive bird cloaked in its own shadow. Its head snapped toward me, red glowing eyes boring into my soul.

"Well, this can't be good," I said, sheathing my sword and slowly walking toward the desk. The bird hopped onto the office floor, landing with a solid thud. It straightened its back, standing to its full height of 5 feet tall. Besides the landing, none of its movements gave off any sound. It opened its beak wide, releasing the smell of rotten meat.

"Urg.ent. mes.sage. For. Of.fi.cer. Mi.ka. Ri.del." Each word from the bird's mouth came out in broken segments as it snapped its beak closed between each syllable. Its voice was an eerie rasp that gave me chills down my spine. I walked closer to the large, menacing bird and noticed for the first time that it had a leather bag looped around its neck with a small gold medallion at the clasp. I was familiar with the pouch, although this was the first time I saw it attached to a creature like this.

I moved to the bird, grabbing a small letter opener from my desk. I made sure to make my movements as slow and evident as possible, the giant bird's eyes never leaving me. I used the letter opener to prick my arm. Blood pooled at the surface of my skin. I tossed the letter opener to the side and used my thumb to collect the blood. Slowly, I reached forward, placing my bloody thumb on the medallion. A stream of mana traced down from my core to the tip of my thumb. The medallion gave off a warmth as it absorbed my mana and blood. There was a brief glow before the clasp opened with a bit of a pop. I let out a sigh of relief and pulled out the large envelope that was inside the bag. As soon as the package left the bag, the bird let out an ear-splitting screech and shot out the open window with a flurry of wind, throwing papers off my desk. It rose fast, taking off into the sunny sky, and disappeared from sight.

"Care to explain what the hell that was," Jason said, looking mildly horrified. Jason hadn't been working with me very long and wasn't used to the weird stuff that generally followed me

around. Although since I was still relatively new at being an Elite Mage, I didn't have much room to judge.

"That was a messenger bird sent by the association," I held up the envelope to emphasize my point.

The Mage Association was a branch of the government that I worked for. They were in charge of everything magic-related in each of the three worlds. Technically, there was one branch on each of the worlds that worked together to keep the peace. Even though I was assigned to Relexit, the branch I answered to was back home on Etherra. It was for political reasons to keep everyone in check. I couldn't care less where I got my orders from.

"Okay, but what was that? It was huge." He said, getting up from his chair and making his way over to my desk. He picked up some of the papers that had gone flying.

"It is called a Roc. A bird that can use magic to change its size." I explained, using the letter opener to cut open the envelope. "It is my first time seeing one, but we learned about them at the academy. In the early days, there were stories of them growing big enough to hunt elephants."

"Damn," he said, looking out of the window as if he expected to see the bird carrying an elephant. "And someone thought it was a good idea to use it for postal service?"

"I don't think anyone would be able to take the letter without permission." He snorted in agreement. I pulled out the papers and set them on the desk.

"What is it?" Jason asked, leaning on the chair over my shoulder.

"Orders," I said with a sad sigh, flipping through a few pages.

"Orders? But I thought that you were stationed here. Does that mean you need to move?" There was mild panic in his voice. It was understandable since he had quit his job to work for me. I got a quick mental flash of that evening. That night had ended with me covered in blood, standing over a mound of dead bodies, and even though it had been six months since then, most of the police officers in the city still made a wide berth of me when I walked by.

"No, we don't have to move. Because the requirements to become an Elite Mage are so rare, there just aren't enough of us to cover three whole worlds. So, from time to time, we are told to go to an area or city that doesn't have its own Elite Mage and take care of whatever issue needs to be solved." I could feel the tension leave Jason as I explained it to him.

"Okay, so what does it say?"

"Let me check," I said, flipping through the papers. There was a lot of information here, so it took me a while to get to the heart of the issue.

"I hate that. Watching it always makes me feel nauseous," Jason said over my shoulder, looking away from the papers.

"Oops, forgot," I said with a laugh. Since we often dealt with top-secret information, all of our orders had magic placed on them, making it impossible for anyone else to read. Anyone but me, since it was magic-based, I had already injected mana into my eyes and was reading it normally. Jason, on the other hand, was looking at a page swirling with ink as the letters jumped and danced around the page in an endless tango. "Give me a second."

I reached for my core again, this time grabbing it with all my might. The thing that made Elite Mages special compared to any other mage was our unique ability to use all types of magic. Because of that, we were able to access a primal power commonly known as berserker magic. It was something that greatly enhanced our physical and magical power.

I grabbed my core and ripped it over, letting my mana range through my body like a tsunami of power. The rush of power radiated from my body, scattering the papers Jason had collected. I heard him let out an annoyed sigh as they flew. I opened my eyes, pushing the power into the papers. As if electrocuted, all the letters froze in place before marching to their proper position on the page.

"And that part always scratches that little OCD itch in the back of my brain," he said, watching the letters line up. Once it was done, I released the berserk magic, feeling it retract back to the core. The feeling left me tired. Even using it for such a short time took some effort. When we had to fight with it, we

generally slept for a day or more after. "What does it say?"

After a moment of reading, I said, "It says we are going to Rome." I put a large emphasis on the 'we' part since he was going to be coming with me. If he was going to work for me, he had to tag along. Jason was silent for a second, looking at me as if he was expecting me to laugh and say that I was joking. When nothing came, his face turned from suspense to worry and eventually ended in disgust. Or was it horror, hard to tell?

"Well, I had a good time working for you. You'll have my resignation before the day is up," he said, realizing that I was not joking. He turned, walked away from me, and headed toward the door.

"Not a chance in hell," I said, pulling mana into my arm as he reached for the doorknob. "Ice wall."

With mana running through my eyes, I watched in almost slow motion as tendrils of mana wrapped around the bones in my arm, creating a ghostly x-ray of white mana. As the mana reached my hand, it turned an icy blue and shot across the room, connecting with the door. Ice crystals began to form on the wood, rapidly expanding as I fueled the magic. Within seconds, a large sheet of ice covered the door from floor to ceiling.

"Mikah, come on." He turned back to me, sounding strained. "Even for you, Rome is a death sentence. For someone like me, it's just a suicide mission."

He wasn't entirely wrong. After the three worlds had merged with Earth a few hundred years ago, portals opened, allowing everyone to move freely between worlds. This led to a long, vicious war that leveled cities and wiped-out billions of lives on all sides. Eventually, the war ended, and a peace treaty was made between the prominent races of each world: humans from Earth, now named Etherra, Elves from Relexit, and Centinals from Cavalon. And we all lived happily ever after. Or that is how it was supposed to go.

The problem was that races like Elves, Centinals, and Humans were just some of the races to come through the portals. Probably the most well-known place was in the old city of Rome in what was once Italy, which had become a

nesting ground for monsters. Humans tried a few times to clear the place and take back the land, but the large number of vicious monsters was too much, and the city was eventually lost. At first, it was a wild place where survival of the fittest was all that mattered, but eventually, a few of the high-intelligence monsters took charge and made it into a functioning monster territory.

After many unsuccessful attempts to reclaim the city, the governments of Etherra decided to make a verbal treaty with the ruler of the monster region. A sort of, you stay out of our business, and we will stay out of yours, kind of agreement. Apparently, the ruler was a ruthless monster who ruled his territory with an iron fist. But that iron fist kept all the monsters in check, so we were okay with him in charge.

"It can't be that bad. At least listen to the details of the mission before resigning." I said, beckoning him to me. He tossed the jacket he had scooped up on his way out back on his desk and stomped over to me, grumbling a variety of insults under his breath.

"I swear to the gods, Mikah. If this ends up killing me, I will come back and haunt you forever." He said in a serious tone.

"Ha, that won't be possible because I will probably be dead right alongside you," I said with a smirk. I couldn't help but laugh, especially since our last major adventure involved some nasty ghost-looking wraths.

"Shut up and tell me what it says." I waited until he came back behind the desk before I started to reread the orders.

"In summary, it goes, blah blah blah. Officer Ridel, there has been a change in Rome's monster territory. The current ruler, King Urc, has passed away. It looks like two factions are struggling for power over the city. On one side, we have the Freya faction, which has a leader with a similar mindset to King Urc, while on the other side, the Slu faction does not and believes the monsters need to go back to war with the humans. They are asking us to go to Rome and make sure that the Freya faction takes the throne," I was abridging the small novel that they sent me, but that was the main point.

"I quit," Jason said dryly.

"No, you don't," I said, getting to my feet. "What you do need to do, though, is pack. Looks like we are heading to Rome."

Jason grumbled something about possibly making the wrong career choice and dejectedly returned to his desk. I couldn't help but chuckle. I knew that Jason wouldn't quit even if I had let him. He was a good person, and he had my back. He had proved that over the last six months. Ever since the last big incident, more shady people and activities have been happening in Cerulean. We had to take care of a few minor dark mages, a magical beast running rampant through the sewers, and some petty crooks. Each time he came with me and watched my back, he even managed to save my ass once before when a goblin snuck up behind me. After everything we have been through, I trusted him completely.

"Hey, open the damn door." Jason snapped at me, standing in front of the ice wall I had created. I apologized and used my magic to melt the ice.

"Meet me back here in 2 hours. Make sure to pack light." I said as he walked out the door. He gave me the middle finger and shut the door behind him a little harder than usual.

I took the next few minutes to get my head straight, jotting a few things down on a piece of paper. For a trip this long, I would need a variety of things. Over the past few months, most of my possessions had migrated between the office and my house, which I inherited after the untimely death of the previous mage. I would need to go to the house first and get a good portion of my stuff before packing up the weapons that I had here in the office. I let out a long sigh as I pulled myself out of my comfy chair and made my way to the street.

CHAPTER

2

The walk to my place was about 20 minutes along the busy street of shops. It was about that time when people started to get off work, and the crowded streets confirmed it. Drake-drawn carriages passed by at regular intervals, towing people through the city.

My predecessor originally owned the 2-story warehouse that I called home. Lieutenant Cameron had been in charge of this city for seven years and was supposed to be my mentor, but that was cut short by his untimely brutal murder a few days before I arrived. Since he had no family left, the house fell to the state, and in the end, I managed to get it. While it wasn't actually a house but a warehouse, I had no complaints. The exterior had zero curb appeal since it was made primarily of steel sheets. But it came fully furnished and filled with a variety of magical ingredients and tools that probably equated to more than the entire place in value.

I opened the door and flicked the lights on as I stepped in. To my left was a large open room lined with shelves surrounding a large workbench in the center. Each shelf was filled to the brim with magical ingredients. I had made a considerable effort to keep the place as clean and meticulous as the severely OCD-driven Cameron, who had everything both alphabetized and sorted by size. But no matter how hard I tried, I could not keep this place as spotless as him. Currently, the workbench had a variety of items that I had been too tired to clean up. Since I was leaving for an undetermined amount of time, I headed over and organized it. Nothing was better than coming home to a clean house after a trip.

After I was satisfied with the ground floor, I headed up to the top floor, which had been converted into a cozy living area. It was small, no bigger than a studio apartment, but it fit my needs. There was just enough room for a bed, couch, and a tiny kitchenette area off to my left, with a small bathroom off the sleeping area.

The bed looked barely slept in since we had been chasing

down that basilisk for the past three days, and I had slept in the office. I had a cot there that was shockingly comfortable after a long day of work. The bed made a groaning sound as I sat on it, causing fresh wrinkles in the smooth blanket. I grabbed the simple black backpack next to the bed and unzipped it. The bag was filled with multiple smaller pouches. I pulled one out and looked it over. Each pouch was about 12 inches long and 5 inches wide. While they looked plain, they were far from it. In fact, these were probably my favorite things that I had been taught to create.

The bags were called deep pockets. It was a magical bag that was able to hold significantly more than it should be able to for its size. They were made from light gray wyvern hide that had magic runes stitched in with unicorn mane. I had spent a pretty penny on the expensive material to make a good number of them just for reasons like this trip.

Each bag was labeled with its contents and stacked neatly inside the backpack. The one I was currently holding was labeled 'clothes.' I was able to pack five days of clothes without issue before clasp the bag and putting it back in my backpack. The other packages were labeled 'ingredients,' 'cooking,' 'tools,' 'uniforms,' and 'weapons.' The 'cooking' one was already filled with pots and pans, fire-starting materials, and basic spices. The rest needed to be packed elsewhere.

I made my way back downstairs and into the workshop, where I walked around and grabbed a few bags and jars of ingredients that I deemed useful at the time. It was hard to pick since I had no idea what I would be doing in Rome, so I figured I would just get a variety of things. I grabbed a manticores tail, slime juice, poison mushroom, snake venom, mermaid scales, and a few other things. I mainly focused on cures and antivenom supplies that we had been taught. I was a decent fighter, but if I got hurt, I needed to be able to patch myself up in enemy territory. After that was done, I shouldered my backpack and headed out, locking the door behind me.

Unsurprisingly, I beat Jason back to the office and began packing the few things that I needed here. I had a few magical weapons that I wanted to bring. A super bendy goose wood

taser that I called Zappy was a definite bring. I also grabbed a few bombs that I had made: a smoke bomb, a sticky bomb, a flashbang, an ice bomb, and a popper, which just sent a blast of air that tossed people around, and finally, my favorite, which I called the can of ah. It was a soda can that, when opened, let out a horrific scream that would make even a banshee cover their ears. I had shattered the windows in the office and lost hearing for a day when I first tested it.

For the magic tool bag, I grabbed a few of my favorite lock picks that I had made, some curse-sealing talismans, a hoverboard used for short-distance flights, and a Rubik's cube that, when completed, created a shell that acted like a shield. The shell wouldn't last long but could take one large attack.

With everything packed, I zipped up the bag and tested its weight. It was about 20 pounds but filled with probably 100 pounds of goods, so I wasn't going to complain. There wasn't much else to do until Jason got back here besides going over the rest of the paperwork that had been sent to me. It was a very shortened rundown of the monster territory over the past 200 years, including more information on the leaders of the factions I would be dealing with.

I spent the next 20 minutes reading over the information. The recently dead King Urc was actually the fourth king of the monster territory. He was King Urc IV, to be exact. His grandfather had been the first king to get Rome under control. The reason this was an issue now was that he had never produced an heir, so his death meant a new ruler could take their place.

King Urc came from an extremely large minotaur family that could all use fire magic. Since magical ability isn't genetic, it is actually impressive that four in a row could use it, but that was beside the point. Being able to channel and use magic made them not only stronger and faster than all other minotaurs but also able to use long-range and mass destruction fire magic. It was a perfect combination in both long-range and hand-to-hand combat. During the first king's reign of power, he went through the entire area in and around Rome, completely obliterating anyone who challenged his rule

until he had the entire territory under his control. From then on, they set up a small system that kept some semblance of peace. The setup was simple enough. Keep the monsters that he could control or were smart enough not to cause a fuss in the city, and everyone else was kicked to the surrounding areas.

The report kept referring to intelligent monsters. I racked my brain for the ones I had learned about. There were more than a few intelligent races of monsters. Some of the well-known ones were minotaur, kappas, trolls, and goblins. All in all, they were not too different from ordinary people. They could feel joy and sadness, anger and hate. The difference between intelligent monster races and other races was that monster races were more in tune with their beast nature. That made them a little more prone to violence, and most times, they weren't the biggest fans of large crowds. There is also the fact that monster races look different than us and often cause fear just based on their appearance. It was a terrible case of racism, but even now, there were humans who thought Elves should stay on their own side of the gate and vice versa. There were always people who caused issues no matter what world they came through.

On the other side of the spectrum were the other vicious or non-intelligent monsters. Things like the basilisk we had caught were no better than animals. According to the information, the surroundings of Rome had a nest of practically every horrible species of monster I had learned about—everything from the highly intelligent yet evil to the downright vicious and feral. There was a chance that just getting to Rome would be the most dangerous part of the trip. I would need to be on guard and on edge the entire trip. Honestly, that was one reason I wanted to drag Jason with me. I wanted someone to watch my back in a dangerous place.

All things considered, it was a good idea to push the worst monsters out of the city. In doing so, they created a barrier full of vicious territorial monsters that served as a protective wall for the inner city, keeping out most unwanted guests. Unwanted guests like myself and Jason. While we had been officially assigned the task, there was going to be no party

waiting to escort us through the danger zone. According to the papers, we would have to make our way on the ground by ourselves through a hundred miles of monster-infested wildland before even reaching the monster city. The only positive bit of news was that since we were officially requested to be there, we should be safe-ish once we made it into the city. However, there was never a guarantee of safety at my job.

I flipped forward a few pages, continuing to read. After we stopped trying to take back the city and the monster territory was officially set up, all history of the place became shoddy as best. There were a few comments from adventuring parties of dire wolves in the outskirts that had killed half of their group and seriously wounded most of the others. There were more than a few records of entire parties vanishing in the area assumed to be killed by monsters. Any official contact with the city was initiated by them and by a messenger harpy who would fly to deliver a letter from the king to the association.

I took a minute to remember what a harpy was. From what I recall, it was a half-humanoid, half-bird creature that had a midsection that was human-esk and the limbs of a bird. They were intelligent monsters and were great at flying. Even the largest flying predators left them alone. While I hadn't seen one myself, I had seen a drawing of one that had massive talons that could easily disembowel a human.

I shook the grotesque image from my mind and went back to reading. A week ago, the association had received a letter from a harpy messenger telling them of the king's death. It was an official request for help. The faction that sent the letter, and the one I was going to be working with, was led by a Lamia, human from the waist up, snake from the waist down. Her name was Freya, and from the letter, she was in agreement with the verbal treaty of peace that we had and, more importantly, wanted to keep the treaty going. From the information she had given us, she had control of the city's northern half and was currently attempting to expand her influence and support. My mission was first to verify and judge if her words were true and if she did indeed want to keep the treaty and then make sure that she won.

I had two parts of this mission that I was uncomfortable with. First, they left the last part incredibly ambiguous. Was I supposed to hand out fliers or simply kill the opposition and just make her the ruler by force? Elite Mages were not known for their intelligence and strategic genius. We were the muscle of the magical world. I wasn't sure what help I could be in an election. The second was that this all seemed way over my head. I only graduated from the academy less than a year ago. And besides one mission with the eco-terrorists, I had done nothing noteworthy.

I flipped through the pages, looking for details on my exact mission, just in case I missed something. Unsurprisingly, there was no information past a one-line sentence that read, 'aid and assist Freya in any means to take control of the monster zone.' Which, while direct and simple, left a lot to be desired in terms of instructions. I sighed and went back to the place I had left off, muttering a few choice insults under my breath. This wasn't my first time being forced to shoulder a lot more responsibility than I should have, and as much as I wanted to complain about it, I couldn't. Orders were orders.

I pushed the thought aside and moved on. Based on the limited information that Freya had sent us, the opposing faction was led by Slu, a monstrous manticore. They suspect that he somehow had some ancient giant blood in him because while a normal manticore was about 4 feet tall at the shoulder, he stood a solid 7 feet, making him a giant among the winged monsters. Of course, that was all suspicion since giants had died out a few thousand years ago on Cavalon. Slu did rule with an iron fist like Urc, but he believed that humans were inferior and a hindrance. His goal was to take over the monster's territory and expand its borders. So clearly, it would be bad if he managed to get control of the monster domain.

There was something that bothered me about all the information that I had on the city. I went back three times, flipping through the limited information and scanning for it. There was nothing on the portal that linked Rome to their home. Since many of the monsters reported in and around Rome were also found on Relexit, it was safe to assume their

portal led to some part of this world. The problem was that Relexit was huge compared to Earth and was probably only ¼ inhabited. The rest of the planet was a wild land filled with beasts and monsters. Since we had no information on Rome's portal, there was a chance that there could be a lot more monsters than we imagined. This also meant that the threat of war was much more dangerous.

The lack of information was definitely a red flag, not that I had a choice on going there or not. This wasn't a request from the mage association. It was an order. They were probably thinking of using me as a way to gather information on the inner workings of the city. Being used as a pawn was irritating but not unexpected when you work for the government.

I got up from the desk and moved over to the bookshelves that lined the wall. Over the past few months, I had done my best to review all the books and manuals that Lieutenant Cameron had accumulated over his seven years here. And I do remember that one of them had a history of the wars following the great merge. There was a chance that it had some information on the war for Rome.

I found the book I was looking for, which was aptly named 'A Brief History of War Following the Great Merge, as told from the Perspective of an Earth Soldiers.' It started two years after the impact of merging with the other worlds and followed multiple wars that lasted over 100 years and five human soldiers.

The wars ranged from small skirmishes to all out-blood baths. Every few chapters, there would be a chart of the death toll up to the point. The book ended with the final war before the worlds came together to form a treaty. The death toll was in the hundreds of millions by the time the book ended. While quite inclusive, the book had no information on wars that happened after the treaty was made, so it was no help to me.

"Damn," I said, putting the book back. It bothered me to go there with no information; again, not like I had a choice. The doorknob rattled as I scanned the rest of the book titles, finding none that would have what I wanted. "You manage to pack everything you need?"

"Are you positive that I have to come with you?" Jason asked, coming into the office with a similar backpack to mine on his shoulder.

"Yes," I said with a light chuckle. "It will be okay. I will make sure that you get back alive." My words did little to put him at ease.

"I hope so. What are you doing?" I was doing one last scan of the titles, hoping that I missed one.

"Looking for a book," I explained what I was doing, giving up on finding anything in the office. I resigned myself to just going to Rome and hoping for the best.

"Why don't we go see Professor Thrub?" I stopped and blinked at Jason for a second. Not that it was rare for him to come up with a good idea, but it just caught me off guard sometimes.

Professor Thrub was a history professor at the University of Cerulean. He was an eccentric old man who loved anything older than 100 years. His passion and eagerness to help made him easy to work with and get to know. During the big incident, he helped us out with some research on Atlantis. Without him, there was a chance that many people might have died. If there was anyone in the city who had specific information on Rome, it would be him.

"Jason, you are a genius," I said with a smile. "I don't know why I didn't think of that. Grab your things. We will stop by the college before heading out."

Jason said something about wishing he hadn't thought of the idea but grabbed his bag, and we headed out of the office. I made sure to lock it behind us since I had no idea how long we were going to be gone and headed outside. Since it was still early evening, it was no problem getting a taxi to take us to the college. Jason stayed quiet the entire trip. I knew he was nervous. When he was, he checked his pockets over and over as if he had left something behind when he got this way. I watched him check the same pocket three times before speaking up.

"Jason, it's going to be okay. you'll be with me, what's the worst that can happen?" It was a dumb question since the list

of things that could possibly happen while with me involved a lot more death than if I was not there.

"I know that I should be coming with you since this is what I signed up for. But I'm not like you. I don't have some super strong magic that can level a city block," he said with a sigh. "I'm just normal."

He looked at me with something close to pity in his eyes. He was really scared to go. *Damn it, maybe I should have him stay.* Before I could say anything, he slapped his hands to his cheeks. The loud smack made me jump. He rolled his shoulders back, sitting up straight. The look in his eyes changed. While I could still see fear, there was also determination in his eyes.

"I know what you were going to say," Jason said, looking at me. "But when I made the choice to work with you, I also chose to follow you into whatever situation you needed me. So, I'm going with you. That is my choice."

He spoke with confidence even if his fists were clenched tightly, making his knuckles white. This was the reason that I trusted him so much. I couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks," I didn't need to say anything else as we continued the slow trip to the college.

We arrived a short while later and got out of the taxi. Jason paid the dwarf before setting off toward the history building. The history department was one of those departments that was the last to get funding. As soon as you walked in, you were hit with the smell of mothballs and parchment. Their building was old, and the floors were worn by the thousands of students who had walked over it since the last time it was replaced. I was worried that the professor wasn't going to be in since we hadn't set up an appointment. We stopped in front of his door and gave it a loud knock.

"Professor Thrub. You in?" I asked, grabbing the handle and pushing it open. The office was on the smaller size but was cozy. The carpet was worn down but clean, and the shelves were stacked with books, all neatly organized. There was a large desk filled with papers and open books. On the far end of the room was a small sitting area with a couch and

recliner. The only thing stopping it from looking like a cozy winter cabin was a fireplace and a bearskin rug.

The Professor was seated behind his desk, scribbling something on a paper with a red pen. He sighed the way old people do when they are disappointed with the younger generation. There was a red smudge near the bridge of his nose, as if he had to rub it a few too many times from utter disbelief. Whoever had written that paper was going to receive some very low marks.

Professor Thrub was a short man well into his 70s with snow-white, thinning hair, and an equally white beard. He had small, beady eyes that looked through a pair of thick glasses hanging on the tip of his nose. Today, he wore a very nice grey pinstriped suit with a bowtie. He looked up as we entered, and his tired face lit up with a smile.

“Mikah. It is good to see you. How have you been?” He spoke with a low voice that seemed to be filled with wisdom.

“I’ve been well. And you?” I asked, walking over to him as he got up and rounded his desk. We shook hands. For such a fragile-looking old man, he had a grip not fitting his age.

“Oh, you know. When you get this old, waking up can be painful,” he said as he smiled. I liked Professor Thrub. After he had helped me with the summoning ritual that almost destroyed the city, I got permission from the Mage Association to give him some of the details. For research purposes only, of course. We had spent countless hours over the last 6 months talking about all sorts of things.

“While I do enjoy your visits, I assume that you came here this late for a reason. What can I do for you?” He said after all the usual pleasantries were said.

“I was hoping you could tell us anything you know about Rome,” I said. Most of the things that we did were prioritized as top secret. No one was supposed to know where we were going or why. I trusted the professor to tell him the basics, at least. “I’m heading there for a mission, and my information is painfully scarce.”

“There is indeed a lot of power in wisdom,” he said in the best wise man’s voice I had heard from him yet. “Lucky for

you, I did my thesis on the war for Rome.”

There was both a massive benefit and a horrible disadvantage with that. The benefit was the fact that we had someone who had studied a lot about the city and probably had more information than anyone at the association. The downside was that Professor Thrub was incredibly long-winded and had a habit of talking for literal hours about a topic that he found interesting. The twinkle in his eyes let me know that he was more than a little interested in this topic.

“Is there any way that we can get the shorthand? We are supposed to head out tonight.” I said before he could begin. I could see that joy fade a little from the old man’s eyes as he huffed.

“The young are always so impatient,” He muttered, making his way to the small sitting area and taking a seat on the recliner. He flicked on a small stove with a kettle to boil up some tea. We begrudgingly took a seat across from him as he began. The annoyance from before had disappeared as he excitedly began talking. “The first thing that you need to know about Rome is that the portal in Rome was one of the last gates to appear.”

“I didn’t see any information on where the gate was located,” I said, interested. And this is why I liked the professor. He was already addressing one of my major concerns.

“See, that’s the thing. We don’t know where it is or where the other end leads to. You see, the gate didn’t even appear until about halfway through the Great War. That is over 100 years after some of the last gates were reported to appear. Even then, it wasn’t a major issue for another 20 years.”

“What changed?” Jason asked, picking up a scone from a plate on the coffee table between us.

“That was the whole focus of my thesis. A lot of information about the Great War was lost. There was so much destruction and death that it was hard to keep good records. However, during my research, I found a journal that described a massive forest on the other side of the gate. They must have figured that there was nothing to fear and just did their best to

ignore it. Until, one day, monsters began pouring from the gate in droves. Most of the city and artifacts had already been removed once the great war started, so the monsters took over the city rather quickly. Of course, not everything was or could be removed from the city, and we tried to take the city back.”

He stopped to make his tea. I did my best to be patient as he poured the water and dropped in a few cubes of sugar. He drank slowly, letting out a long, relaxing sigh. After a few more sips, he began talking again.

To summarize the next 2 hours of my life. Humans tried on three major occasions to take back the city. Each time, we dedicated more resources, yet somehow, each attempt was less and less successful. The final battle was the worst in terms of time, money, and loss of life on our side. According to the scattered records that he was able to find, there was a rumor that a massive spider they called Charlotte had laid waste to over 20,000 soldiers both on the ground and in the air in a single day. It is possible that the number is a little exaggerated, but whatever happened, they gave up on taking the city. For the last 300 years, the monsters have strictly owned and run the city of Rome.

“Now, I was not inclined to believe in such a large beast,” the professor said with a shrug.

“Why is that?” I gave a sharp glance at Jason as he spoke. It was a good question, but we also had a time limit.

“That is because of the size of the creature. If it were truly as big as they said, then that would mean that there had to be spiders that large on the other side of the gate. But there are no creatures this large in all of Relexit history,” he explained, sipping his tea.

“Which would mean that the monsters were not connected to Relexit, or...” I said, thinking it over.

“Or the story was overinflated 200 years ago.” I get why he thought that then. So far, we had only ever seen creatures that big on Cavalon, never on Relexit. “Plus, the monsters that were described were ones that we see often here.”

He was talking about monsters like trolls, kappas, manticores, and so on. The Elves had records of them being

around well before the great merge. So, the chance that something that big came from Avalon and through to Relexit only to be brought through another portal to Rome was a stretch.

“Of course, that isn’t the only explanation. But no one wanted to believe me on that theory,” he said rather bitterly.

“What theory?” It was my turn to be glared at by Jason. I couldn’t help it. He was trying to bait us into asking for it.

“It’s nothing,” he said, sitting up straighter. “But my original theory was that there was a fifth world, and they came from there.”

“Why?” I didn’t understand where this was coming from.

“Well, there are some depictions of monsters that we haven’t seen on Relexit, including a giant spider.”

“But that could just be due to the size of Relexit and lack of thorough exploration,” Jason chimed in.

“And that is exactly what my professor and all the other academics told me, He said with clear irritation. But still. Why are there dragons in every world’s culture but none living today?”

I had seen this look in his eyes. It normally started an even longer discussion, one we did not have time for. Jason and I got to our feet at the same time.

“Thank you, Professor. I am glad we came here. But we do need to get moving.” The professor nodded and stood up with us.

“Of course, I do always enjoy your visits. You must come by once you get back and tell me everything you can.”

“For all the help you have given me, it is the least I could do,” I said, thanking him again as he led us out.

The conversation with the professor was insightful. The professor had told us a few of his ideas about the gate. The first and most common idea was that the gate was active somewhere in the city, and people were able to move freely between the worlds like everyone else. That idea had been contested for a few reasons. The first was that from the little information that we were able to gain about Rome, it seemed that they had gone through a lot of effort to be self-sufficient.

If they had a gate that they could move through, then why were they trying so hard to make this side so sustainable? The second reason was that there was no reason to ask for help from the Mage Association if they had people on both sides.

Another idea was that the gate in Rome had somehow vanished over these 300 years. That one was the least likely answer since, in all these 400 years since the first gate appeared, not one had been reported vanishing. That left only two other possible ideas. The first was that they were at odds with the monsters on the other side of the gate, segregating them to Etherra. The other was that the climate on the other side was no longer livable.

Over the years, there has been more than one gate that was dangerous on the other side. One case was from a gate that appeared in a large valley in the Asian continent that had been connected to an ocean on Cavalon. Over the years, the entire valley had been flooded and had turned into a small ocean. Another case was in Russia, where the gate was linked to an area of Relexit that was filled with toxic gases. It ended up killing an entire city before they were able to evacuate. If that was the case, then the monsters were stuck in Rome by the environment. Of course, none of it was proven; it was my job to determine the truth.

“Are we heading to the gate?” Jason asked, pulling me out of my head. He had flagged down another taxi and was getting in.

“I want to stop by the police station first and give the captain a heads up before we head out. But then, yeah, we are going straight to the gate.”

CHAPTER

3

Luckily, the police station was on the way to The Gate and was nothing more than a pitstop. It was a simple three-story brick building with a large stable to one side, filled with off-duty drakes of every color. When I first got here, I was able to take a few drakes on a quick tour through the city, and I completely understand why they were the main mode of transportation. They were quick and agile, which allowed them to maneuver easily through crowded streets.

I headed into the station, ignoring the few police officers who were out front. I chose to leave Jason behind to hold the taxi that was taking us to The Gate. It had only been a few months since he quit, and he didn't feel very comfortable inside the police station. Apparently, it had been a less-than-happy goodbye. I hadn't asked for the details, and he didn't tell me, but I knew that the police, who had a bad image of me, shared that negativity with Jason. I left him with the report from the Mage Association to familiarize him with.

Even in jeans and a t-shirt, I was easily recognized by them, and the few officers I walked past gave me a wide berth. Thankfully, my least favorite police officer wasn't at the front desk, and I was able to slip by and head straight up the stairs to the third floor. The halls of the station were even more sad and bland than my office building. The police captain's office was about halfway down the hall. It was closed, but the sound of shuffling papers let me know that she was in.

"Come in," the voice of the police captain answered when I knocked. I did and stepped into the office. It was a cozy room, smaller than my office but filled with filing cabinets and shelves. At the far end was a large, dark wood desk that sat in front of a window letting the natural light of the sunset flood the room. At the desk, with her head down, scribbling frantically, was Captain Eleanor Highbeck. She was a beautiful, tall, high elf with blond hair pulled back in a tight, professional ponytail. Like all elves, everything she did looked

graceful and beautiful. Each stroke of her pen seemed to be a little show.

I sat at her desk, patiently waiting for her to finish her work. I felt a little bad for Jason, but I considered the captain a friend and would not rush her unnecessarily. It took about three minutes before she set her pen down and looked up at me with bright green eyes that seemed to glow with the sun's rays behind her.

"Good to see you," she said with a warm smile.

"And you," I said back. She looked a little worn out. There were dark marks under her eyes from lack of sleep. "Things been busy?"

"A new drug has made its way into the city. It's all the rage at parties and has already caused a few incidents," she said with a shrug. It sounded interesting, but if it wasn't magic-related, it took a back seat to my work. "But I assume you are here for other reasons. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I just stopped by to keep you informed. First, I wanted to let you know that the little basilisk problem has been resolved. All fingers and toes should be safe for a while," I said, giving her a thumbs-up.

"Thanks, I was getting tired of seeing the reports come across my desk for that thing. Did you kill it?"

"It will no longer be a problem," I said, not wanting to answer her question. Even though I hadn't been paid yet, my wallet seemed to grow heavier from the guilt.

"Well, thank you anyway. But you said first. What is second?" I was very thankful that she chose to move past the subject.

"Secondly, I came to tell you that I would be leaving Cerulean for a while. I got an assignment back on Etherra, and I'm unsure how long it will take me. If there are any serious issues here that you can't take care of, send it to the Mage Association, and they will send someone else here if it's urgent." I explained the gist of my mission. It was probably against the rules to tell her as much information as I did, but I felt I could trust the police captain. Even if I trusted her, I left out the main reason for the mission just in case. The

conversation was 15 minutes, and I got up to leave after I was done.

“Well, I hope it goes well. Let me know when you get back in the city.” She said, getting up and walking me to the door.

“Of course. I hope I'll be back soon.” I said as I left her office and headed back down to the street where the taxi and Jason were waiting.

“Everything good to go?” Jason asked as I got in. He was flipping through the pages of the report, scanning the details. I nodded my answer as the cart jostled forward.

“What did you learn?” I asked, pointing to the pages.

“While waiting for you to return, I reviewed the route the association wants us to take. Of course, the first thing to do is go through the portal back to Etherra. Once on the other side, Eledor has an airfield where we should be able to catch a ride. I'm unsure how that all works since I've never traveled by airship. From what the association sent, we can either try and hop our way as close as possible from Eledor, or we can make it to the other continent and then go from there by ground transportation.”

“If I am right, we should still be in the right time to travel through the Gate,” I said, looking out the window and judging the time. The portals that linked our worlds were like a one-way door. You could only go through the door if it was open in the correct direction. If someone tried to walk through the gate when it was going in the wrong direction, it would be like stepping into a brick wall. The portals shift periodically, and the one here shifts every 17 hours and 6 minutes. I tried my best to keep the direction in my head, since about a month ago we almost lost a thief through the portal that was about to change directions. It would have been a smart plan if he had made it through. Luckily, we were able to stop him at the literal edge of the gate.

“What about the air travel?”

“Well, a perk of the badge is that I get on airships for free. We just need to hope one is leaving soon after getting there,” I said, tapping the pocket of my jeans where the badge

was located. Elite Mages had a pretty negative reputation with the public. The one trait that made us so powerful also tended to cause a lot of destruction. Because of that, I had opted not to wear my uniform most of the time. It made getting around a lot more comfortable.

It was a little concerning that neither Jason nor I had ever traveled on an airship before. This was going to be a new experience for both of us. Eledor was located in the Northern Grey Continent, roughly where the old city of St. Louis was. So, we needed to get from one continent to the other. Over the years, most of the cities, states, countries, and even continents have been renamed. What was once North America was now called the Northern Grey Continent for a species of grey-leaf trees that had overtaken much of the land after the great merge. Europe was simply called the Eastern Continent.

“I think I’d prefer air travel as much as possible over ground travel,” Jason said, passing all the papers back to me.

“I feel the same. My only concern is whether we will be able to find a ship going in the direction we need to go. We need to get there as fast as we can.” That was something we were going to have to wait and see once we got to the airfield. The conversation ended after that, and we rode the rest of the trip in silence.

I could tell Jason was still a little nervous, but he was taking all of this pretty well for someone who had been told he was going to one of the most dangerous locations on Etherra less than three hours ago. I was actually kind of proud of him. I think reading the information in the package helped him come to terms with this whole thing.

The gate was only a short taxi drive away, and we paid the pleasant elf driver and stepped out onto the sidewalk. The building before us was aptly named ‘The Gate.’ It was a very simple-looking tall stone building for something so pivotal to the city for travel and goods. The only thing that let you know that it was important was the regular patrol of security guards that walked around the perimeter and stood at the front door.

I did the traditional nod in greeting to the guards as we made our way inside the building. While plain and rather bland on the outside, the inside was very nice and welcoming. The cream-colored walls with wood paneling on the lower half wrapped around the room, designed as a mix between a lobby and a waiting room. Five tables with comfy chairs were scattered around, and couches lined the walls. The receptionist's desk was in the center of the far wall opposite the door. Above the gnome working at the desk was a sign that read 'outgoing' in green letters. *Perfect, we made it in time.*

There was a short elf in front of us with dark brown hair in two small ponytails. Her long ears stuck out almost parallel from her head. Judging from her height, she was most likely a plains elf. Unlike the high elves, like Captain Eleanor, who was tall and had smooth pale skin, plains elves were short and had light brown skin. She stood on a small step that stuck out from the desk and allowed shorter races to interact with the receptionist. I saw the gnome on the other side of the desk pass her a ticket and point to the door to the right.

"Welcome to the gate. Two tickets?" She asked with a happy, genuine smile on her face of someone who loves their job. The gnome was a short woman with black hair and a thick coating of makeup to cover the wrinkles around her eyes. She was elderly but looked like she had the energy of a teenager. Like the elf before, she also had pointed ears, but gnomes had two pairs of ears, with each one ending in a small pointed fork. For some reason, those ears always reminded me of dragonfly wings.

"Please, and thank you," I said, reaching into my pocket and pulling out my Elite Mage badge. It was a round black disk about 3 inches in diameter with a silver Octagram, each point of the star touching the edges of the badge. In between the stars' arms were small pictures of either a planet or a type of magic, alternating between the two. It represented the four worlds linked between the portals; Etherra was in blue, Relexit was green, Cavalon was yellow, and the void was black. The other four symbols were a skull for necromancy, a rune for rune magic, a drop of blood for ritual magic, and a

fireball for casting magic. In the center of the badge were three large, blood-red, jagged scratches that fit our other name of Berserker mage.

Even if I wasn't in uniform, the badge was easily recognizable and got the job done. The best perk of being an Elite Mage was that I could use any government-run transportation for free, including the gate.

"I'll have that right away, sir." The gnome said, her smile fading once she saw the badge. She put on a blank, monotone face and began working on our tickets. This was a normal reaction that I tried to avoid.

While Elite Mages were similar to cops and were here to protect the people, we had a much more negative reputation. The thing that made us unique was our ability to go beyond our limits for a short amount of time. In doing so, we gain a lot more power and strength, both physically and magically. It is this factor that has allowed us to win on many occasions and literally save cities and worlds. The downside of this is that with the explosive power we get, we also lose a little bit of self-control and sometimes lose a little bit of reasoning. There have been cases where, in trying to stop a bigger problem, Elite Mages might bury half a city block. In the end, we saved more lives than we took, but that didn't mean that people were comfortable around us. We were often thought of as a necessary evil.

"I can't get used to that, no matter how many times I see it," Jason muttered under his breath as we waited patiently for the receptionist to give us our tickets. I waited for her to give us the tickets and stepped off to the side before responding.

"Honestly, I feel the same. I've had this badge for less than a year, and the uneasy looks and not making eye contact with me get old. That's why I don't wear my uniform that often," I said, letting out a resigned sigh. It was my fate.

I led the way past the front desk and pushed the double doors open that separated the lobby from the gate room. It was a spacious room over 40 feet high and completely white in every direction except for the massive portal that

stood in the center of the room. The elf must have already gone through since there was no sign of her.

The portal reached up, flirting with the ceiling. It was almost as wide, making it a massive oval that looked like a stain in the white sterile room. At first glance, the portal seemed like a floating puddle, but instead of a nice blue or clear water, it was like a black mass with swirling rope-like purple strands mixed into it. Every time I saw it, it gave me a feeling of looking into an endless void. The eerie oval puddle spun suspended in the air in a slow, clockwise spiral, almost hypnotic. The only other things in the room were the two guards who checked our tickets and let us pass.

I had been through the gate only three times so far, and each time was no less unsettling than the last. Even if I got past the fact that it felt like I was walking into a towering black wall of liquid, which was intimidating enough, the gut-wrenching, somersault feeling you get when passing through the entrance got me. And the thing that made it most unnerving was the fact that it all happened in less than a second.

An old man in town had mentioned that taking a deep breath and holding it before entering made the entire experience a little less unnerving. I figured this was as good a time as any to test the theory and took a few long, deep breaths as I walked up to the vast expanse before me. I reached forward and let my fingers break the surface. It felt like nothing as I lost sight of my hand. I sucked in one last breath and held it as I passed through the portal.

Everything went black. Beyond the blackness you get when you close your eyes. It was like the entire world disappeared for a moment. There was no sound and no movement. Everything seemed to slow down. The only noise I could hear was the slow, loud thud of a single heartbeat. My stomach did summersault after summersault as I lowered my leg. Even though I told myself that solid ground was going to be there when I set my foot down, it still felt like I was going to step down, miss the world, and float off into an endless space.

The old man lied to me. It still felt as uncomfortable this time as ever. My foot fell, and I landed on solid Etherra, literally. In one single loud heartbeat, I exited the portal.

The light of the gate room was blinding compared to the eternal darkness of the gate. This room looked the same as the last one, with two guards and all-white walls. The only difference was coming from the thin windows at the top of the walls. The few rays of sunlight that we just left were replaced with the pitch-black darkness of night.

The next most noticeable change was the immediate loss of humidity. Since Cerulean was right on the water, there was always a heavy humidity that hung in the air. Eledor, however, was in the middle of the continent and was dry. The abrupt change in environment was a little jarring and made my sinuses feel instantly scratchy.

I glanced behind me as Jason passed through the portal, blinking at the painfully bright lights. We thanked the guard as we left the gate room and entered the main lobby, a perfect imprint of the lobby we just left. The large clock on the wall told me it was a little past 1 am.

“Damn, I forgot about the time difference. I highly doubt the airfield is open this late.” Jason said as we left the building. He removed his jacket, tossing it over his shoulder. The summer night was a lot warmer than the winter weather we had just left. “So, what do we do until morning?”

“I mean, there should be a bar open somewhere,” I said, making my way down the 20 or so concrete steps that led to the street. A few late-night taxis were sitting, waiting for any last-minute travelers like us. I could see the Elven woman who got the tickets before us. Two men were standing in front of her.

“Man, you should have started with that. Let's go.” Jason said with a lot more enthusiasm than he had shown thus far, practically jumping down the stairs. It looked like he hadn't noticed the Elf yet. From the looks of her tense body, the two men were not here to greet her.

My eyes narrowed as we got closer to them. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but both men were holding signs.

The closest one was a sign that said, 'Pointed Ears Aren't Welcome On Earth.' The world Earth was in all bold, indicating that they didn't believe in calling it Etherra. Jason saw my face harden and followed my eyes.

"Shit," he said, recognizing who they were or, more importantly, what they believed in. It took only three more steps before we were in earshot of them.

"Pointed ears aren't welcome here," The man closest to us said. He was a short, plump man with a scraggly brown beard. The fact that these people were here well past midnight meant that this was something that they were passionate about. Fanatics. After the incident three months ago, I had a sour taste in my mouth for anyone that die-hard about their beliefs.

"Why don't you go back to where you are from and leave us the hell alone? There is no business for a pointed-eared freak like you to be here," the other man jeered at the small elf. He was taller than the first man but as thin as a pole. A strong wind might blow that man away.

Their dialog was so cliché that it was almost painful to listen to. It was as if they didn't have a real reason as to why they hated other races. To be perfectly honest, they might not have a reason other than that they are different.

"I don't want any trouble," the elf said in a slightly shaky voice. It was clear that she was very uncomfortable with the situation. I happily removed the badge from my pocket and pinned it to my chest. I normally hated the reactions the badge caused me, but today seemed to be an exception.

"Why are you blocking the street?" I asked, stepping up behind the elf. She jumped and spun around to face me. I saw each of their eyes move to my face and then to the badge on my chest. Before she could freak out about coming face to face with me, I stepped past her and placed my hands on top of their signs, pinning them to the ground. They were made from thin cardboard, and the smell of paint was fresh on its surface.

I pulled a thread of mana over my eyes and down my arms. During my time training my mana eyes, I learned one

cool trick. If I forcefully injected a large amount of mana into my eyes, they would begin to glow an eerie blue. I had been told on more than one occasion that it was just freaky to watch. Thanks to that, I had used it to intimidate someone. A small smile spread across my lips as my reflection in their eyes showed a flicker of blue. *And this is why people think you are the bad guy.*

I ignored the thought and continued to pull mana from my core. Fear flashed over their faces as their signs burst into flames. I was almost impressed that they didn't run away until I saw the tall man shaking like a leaf.

"I said, why are you blocking the road?" My voice was stern, and my smile grew wider.

"I'm sorry, sir. It won't happen again," both said simultaneously, dropping their gaze. The still-burning signs toppled to the ground as the two men turned around, moving quickly.

"Idiots," I let out a sigh, my mana drifting back to my core. Tears welled up in my eyes, and I had to blink a few times to clear them. Forcing that much mana into my eyes was dangerous, but worth it from time to time.

"Th- thank you," the elf stammered as I turned around. The girl was shaking like a leaf. She was more scared now than when she was facing off against the two men.

"No problem," I said with a shrug. It was to be expected that she was also scared of me. At this point, it was more beneficial for me to get out of there as quickly as I could. I pocketed the badge and turned around, heading for the taxis. "Let's go."

"Seriously. You saved her, and she couldn't even be truly grateful," Jason spat, clearly irritated. It was nice that he was trying to stick up for me.

"Don't worry about it," I said, opening the taxi door and letting Jason slide in first.

"Evening. Where can I take you?" The driver asked once we were both inside.

"Is there a bar that is open at this time?" Jason led the conversation.

“Yes, sir. Is there anywhere you want to be close to?”

“Yeah, if you can get us close to the airfield, I would appreciate it,” I said, buckling myself in, trying to ignore how painfully hot the inside of the taxi was.

“No problem.” He said, putting the cab in gear. The driver was an old-looking ratman. It was rare to see them in this area because they normally preferred living in dry, hot places like the desert. He had the face of a desert mouse and was covered in fur. The fur around his eyes and mouth was turning white in his old age. I could see his long, leathery tail laid across the front seat and up the door. It was a little chilly outside for a summer night. I was perfectly comfortable in jeans and a T-shirt. From the look of the ratman, you would think we were in the Arctic. He was wrapped in at least three layers, with the outermost layer being a thick, puffy winter coat. As if that wasn’t enough, he also had the heat on full. I could feel sweat building up on the back of my neck.

“Thanks for that back there, kid,” the old driver said after a few moments of silence. “I’ve been driving taxis for the better part of 20 years now. Folks like that have always given other races a hard time. It’s hard to stop them since they rarely hurt anyone. And if we make a fuss, it proves them right. So, I just wanted to say that I appreciate you standing up for that elf girl.”

I didn’t answer. One wasn’t needed, but I couldn’t help but smile as we continued our drive. Jason lasted another 30 seconds of silence before starting up a conversation with the driver. They talked about this and that as we drove down the empty streets.

Funny enough, it was night every time I came to the city. There was little nightlife here, and most businesses were locked and shut down, making it seem closer to the slums than a bustling city. I knew the airfield was on the edge of town, and it took us almost half an hour of zero traffic to reach it.

“Here you go. Best bar in the area,” he said with a nod as we got out. Jason exchanged a proper goodbye, and I reached into my pocket for money. He held up his little rat

hand and waved me off. "This one is on the house. For the elf."

I shook his outstretched hand before closing the door. We waved as he sped off into the night. The outside air felt almost cold compared to the steamy cab we had just left. We both took some deep breaths, letting the night air cool us off.

"You sure he dropped us off at the right place?" Jason asked, looking around. The street was empty; all the large buildings that lined the street were shut down.

"Well, he said this was the best place," I said, wondering if we had different ideas of what was good. From the street, we couldn't hear any music or sign of life. Only a sign pointing down a flight of stairs to what looked like the basement of an office building told us that there was a bar there.

The sign was yellow, with a green vine wrapping around it and the words 'Little Garden' written on it. As we descended the stairs, the light that should have been on was dead, making the small staircase pitch black. The faintest hum of music could be heard as we reached the bottom and pushed open the fogged-up glass door. We were hit with a rush of warm air, humidity, and the overwhelming smell of dirt.

"Little Garden is kinda an understatement," Jason said with a whistle. He was right. This place was more of a hidden forest than a garden. From floor to ceiling were various tropical plants that flowered and vined their way throughout the room and across the ceiling. It was honestly very beautiful and refreshing.

The quiet lull of music filled the room just loud enough to allow reasonable conversation between the customers. Round tables were scattered around the room, each with a beautiful tropical flower in full bloom. Most of the tables had at least one person happily drinking. It definitely had a more laid-back atmosphere, and I liked it a lot. We made our way to the bar, took two stools in the middle, and ordered our drinks.