

CHOICES
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FOR
GODS

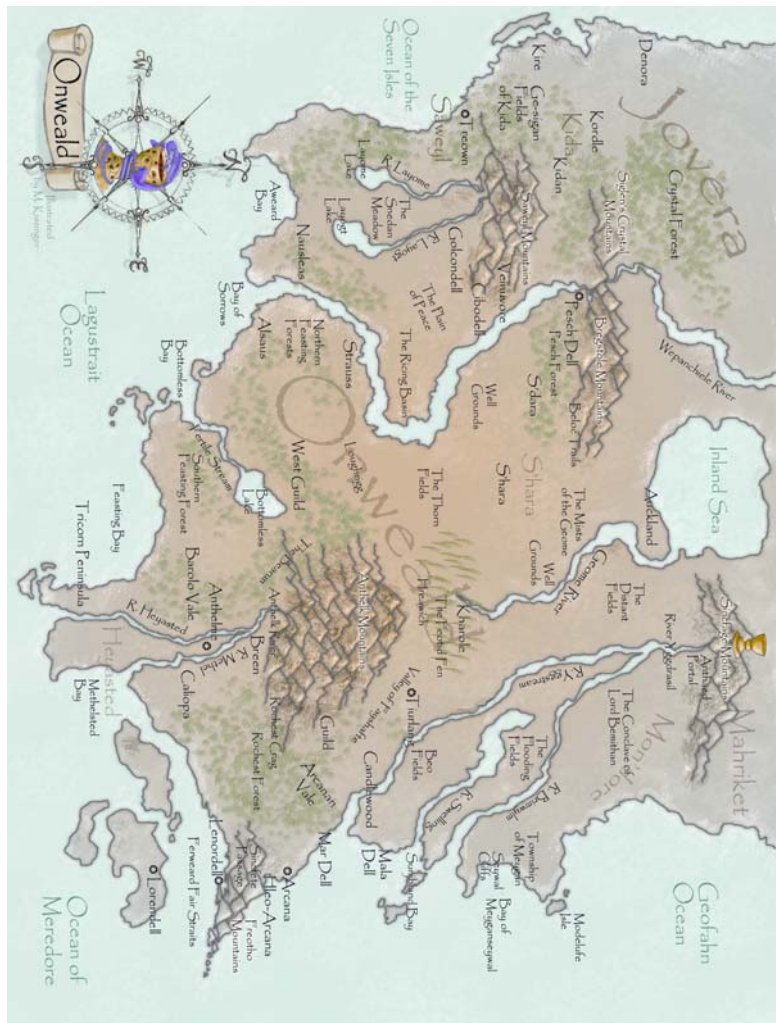
A Novel By

Sandy
Lender

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ArcheBooks Publishing

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DEDICATION

to Lavinia Lamkin

My Kora Rothahn, my Hrazon of Mon'dore, my Mia,
my matriarch, my mentor, and my support—
I wish you could have met Nigel and Chariss

CHOICES MEANT
FOR GODS

CHAPTER ONE

Lord Baine would not return.

Standing on the threshold of a Baine estate balcony, Chariss thought about the ofersey'n's situation. She stared into the distance as if the clouds would form a picture of his battles for her, but considering what she knew about Baine's enemy, she didn't need much imagination. The man had gone to join a battle he couldn't win. No one in his household realized it yet, but several, including Chariss, began to suspect.

She stepped onto the balcony to lean against its rail and shivered. Hrell Baine was a worthy man, and it upset her to think he could already be dead. Springtime brought fresh, good things—not a war, not the death of a good man. A tear brimmed in her eye at the thought, and as she let her gaze tilt to the buildings of the village below, the tear fell. It splashed against her wrist and left a violet splay. Violet—like the color

of her eyes. Violet—like the jewel that graced her cheekbone, up near the corner of her right eye.

Chariss was a pretty girl. Well, she was pretty until she drew a sword. Then she was just plain lethal. Despite her skill with a sword, she didn't carry the purposeful look of hardened warriors. Call it balance if you like, but her face held the look of a young woman who could set aside the wrongs done to her over the years and enjoy some fleeting moment.

The gods themselves came to miss that look.

Back then, the gods still breathed the geasa into mortals to assist them, and Chariss possessed that gift in abundance. The geasa enabled Chariss to call spells and forces that could serve to protect her from Baine's approaching enemy.

The geasa pulled her from reverie that morning, whispering in her ear, *Flee now*.

"Chariss!" her guardian called. "Drake is here!"

They were still running when day passed into night.

CHAPTER TWO



In the night that Chariss entered the life of Hleo-Arcana, the eldest Taiman son was away, so Kyle Adan walked the family's halls to make sure all was safe. Imagine his surprise at hearing a sound on the front door. He lifted his lantern to check the hall clock. It was just past midnight. The second moon should have reached its zenith, and all manner of beasts should have come out of hiding. Thinking Nigel Taiman had returned early, Kyle didn't think twice about lifting the bar to let him in. He was about to greet the man as he hauled the door open, but the lantern revealed a different scene. There stood an old man and a young woman, leaning on one another for support.

"Who goes there?" He lifted the light to show their faces. He saw no shapes behind them and wondered how they had breached the far gate (and how long ago).

"I know the master of this house," the man began. "Please

tell him an old friend needs help.”

“At this hour? Are you mad?”

It wasn't the idea of helping them that bothered Kyle, but the tongue-lashing he'd get from Mister Godric Alan Taiman if he let two strangers in so late, even if they did look like harmless travelers. The man wore ordinary trousers of non-sense brown that matched the shirt he wore laced up and loose against his toned frame. Over it all a torn cape hung as tired from his shoulders as his head. His unkempt beard shook when he spoke as if all the energy left in him went into the effort of forming the words.

The young woman was just as plainly dressed with a brown smock that laced up both sides of her torso with leather laces over a beige underdress. The sleeves had been pushed up to expose her forearms that were porcelain white from a winter indoors. Her slender fingers suggested she was Geasa'n with their length, and she clutched the old man's arm as she leaned against him. If they hadn't been so tired from travel deep into the night, he would mistake them for ordinary beggars in the ordinary garb of Arcanan citizens. But as the light from his lantern moved across their faces, Kyle noticed something sparkle on the lady's cheek. His eyes darted to the man's, and it was only then that he recognized the greatest wizard ever created.

“By the gods. Of course, come in, of course. Please come in and I'll get Mister Taiman right away.” He continued an almost nervous chatter as he ushered them in. “You look like you've had trouble on the road, Hrazon. Wait on this bench. I'll be right back.”

His boots echoed as he hurried away, and the darkness of the vaulted ceiling closed down on them, both huddled together between mahogany walls that had never received two

such travelers before. The question entered Chariss's mind: *Did he bar the door?* She hadn't heard him replace the bolt. But then, she was so weary that she couldn't trust her senses. She shivered in her wizard's embrace.

The very walls watched them.

"Hold on," Hrazon whispered. "These people will help you." He'd been unsure what direction they were going as they fled Treown earlier that day, but he recognized Hleo-Arcana when they passed its outer wall. "The master of this house was a student of mine. You met him at court, but you probably don't remember much of him. He married a woman who has the gift of healing. She'll know just how to care for you. She'll have you up on your feet in no time. By morning, you'll feel yourself again."

They both grew silent, listening to the rustle of their clothes as he rocked her slowly. She wished he would keep talking, the timber of his voice flowing through his beard to cloak her with reassurance. Over time, she became aware of another sound in the dark—the tick-tock tick-tock of a clock. Focusing on the sound, she could tell that the instrument must be large, made of sturdy wood—like the door they had knocked upon, like the bench they sat on now, like the impressive estate they'd flown to. She listened to the tick-tock meter echo off the walls, and with her shivering calming under its rhythm, her mind began unraveling the damage of the day.

She berated herself for doing more than she was capable. What if she'd made a mistake? She could have killed them both with the slightest lapse of concentration, and that stung her more than the pain now threatening to knock her unconscious.

It will be no one's fault but my own if I've killed myself trying

spells I can't control.

Even amid her meditation that her guardian assumed was repair, she knew the doorman had found help. Somewhere behind the soothing tick-tock she heard voices and footsteps.

First, a man's jovial greeting turned to alarm: "Hrazon, Old Man! Is that you?" Pause. "Hrazon? Is this blood?"

The doorman spoke next: "Should I go for the doctor?"

Then the voice of an angel toned, "Please, Kyle, with all haste."

"Hrazon, can you speak?" the man of the house asked.

Chariss recognized the man's voice from somewhere, but didn't have the energy to look up at him. If Hrazon trusted the man with his life, well, then she would trust him, too. After the day of fleeing an assassin, and fleeing in the manner that she had, she had no choice.

"Yes, yes, thank you, Godric," Hrazon answered.

"By The Master, what's happened?" Godric turned to shout to the depths of the house for servants, but turned back to his guests. "Just sit tight. We'll take care of you."

The house erupted with its master shouting and footsteps pounding. New, quick conversations sprang out of the darkness. Orders passed to servants. "Bring water and a cloth to wash Hrazon's wound. Post guards along the wall. Prepare guest rooms on the third floor."

If she'd been able to lift her head, Chariss would have seen a blur of servants in nightshirts and robes lighting candles along the walls. From somewhere in the fray Godric's voice came close to them again, "Kora, this is Hrazon of Mon'dore, the one I went to the ofersey'n's court to speak for a few years ago. And this young lady must be Chariss."

"I'm Kora, the mistress of this house. I give you my word you'll be cared for and protected here."

Chariss lifted her head, and her dry lips cracked into what little smile she could muster. She closed her eyes for the effort of sending a thought to the woman: *Don't let Hrazon know what's wrong with me.*

With the message Kora felt the self-diagnosis—and her heart ached with the girl's concern for her wizard. Chariss had overextended herself that day. Hrazon would have to explain how this came to be, because his ward was in no condition to answer questions. However, Kora received one message loud and clear—her new patient clung tenuously to life.

“Alan, please carry Chariss to bed.”

The man recognized a stress in his wife's voice and broke off barking orders at his servants. “The rooms aren't ready.”

“We can use your Aunt Khana's room.” She met his gaze with purpose. Kora was a stoic woman, not tall, but full-bodied and able to stand her ground when necessary. Tonight she needed to get her ailing guest to bed and would waste no time on argument. “Please carry her.”

Godric emitted a sound almost like a growl. He either didn't like his wife offering him an order or he didn't want to put anyone in his aunt's room. Khana, who had been dead for at least forty years, certainly wouldn't need it.

Kora placed a hand on his forearm and responded softly to his growl, “It will be all right, My Love.”

“Help Hrazon follow us,” Godric commanded a servant.

Chariss felt Godric lift her up, away from Hrazon's embrace. It was more pain than she could endure, and she slipped into the unconsciousness that both she and Kora feared.

“Tell us what's happened,” Godric said. “Are there horses, a carriage we should tend to?”

“No, no horses.” Hrazon drew a labored breath. “We ran the horses into the ground not sixty leagues out of Treown

this morning.”

Godric nearly stumbled in surprise. “This morning? You’re mistaken. You’ve lost track of the days.”

As if ignoring him, Hrazon continued. “It broke her heart to do it, but we had no choice. We couldn’t stop to bury them.”

“Couldn’t stop? Are you in trouble?”

“An enemy pursued us.” Breath. “Drake attacked Treown at sunrise.”

“What?” Now Godric stopped at the foot of a massive staircase and turned to face the wizard. “That’s Lord Baine’s territory.”

Hrazon read the disbelief on Godric’s face, but didn’t blame him for it. The land of Onweald had enjoyed peace for nearly four decades. To think one of its oferseý’n invaded another’s capital city was ludicrous. But Godric had once studied under Hrazon and would trust his word.

“Was Baine successful?” he asked. “Did he stand?”

“He took his army to defend Golcondell from Drake weeks ago. I’m certain Treown fell well before midday.”

“What made him think Golcondell needed help?”

“He received a messenger from Lord Gint requesting aid against an army. Baine himself led his own army to the fight. He sent a messenger back a few weeks later.”

Hrazon explained how Baine’s message named Drake, the new oferseý’n from the northwest, as the enemy, but offered no reason why the man had started a war. He sent his daughters his love, put them in his brother’s care, and asked all to pray for The Master’s help. The note had left his daughters tearful and left Hrazon and Chariss fearful. They knew Drake would pursue Chariss, and were left no choice but to prepare for their escape.

Godric grunted at this news and mounted the stairs with Chariss limp in his arms. Their conversation continued up the staircase. The structure curved as it reached for the second floor so the empty space between its carved wood banisters and towering wall could demonstrate Arcana's prosperity. Hrazon found that the events of the day had taxed his strength enough that he had to lean on the servant as they climbed.

The gaping mouth of the staircase gave way to a dim hall that led the party past closed doors and empty rooms. Hrazon imagined the doorman sprinting down these corridors in a panic just moments ago. The darkness of the doors they passed blended into stone walls as if the mountain the home had been carved from had been stained to match the mahogany barriers that kept passing eyes from seeing inside. The house seemed to hide behind those doors, behind the stones that retained the warmth of fires in the hearths beyond them. Even the embers in the fireplaces hissed an admonishment, hushing and shushing the voices in the hall.

Godric's voice boomed as it left his chest, but the stones and their blankets of tapestries absorbed the sound, muffling it with the doors standing guard against the travelers. Hrazon felt it appropriate to keep his voice low as he answered Godric's volley of questions along the way.

Godric reached the room Kora desired and laid Chariss on the oversized bed. A servant dashed in ahead of them and pulled back the blankets. Another scurried in with firewood, and yet another with strips of cloth. The flurry made Hrazon's head spin, and the sound of waves crashing against the cliffs below took his attention. The growl of the ocean reminded him how far they had traveled to be so far southeast on Onweald, and the bustle of activity in a usually dormant room

reminded him how much danger his ward was in.

“We didn’t realize he’d amassed so much power so fast,” Hrazon said.

“I find it unbelievable Drake could do anything such as this without help. He’s only been in Kida a few years. How could he convince his people to go along with this?”

“He’s been there two years this spring, and I believe the Joveran people helped build the army.”

“Hmpf. It seems longer than that since court was held. And do you still believe he attacked today? Do you mean that you were in Treown this morning?”

Hrazon nodded. “She brought us here. I don’t know how. Somehow, she must’ve picked the estate from my mind, and when our horses gave out, she grabbed my hand and we moved through time. We moved like spirits, it seemed.” He looked at Kora as if he expected her to understand. She looked like a sensible Geasa’n. Her mannerisms and demeanor spoke to Hrazon, telling him she understood completely, before he gave voice to his concerns.

“I’ve only performed that feat once in my life,” he said. “And then it was a short distance, across a city. I fear for what it’s done to her, what you’re not telling me.”

With a motherly smile Kora looked down at her patient. Her fingers stroked Chariss’s hand like a lover, and there was a supreme sadness in the gesture. “You already know she has a terrible fever.” Kora’s features betrayed how worried she was despite the kind expression she offered in her smile, her full, pale lips forming the curve with a practiced smoothness that spoke volumes. If she had intended to imply joy with that smile, her fairy green eyes would have twinkled with light; but tonight there was a lackluster shine about them.

“She overexerted herself today,” she said.

Even without Chariss's final wish, Kora couldn't have told him that the child he loved like a daughter had telabyrinth poisoning. The hormones and energies secreted during the act of teleporting made a dangerous combination. Typically, members of the Geasa'n never learned the skill. Yet, Kora sat staring at a young lady, barely twenty years of age, who had poured every ounce of strength she had into teleporting two people nearly two-thousand leagues in a day. Kora feared they might never solve the mystery of how Chariss had accomplished the feat. Her patient fell deeper into a coma with each passing moment, and she found she couldn't bring herself to tell Hrazon that, indeed, Chariss was dying.

CHAPTER THREE

Treown went down without a fight. The more politically astute nobles had escaped before Baine even left for Golcondell. Some of the merchants, hearing rumors of the approaching army through suppliers and traders, packed up their shops and took what wares they could transport to other cities. Most of the outlying farmers had gathered their seeds for the upcoming season and gone to greener pastures. It left little in the city to contend with.

Drake commanded his own Kidan Army, comprised of thousands of warriors on foot, and the Joveran Army of five-thousand foot soldiers and five-thousand mounts. He developed a new name for the united forces; something that was meant to instill fear, of course. The combined troops were called the Dreorfahn, loosely translated as “gore-stained,” and a contingent of the mass finished what was left kneeling at Treown in a matter of hours. As night closed in on their new

camp, one of the generals went up to Baine's house in search of his leader.

There Jamieson Drake sat like a king on a throne. But no crown adorned his head, and the parlor he kept watch over was littered with bodies. Blood dripped from a gash in his side, leaving an unkingly puddle beside his chair. He stared at the soldier now blocking moonlight in the doorway and knew the man didn't bear him good news.

"Come in, Nicolas. Report."

"My lord, the sentries found two horses not sixty leagues north."

"North? What was that old buzzard thinking?"

"There are trails, my lord."

"Trails? More than one?" Drake's eyebrows furrowed in frustration. The light tufts were in direct contrast to the midnight blue of his eyes. "What, one for each ridiculous ofersey'n left out there that might save them? Are any of these trails real?"

"They had discounted two of them before I left to bring you my report. My hope is they've found the true one by now and can overtake Hrazon by morning."

Drake chortled under his breath. "Doubtful. And your hope should be that you're not there if they overtake Hrazon of Mon'dore."

"The sentries say the wizard's spells were thrown around, disguised, but their source is along the Wepanchiele. Not on it, though. They're on foot. They're moving in a northern direction. I've deduced from what the sentries have found that Hrazon's taking her north, probably to the ports in Auckland, in Lord Fermson's lands."

Drake contemplated the general's use of the word "deduce." It seemed wrong for Nicolas to use fancy words.

Something had the general riled up this evening. Still perturbed by the idea of tracking multiple trails, Drake turned his gaze to a map on the parlor wall. Without stretching the wound in his side, he pointed at the map, pulling Nicolas Lont's eyes to it. "They will run out of land and the inland sea is still frozen that far north. Why would they run into a geographic trap?"

"To elude us."

Another odd use of vocabulary, Drake mused. "Hrazon is not a fool."

He was an intense leader, this Lord Drake. He was also a powerful sorcerer, yet Lont would argue with him, would challenge him, albeit carefully. This was one reason why Lont had won the small degree of respect the leader afforded him.

"I tell you the source of the spells was north."

"Perhaps he has an ally there."

"One that you don't know about, My Lord? I doubt that."

Drake almost smiled at the flattery. It seemed real coming from Lont's lips. "I think he goes to Arcana."

"No defenses," Lont quipped.

"They have The Master Himself."

"You've told me how The Master treated Hrazon in the past. Surely the wizard wouldn't run to Him now. And I, for one, do not believe in such rumors."

Drake considered that Lont had not only listened to his stories of Hrazon and Chariss, he remembered them well enough to use them in conversation. It was an interesting concept to the leader. Not all of his peons were so attentive. "You don't believe The Master's own daughter could call her father for defense?"

Lont huffed, "Legends and bards' exaggerated songs. The gods do not walk among us."

Now Drake smiled. As if pointing out Lont's error, he asked, "What did Juliette suggest?"

The general bristled. "I didn't ask her opinion."

Drake's clucked his tongue. "Now, now, Nicolas, she's here to help us."

"She's a disgusting beast. I'll not beg favors of her, nor will I indebt myself to her."

"You already have." Pause. "When I sold her my soul, I sold yours as well. Every man outside this house is mine, just as you, and every man I've given to her. She'll not only find Chariss again, she'll lead us to her. Juliette will make me victorious in more than my desire to see the wench dead on my blade. She's going to help us take over the entire continent. I'll own and rule all of Onweald before she's done, and we can move on to Bellan."

Drake winced at a fresh pang in his wound and gasped for breath.

In that instant, General Nicolas Lont ignored his station and reached for his leader. Taking hold of Drake's clammy wrist, Lont spoke with genuine concern, "My Lord, let me call for a doctor."

But the ofersey'n shook his head and spoke through gritted teeth, "I'll have no mortal stitch me up like a sack. I'll have no scar to prove that wench bested me."

"Bested you? No woman will best you, My Lord. Nor any mortal man, for that matter. You hold Saweyl and all of Gint's lands. She fled with her tail between her legs like a mongrel dog—"

"She fled to protect that old man. It would do you well to remember she has the geasa, and I don't believe she has fled from me for years. It's Hrazon she protects, not her own skin. She left me with this hole in my side because I forgot." He

paused to wince. “But I won’t forget again.”

“You’re right, My Lord. But tell me what to do.”

“There’s nothing either of us can do. The blade was spelled with something I can’t unravel. I’ve sent for Julette.”

Lont didn’t have to respond aloud. His leader already knew of his dislike for the woman—if you could call her that. Her origin was long forgotten among mortals, but her power infamous. Few stories existed in history that predated her deification; fewer still portrayed her in a positive light. She had many names—The Dragon, the devil, the betrayer—but the name she’d possessed all her immortal life was Julette. Even before The Ultimate One made her immortal she’d been powerful. Her name back then had been fashioned after the ancient names, but there was no one alive who could remember her as Kelthowr...or who would care to.

As she arrived in the Dreorfahn camp, her husky voice crossed the parlor before her. “I didn’t believe it when the messenger said the great almighty Jamieson Drake was wounded.” She pushed Lont aside. “But here you are. Wounded. Bleeding. Unable to heal yourself. Tsk tsk tsk.”

Far from a disgusting beast, Julette looked prepared to join her men in battle. She wore a knife in a sheath over the bulging muscle of her upper left arm and her hands were covered by fingerless black gloves so she could better grip the hilt of the sword at her waist. She wore military boots that were standard issue in Jovera’s army, but her legs grew out of them like the sinuous limbs of a fig tree to reach up under a chain mail skirt. The exposed flesh was the sun-kissed color of fruit, but had the hard look of fresh leather.

The woman reeked of desire. Lont felt his stomach turn each time he saw her, but found his eyes, like those of his leader, following the curve of her side and the swell of the

form-fitting metal body armor sheathing her torso. She would freeze if they went north, Lont hoped.

She looked at General Lont, dismissing him with, “You can go.”

With a short bow to his ofersey’n, Lont obeyed.

“So you send for me as if I’m one of your petty servants to command?” she asked with a hint of amusement. The tone in her voice put the sorcerer on his guard. Even in his wounded state, he recognized her instability.

“I requested you because I need your help,” Drake replied with deference.

She gave him a satisfied smile. “Indeed. Well? What is it you need me to do?”

“You know what I need.”

“Oh, I suppose you want me to find Chariss for you again?” She ignored him gnashing his teeth against the pain in his side. “I’ll tell you they went north, if you want me to lend credence to your general’s continued service. But you’ll have better luck finding Chariss to the east—through the deserts of S’hara. I can feel the heat rising off her every time I reach for her image.”

Intent on believing, Drake didn’t stop to think of the obvious: the possibility that Chariss had a fever. Nor did he question how she could get that far east so quickly. Three rivers lay between Treown and the well grounds that gave way to the desert region of Onweald. And the ice on the Wepanchiele was already breaking up despite the freezing nights of this late winter. Chariss and Hrazon would have had to hire a boat to cross where the river’s body swelled, and its banks were too distant to see in the fog that lay perpetually on its surface.

He grimaced at a new shot of pain. “You must do something to heal this,” he gasped.

She watched him pant for breath as his pain subsided to a dull throb, and then spoke. “Can’t you heal yourself, Sorcerer?”

“You taunt me.”

“Of course I taunt you.” Her anger sprang to the surface. Her black eyes flashed, and she spoke with authority. “You fool. How dare you disobey me? How dare you come near her?”

“I didn’t—”

“How dare you enter this house with her in it? Did you think she wouldn’t know you were coming? Listen to me and hear me well, Jamieson Drake.” She spat his name and leaned in to support herself on either arm of his chair. Her voice lowered to a whisper. “Amanda Chariss can send you and your army to oblivion any moment of her choosing. You will die without me.”

He dared to contradict her. “I am a sorcerer. She is merely a girl with the geasa.”

“That girl is something I’ve never seen before.”

She moved away from him, letting her last statement sink in. Juliette may have looked vibrant, sensual, young, but she was almost as old as time itself. To say she had never seen the likes of Chariss wasn’t just surprising. It was alarming.

Drake watched her examining the dead while he pondered this. Chariss had indeed surprised him over the years with one disappearing act or another, but to hear all his easily contrived excuses for her escapes dismissed by Juliette’s pronouncement was disturbing. He had convinced himself time and again that his peons had been sloppy or that Chariss had been lucky, and thus had managed to escape his clutches. To think even for a second that she had eluded him with superior skill set him back.

“Do you mean to tell me she is greater than me?”

“I mean to tell you, and you will not repeat this, I don’t know the extent of her gift.”

The statement sent a chill through him, but he was more affected by his wound than he realized. He found that he lost focus on the concept. Instead, he watched Juliette’s form smear before his eyes. She nudged a body with the toe of her boot, and it reminded him of a scene from that morning. Chariss had worn boots like the ones that clung to Juliette’s legs, only they were taller.

He watched Juliette before him bend down and pull a silk scarf from the corpse’s grip. It was wet and stained with blood. Nevertheless, his mind wrestled with the fact that Chariss had worn a long dress. How, therefore, had he seen her boots?

Blood loss mingled with exhaustion, clouding his senses. He watched Juliette groggily as he tried to remember. Chariss had stopped at the top of the stairs and pulled up one side of her skirt. She had slid a knife from the leather strap around her thigh, just above the top of the boot. And her hair had fallen forward, framing her face like a portrait. He had stared at that portrait even earlier in the morning, when she had appeared in the balcony doorway as if to greet the first sun of the day. His delirium made the memory appear like a scene from a play before him.

He had stood in the village of Treown, ignoring the sparse clatter of merchants opening their stores and kiosks for the day’s business.

“Ere’s yore daggah, suh,” an uneasy, greasy merchant had mumbled.

Yes, Drake remembered the feel of stretched leather as the merchant placed the sheathed weapon in his hand; but even at the time, Drake seemed not to notice its heft. He’d merely

stared off toward the estate to the north of the village ignoring the man, ignoring the soldiers standing guard around him. His attention was focused solely on a young woman at the house. No ordinary mortal could see whether the curtains were open or closed, but Drake was far from ordinary. Motionless, he watched a figure on the balcony above with heightened interest.

She was beautiful.

For years he had hunted this girl, his only desire to kill her, preferably in front of her guardian. He watched the breeze tease the ends of her auburn curls and his lust stumbled over itself. When was the last time he had actually seen her? The oferseyn's court seemed long ago. Now she looked so much like her mother that the image caught his breath.

With the steady hand of a village surgeon, Drake dragged the dagger from its sheath and fluidly slid its blade into the merchant's belly. The memory of the man's death mingled with the memory of Chariss's womanly form and heightened Drake's sensation of lust. He could imagine the blade in her body just as easily as remembering it in the merchant's.

Julette stood up in Lord Baine's parlor and, staring at Drake's far-away gaze, smiled wanly. She had known for two years what the leader was about to admit to himself, and her swinging mood let her delight in his confusion.

"Oh, you are more than a fool," she leered.

He jolted back to the present. "I'm delirious with fever. This wound will finish me."

"You're already finished if you think you can have that girl as anything more than a pile of ashes. I thought you wanted to kill her."

"What? I do."

"You lie."

“I have promised her death for sixteen years,” he snapped. He avoided her eyes, knowing she would harass him if she saw what he tried to hide there, what he had hid from himself for two years.

“And today you changed your mind.”

She stated it so succinctly that it caught him off guard. Yes, that had to be the answer. He had changed his mind. The girl who represented betrayal to him had been his quest for so long that vengeance against her had become a well-loved friend. It seemed all he lived for was the day he'd slit her throat. But now he acknowledged the dreams she had sparked in him at court two years ago. Maybe it was still vengeance, but it was no longer her death he longed for. He paused to reflect on the way he'd reacted to seeing her again that morning. If not for the wound draining his senses, would he have grown irate at the feeling of anticipation in his body? Or would he finally accept it, let it grow wild?

“So will you help me capture her?”

Now Julette laughed, further evidence of her tenuous grasp on lucidity tonight. “Why not? I've promised you half the world. Why not Chariss as well?”

“I have sentries chasing her now with orders to kill.”

Julette rolled her eyes at the implication. “We both know they don't stand a chance against Hrazon.” She lowered her voice again. “You are a pawn to me, Jamieson, but a pawn that I have uses for. I would be displeased if you died.” As the words fell on his ears, the gash in his side began to heal. “You will be more careful in the future. You will not rush to capture her yourself. You will wait for me and my good timing. Do you understand?”

He nodded. “I will wait for your good, and perfect, timing.”

She could read the impatience behind his promise, but knew he understood. "You need something to occupy you."

A body behind her moaned. With the flick of her wrist, Juliette called it into motion. Drake watched the ungraceful, broken servant woman stagger to her feet. He frowned at its homely countenance covered with gashes and blood, and then smiled as it began to change. The matted hair grew in an instant and turned auburn brown, cascading down the crippled back that quickly straightened. The arms lengthened, the breasts rose, and the broken legs became sure. The transformation stopped and the servant's eyes flew open in alarm. She didn't look exactly like Chariss, but the effect was close enough.

"Intriguing," he mused.

"Yes. Now, I must go see to your sentries."

"Of course," he said absently. "But which room belonged to Chariss?"

"Top of the stairs, second door on the left." With that, Juliette turned on her heels and strode out of the house. She needed to find Lont and give him something useful to do. He had his own tent, probably near the house, so he would be easy to find. And easy to use. The man was not the smartest she'd ever worked with, but he was loyal to the ofersey'n, and that's what she needed.

She felt no loyalty to the sorcerer, but what she'd said to him was true. She had uses for him. He was more valuable to her alive than dead, and so she endured his arrogance and stupidity. Falling in love (or lust, whatever it was) with Hrazon's ward was foolish to the extreme. If Amanda Chariss with her untapped power didn't finish the ofersey'n, then Hrazon of Mon'dore would. Unless they got lucky. And if those two had fled to Hleo-Arcana, well, then, she and Lord Drake were

lucky indeed.

She had hoped to get her claws into Godric's family before the fugitives arrived. She had designs for the estate, but political games had kept her from making a move so far. And she hated political games. Her plan for taking the estate had been set in motion years before. She had merely to remain patient and all of Onweald would tumble like a broken glass into her hand. With that juicy thought, she spotted the general's tent.

A soldier had pitched the tent near the house, so she didn't have far to search. Nicolas was usually alone when not in his oferseyn's presence. It would be easy to dismiss his penchant for solitude by explaining that he didn't fit in with the rest of the soldiers. In truth, General Lont, while not very smart, deserved more credit than that. Yes, he avoided the embarrassment of trying to mingle with the soldiers he commanded, but he also avoided exposure. By keeping his secrets to himself, he didn't have to worry about The Dragon taking an interest in him. Lont desired more than a high-ranking title in his oferseyn's army. But it would take a deal with something worse than the devil to get what he wanted.

This thought raced through his mind as Julette lifted the flap to enter his tent without a word of warning. She considered the startled look on his face to be nothing more than a mortal's reaction to her appearance. She reveled in it.

"Is Lord Drake healed?" he stammered.

"My, aren't we demanding? And what makes you think I go around healing oferseyn?"

"I think I have a right to know if my leader will live or die," Lont quipped.

"Of course you do," was her patronizing reply. "He'll be fine. I came to talk about your sentries. They're all Geasa'n,

correct?”

“Yes.”

“Gather some ungifted men. Men who can track without magic. Men you trust.”

“How many do you need?”

“One for each city in Lord Wold’s lands.”

“You believe Chariss is headed there?”

“Try not to think, Nicolas. You look so much more handsome when you’re bewildered. Yes, I believe Chariss has fled to the east. I want our ungifted spies to go to Breen, Candlewood, Caliopa, West Guild, and Arcana.” She spoke the last city’s name with a hint of excitement. “I want to know the exact size of their armies, and I want to know if we have any *guests* in Arcana.”

“I will send them out immediately.”

“Wait! Wait. I appreciate your enthusiasm. But make sure these men truly don’t have the geasa. Hrazon and Chariss will pick up their scent cities away.”

“Understood. Lord Drake has spies in Caliopa and Arcana City already. I could send messengers to them.”

She already knew of the spies in Arcana City. “I will send my own messengers to them—ones who are much faster. And here is the next point I wish to make. Chariss is to be captured alive.”

“Alive?”

“It is the ofersey’n’s wish.”

“He’s been unable to capture her dead for sixteen years now. What makes him think we can take her alive? What makes him think we can get her away from Hrazon?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It is his wish. I will try to make it so. Go round up your spies, and I’ll find a way to contain her. I’m not merely a sorceress, but a goddess, after all.”

CHAPTER FOUR



Despite their seclusion, Hrazon and Chariss were the subject of rumors spreading through Hleo-Arcana by morning, so Kora chose to leave her patient's side to perform damage control. Her guests were in danger; she didn't need more than two-dozen children blabbing their whereabouts in the city that afternoon. She called an impromptu curfew and asked Godric to call exams for the afternoon instead of the customary free time. She then dealt with the orders for lunch and dinner, but wanted to quickly get back to Chariss.

"I can't get through her nightmares, and I think they're holding her back," she whispered to the servant Loetha. "She's spending too much energy trying to stop repeating a dream. I'll need something to help me get into her mind and I think Nicin will do the trick."

The two spoke in conspiratorial tones to hide the severity of Chariss's illness from Hrazon. As a wizard, Hrazon could easily diagnose what was wrong with his ward, but due to the limitations the gods had made when creating various beings, wizards couldn't heal with the same level of skill other Geasa'n could. Kora and Loetha elected to keep him from fretting any more than he already did. It was obvious something beyond Chariss's condition weighed on his mind. From experience, he knew his and his ward's presence brought danger to the members of the household and he wanted to speak to Kora about the threat they posed without alarming her. When Godric poked his head in to check on the situation that evening, Hrazon decided to seize the moment.

"I have a concern to discuss with you, Godric."

"What is it that's bothering you?" Kora asked.

Hrazon sighed deeply. "Fear? Seeing Chariss tucked under blankets, sleeping like a child, has made me complacent today. For a few hours, I've let myself believe we're safe."

Godric interrupted with a guffaw. "Of course you're safe. This house is a fortress."

"But the man who chases us has knocked down fortresses before."

Godric answered with impatience. "This fortress is built from a mountain. I doubt this sorcerer can take down a mountain. And there are Geasa'n here to confront him."

Hrazon shook his head. "I don't want anyone to confront him. I don't want this house to fall to ruin because of us. We can't endanger you any longer. We must leave."

"We don't know for certain Drake still pursues you," Kora said. "You shouldn't scare yourself with thoughts of him coming here."

"I can't help thinking he'll perform the same feat Chariss

did and appear on the balcony at any moment. I've got to get her away from here or he'll take out every one of you before—

Kora was shaking her head as she interrupted. "If he was going to follow you through her teleporting spell, he'd have done it that morning. If he does it now, he'll probably just end up in the same state she's in, making it easy for one of the guards to thrust a sword in his belly. Now, it's my job to worry about those under my roof. I'll worry enough for the both of us. I want you to relax. Enjoy our home. Enjoy Lahs's excellent cooking. Let us heal Chariss for you, and let us hear no more talk of you leaving."

"But again, I must impress upon you the danger you're in by harboring us."

"I won't listen to such stories," she said, her voice was still as kind as ever. "Please don't ask me to turn a sick girl and her guardian out of my home before they're rightly able to go."

Godric grumbled something under his breath and left the room.

Kora winked at Hrazon. "My husband won't hear of you trying to leave so soon, either," she said, believing her words to be true. "It does him good to see his teacher. The students finish their exams tomorrow and start leaving for the spring season, so his duties here are winding down for a time. Perhaps it would take your mind off your worries to sit with him a while, to talk about old times."

Hrazon's response was something polite and subdued. He didn't want to upset the woman, but had to find a way to convince her to "turn them out."

•

Julette was livid.

Morning brought her edras demons screeching back with their unworldly travel, carrying the limp body of Doctor Mahgin of Arcana City. They reported on everything they had seen, and it sounded as if the school at Hleo-Arcana already had its latest visitors, if in fact the human they carried was indeed a doctor. It had never occurred to her that Hrazon or his ward could teleport. It was dangerous, which, all things considered, could explain the presence of the doctor. It took too much energy from both the person performing the feat and from the balance of nature. Julette should have felt the imbalance from such an expense of energy so close to Treown.

Her edras leader watched her pacing, wondering when he would be allowed to eat Doctor Mahgin. Finally, she stopped and stood still, facing the beast. It bothered her that the creatures chose to smell that way—like rotting flesh. But as long as they didn't grace one's chambers for too long, having the vile minions around served one's reputation—as if her reputation needed support.

Julette was the second most powerful being the world had known. She had practiced the art of sorcery long before mortals realized women could possess the geasa. Her mind was clear and her form nearly perfect when The Ultimate One sought her out. He came to her in the form of a man and chose her as his bride. He made her a goddess, forming the power she would wield from the foundation of time. It was a gift not to be given lightly. They had lived happily together in Mahriket, the city beneath Paradise.

However, even gods get bored, and after they'd lived together a few thousand years, The Ultimate One chose to have children to rule in his absence. Five children were born to them. The third, Master Rothahn, would be the one chosen to

rule. He had lived about four-hundred years when The Ultimate One made his announcement. The lesser gods in his city were divided on their opinions of him stepping down from the throne, but they all respected him enough to hide their thoughts—all but Julette. She understood then why their children had been made, and raged for months about it. She felt betrayed, usurped. The throne should be hers if her husband was going to step down from it. Nevertheless, The Ultimate One laid down the law, she balked against it, and the First War began.

People generally avoid making reference to the First War.

When Julette railed against Mahriket, the ensuing battles created despair in The Ultimate One's heart and he left the world while the war raged. It lasted only a night. In his absence the lesser gods created warriors called Protectors to slay the beasts Julette summoned. The world was introduced to wicked dragons when the peaceful ones were slaughtered or converted. Trolls and edras took on new roles in their dark lairs. Beasts resembling jackals were conjured to eat children, and ryfel (an armored beast the size of a small house) snatched up the gods' followers and rent them with poisonous claws as though they were scraps of cloth. Giant men were formed from the boulders of mountains to crush the villages where The Master's followers slept.

There was no force to check neither the gods nor Julette. The Master Himself broke the laws of physics, as well as Julette's seeing stone, to bring her onslaught under control. By dawn, the mortal world was decent enough for The Ultimate One to return to begin cleaning up the mess.

Demons were the worst of the lot that were allowed to survive after The Ultimate One's return. The edras, a mild form of demon, repented for their part, begging for mercy. The few

left alive were cast into a spirit world where they couldn't be tempted to harm men. The few released by magic over the years became tools for men; their blood was the main component of the poison Edrahkt. Now Juliette employed edras to gather information, but there was no hope of Doctor Mahgin recovering to tell her what he knew, so she announced to the cowering edras before her: "I have no more use for you. Dispose of the human as you will."

The creature took only a second to bow and disappear through the attic door with a growl. She waved her hand and the smell he left behind disintegrated into something a bit more fragrant, a bit wooden. As for Kora Taiman, Juliette would have to do more than wave her hand in the air to get her out of the way. Although Juliette was as powerful as The Master Himself, she had to be careful. Nasty repercussions greet you in your bed at night if you attack The Master's daughter, no matter who you are.

It wasn't a proven fact that Kora was Master Rothahn's child, turned mortal for marrying a man unworthy of her. Rumor had it she was kicked out of Mahriket for marrying so far beneath her station and that Master Rothahn actually cursed the estate because of Godric Taiman, the man who stole His daughter's heart. But rumors have a way of getting exaggerated, and this one had been going around for years. Nothing substantiated it, but, just to be on the safe side, Juliette decided to rethink her plan for getting to Hleo-Arcana. Who knew how many members of The Master's court sat in Arcana guarding the place, if the tale was true.

CHAPTER FIVE

That night found The Master sitting alone in a stone room. He had no worshippers around Him, no gods-in-training at His feet. He appeared normal, as normal as any other human you'd see in a castle. To any passerby, He would seem a touch on the regal side, but, overall, like a typical thirty-five- or forty-year-old man relaxing with a tankard of ale.

However, the typical passerby would be mistaken. Master Rothahn was nothing like what He appeared. First, He was not a thirty-five-year-old mortal man, and He certainly was not relaxing in this chamber tonight.

He didn't wear a beard as most noblemen that age tended to do, but left his features uncovered. One never knew when He might want to smile, and there was no point in hiding the event. He wore His mousy blonde hair long, just past the nape of His neck as most of the noblemen had started to do.

He wore expensive trousers tucked into knee-high boots, but it took a discerning eye (or an uncomfortable closeness) to tell where the black of the boots stopped and the black of the fabric began.

At His waist He wore a belt with a jeweled dagger in a sheath. His shirt, tucked loosely into His pants, left enough room in the sack-like garment to raise His arms and twist around without impediment. It was as if He was prepared for someone or something to sneak up and challenge Him to a duel. (He would have found that concept amusing—someone challenging The Master.) Yes, as a person examined Him more closely, the feel of loneliness dissipated, and an air of authority assumed its place.

This man commanded the very space of the room.

He sat upon a marble throne, watching the surface of an enormous round stone as if following a story unfolding for His eyes alone. Watching the crystal ball before Him, The Master let His mind give a nod in the direction of a god approaching the solace.

In Mahriket they called this the stone room for obvious reasons. Whenever The Master went missing, someone would be sent here to find Him. Tonight, the unlucky messenger not only found Him, but went so far as to enter the room and await an invitation to speak. His name was Parrin Aeschere, and he was a doctor. In fact, he was the doctor who had delivered Master Rothahn nearly three-thousand years before. He leaned against the stone wall and let his mind seek out The Master's. He didn't want to interrupt something important, and, even though nothing important had happened in the world of the mortals for a thousand years, you never knew when the little buggers would surprise you.

"I know they've sent you to check on me, Parrin. And I

know you aren't worried enough about me to follow their orders. What is it you want to talk about?"

"You seem disturbed," he offered.

"Ah, so perhaps you are worried enough." Pause. "As usual, you're right."

Not one to rush a conversation, Master Rothahn stared longer into the stone before sitting back. He passed His hand before the surface, erasing its image. When a being had eternity stretched before Him as an empty slate, nothing had to be done quickly. So He settled His shoulders against the marble and pouted His lips in thought. Not every god in Mahriket received the same respect Master Rothahn afforded Parrin, so it was odd to put His feelings, His misgivings, on the current subject into words for anyone.

"I can't figure out why this girl should intrigue me so."

Parrin waited a polite second before asking, "Which girl is that?"

"Amanda Chariss Dardriu. I can't understand why my father needs her, and his interest is really the only explanation for my interest."

Parrin let Him mull it over another moment before asking, "She's a damsel in distress?"

"I guess so, but I've saved thousands of damsels in distress in my lifetime. Why should this one be any different? Why should this one catch my father's eye?"

"You never know what he'll have these mortals do."

The Master nodded. "I suppose you're right." He sighed as if dreading His next task. "I have to say goodbye to Ella before I go."

"You're going to Arcana?"

"I want to meet this girl."

"But, Rohne."

“I won’t kill Godric while I’m there.”

Parrin grimaced. “I wasn’t thinking of that. My objection is more reasonable. Surely you won’t just rush into the school. Someone will see you there.”

Master Rothahn stepped down from the chair, noting the concern on His friend’s face. “I am their god. I can appear whenever and wherever I wish.”

“But you haven’t been on the continent in...what...five-hundred years?”

“You forget the time I collected Cassandra and that dragon child she found. That wasn’t so long ago.”

Parrin scowled. “That hardly counts. You were only there a few minutes to collect her and scare the wits out of her priest.”

The Master made some sort of grunting sound. “I did, didn’t I? But it turned out for the best. She did her duty well.”

“Send Mia to Hleo-Arcana. You shouldn’t go to that world.”

Master Rothahn frowned. Parrin was right. It would be better to send one of the lesser gods. Nevertheless, He felt something pulling Him to this particular girl. Something about Chariss had intrigued His father. Something about her made Him want to reach into her world and save her from the telabyrinth poison killing her now. He sighed. It might make more sense to send Parrin to help the girl. After all, Parrin was a doctor. But the god didn’t have the flare necessary to set mortals at ease. The lesser goddess Mia might be the better choice. Draining the ale from His mug, He decided to find something else to occupy His time for the night.

CHAPTER SIX

Kora and Loetha struggled night and day before they felt Chariss had a chance at recovery. When Kora sensed Chariss climbing out of her coma on the fourth day, her relief went unchecked. She lowered her head and wept prayers of thanks to The Master.

Seeing just how much the women had been able to hide from him startled Hrazon. He chastised himself for allowing them to deceive him so easily, but recognized the truth. Something within him had known Chariss's danger but he didn't want to give voice to the words any more than Kora or Loetha.

For another two days, Chariss slowly recovered within, her mind repairing damage from her overexertion. She sensed the departure of students and teachers for the planting season and felt the warmth of springtime sunshine when it streamed in the balconies. During the times when she felt only Hrazon's

presence in the room, she struggled harder to give him some sort of message, some reassurance that she would pull through. At times, she was aware of voices belonging to her caregivers, but she would drift back before she could speak to them. She knew Hrazon alternately paced and slept next to her bed. She knew Kora and Loetha pressed water-and-Nicin-soaked cloths to her lips and rejoiced the first time she drank. She knew a girl, Kora's daughter, came to read her a story, and the girl's pet cat curled up on her stomach to listen as well. And she also knew her nightmares were stronger than the medicine Kora gave her. Hints and glimpses of visions of horror visited her now, and as long as her body used all its energy saving her life, there was nothing left to fight off the dreams.

These dreams had plagued her off and on for sixteen years. Dreams of children slaughtered because their parents had aided her. Dreams of homes ablaze behind her as she fled, either with or without the latest benefactor at her side. Dreams of her mother's death and a hazardous spell that once sent the four-year-old Chariss tumbling into space, away from a physical threat, but toward an endless drop.

The woman had been fighting Jamieson Drake. The woman stood no chance. To save the child, Vertigo used her last breath to spin a spell, flinging Chariss away. The spell was dangerous, as all teleporting spells are, and hastily woven out of a dying geasa. Chariss was doomed, and, at the tender age of four, somehow knew it. She spun in a void of darkness until a crash of light exploded above and Hrazon reached in to grab her.

As if atoning for his absence from her side that day, he began teaching her how to save her own life. You see, Hrazon knew her family. He had introduced Vertigo to Charles Derdriu, and had helped them settle into a house in the city of

Kharole. He had suggested the midwife who helped bring Chariss into the world. But when an old admirer returned to find Vertigo married, Hrazon was on the other side of the city.

Vengeance took Chariss's family from the world, and jealousy turned to hate kept her on the run all her life. From city to city, benefactor to benefactor, Drake pursued her. His intention was to remove all evidence of what he viewed as Vertigo's betrayal. He killed Vertigo and Charles, and burned their home and farm to the ground. Even the city of Kharole had eroded over the next few years into a ghost town drowned in a fen at the base of the Geome River. Chariss was the last piece of evidence.

A few mornings before, when waiting for Lord Baine's return to Treown, Chariss had felt the weight of sixteen years of running press down on her. Now, in her weakened state, she dreamt of the day she left Treown. She dreamt of the breeze that greeted her on the balcony.

With her arms open wide to hold back the draperies, she had looked like a princess embracing the morning. She had the long hair and soft skin of royalty, but she knew of no royal blood in her veins and no wealth to her name. Admirers had told her she was beautiful, and, that morning, she smiled at believing it, if only for a moment. Her violet eyes were the subject of gentlemen's poetry and they took in the landscape of a pale, brown city, for it wasn't quite spring in Treown.

It also wasn't quite warm enough to stand without one's cloak on the balcony, but something told her this was the last time she'd have the chance. Her countenance fell as her gaze moved across the tops of the shops and homes that outlined the nearest edge of the city. How many homes had she invaded in her life? In the past sixteen years, none had offered an army as this one in Treown. And now it would fall to ruin.

The feeling that someone watched her from the city below, which was impossible, sent a shiver up her spine. The Dreorfahn Army couldn't be more than a day away, and its leader would ride ahead to find her.

Somewhere in her dream, a servant screamed.

The chaos of Drake's raid had begun. She and Hrazon had been through this drill before. And only The Master knew how many times they would have to do it again. Chariss's mind acted the scene in her dreams and there was nothing she could do to stop the images of the servants being slaughtered. There was nothing she could do to stop the image of Baine's son dropping to the parlor floor before Jamieson Drake. The ten-year-old's blood splattered across Drake's shirt and Chariss felt a rage she'd not known before.

No one could have expected her to threaten this sorcerer. It wasn't her nature to confront, but this time she had stopped with Hrazon still several paces behind on the staircase. It wasn't a large structure, but Drake could reach between the railings and grab her wrist. He would have broken it against the wood if he hadn't been spent from teleporting himself from the city. On the hand that gripped her he wore a weapon forged from silver. It hugged his forefinger like a ring and covered it like a shield. A hinge at the first knuckle allowed the finger to bend but the knife-like point of the metal still stabbed her skin in the dream as if a bird of prey scratched its talon to draw blood from her wrist.

He leered at her with eyes that held contempt, and sneered above the clash of battle behind him. "I have you at last."

His other arm moved—the hand with the sword—and she believed he meant to kill her. Instinct moved her own weapon. Her geasa found the space between the railings and beneath his chest armor. The spell she'd placed on the blade rammed

with the steel into his body. The surprise on his face pleased her, even in this dream state.

“Inferior,” she hissed. “I think you are mistaken.”

Of course she didn’t believe she had a superior power, but she wanted to give him pause. Said with enough conviction, even the most unsubstantiated lie can sound plausible.

No one in the bedroom at Arcana could have known Chariss relived such a frightening moment. Her dream turned from a realistic account of events to the fears with which people torment themselves. What if she hadn’t pulled the dagger from its sheath before descending the stairs? What if Hrazon had been closer and had tried to stop Drake himself? What if the group of soldiers had realized who she was as she ran past? What if the blade on his finger had been dipped in poison? What if? What if?

Each scene played out in her nightmares while the people of this new house huddled around her and worked to keep her body alive. Each scene began and ended with the vision of the beautiful Vertigo, as if the woman tried, for the thousandth time, to say she was sorry. As if he had tapped into one of those scenes, one of those dreams, Hrazon sat in her room telling the story of the day Vertigo was murdered before the little girl’s eyes.

“You can imagine what a hard life it’s been for her,” Hrazon said to his captivated audience. He and Godric sat with their backs to the bed because Kora, Loetha, and a servant named Lahs administered a bath to their patient. Lahs had to scoop up the apron from her waist to dab tears from her eyes, and excused herself to go stand on one of the room’s two balconies for a moment.

“I knew Vertigo when we were training,” Godric said. “I always felt she needed protection.”

“She wasn’t cautious, as Chariss is,” Hrazon conceded. “She had the geasa, but didn’t use it well.”

“Didn’t her parents also have the gift?”

Hrazon felt a pang of guilt. “Yes. Cassandra was...amazing.”

“Cassandra! I remember that name now. Didn’t I attend her funeral right before I started training with you?”

Hrazon didn’t feel the same excitement that Godric did at these memories. “I don’t believe so. She died a long time ago.”

“Yes, that must be, but I seem to remember something about her. Something other than the fact that she was gifted. Did she have a house there in Kharole?”

At this point, Hrazon struggled to hide his discomfort. “Yes, perhaps that’s what you remember.”

“That’s the house Vertigo grew up in. Oh, yes, I remember it now. They had stained the wood so the house was blue. By the gods, it was like looking at the sky. Very pretty. Didn’t you live there when Vertigo came of age for training?”

“There was a time I lived there with her. As you said, she needed protection.”

“I thought she struggled because she was so young. Wasn’t she a good ten or twelve years younger than I?”

“At least ten. You were nearing the end of your cycle with me when I brought her in to begin.”

Godric nodded absently, thinking back to his early twenties. “By the gods, that was nearly thirty years ago,” he breathed.

The memories of an innocent time stung him, playing on the shadows he and Hrazon cast from the sun. He had been an energetic young man, full of life, full of ideas. He had known he would inherit his father’s school, and had grand plans for its growth. The school at Arcana was already respected then,

but he had dreams to make it something spectacular. Families would pay a year's wages to send their gifted children for training, and be happy to double the payment when Godric's dreams came to fruition. His family's wealth would expand beyond the emperor's.

When he finished his cycle with Hrazon, he was a twenty-three-year-old lad with some money in his pocket and a host of ideas in his head. He struck out for home with the haughtiness of a young man fresh out of school with all the answers to every political, social, and worldly problem. His first week brought myriad shattered dreams: a night of indiscretion with what he thought were a couple of small-town harlots; his father's angry halt to his wild schemes for the school; and too many holier-than-thou arguments with old friends who then turned away. That week built a bitter foundation for the past twenty-nine years of his life.

Hrazon knew none of those things. And Hrazon didn't need to know. He didn't need to hear that nearly eight months after releasing his pupil, a small-town harlot appeared heavy with child at Arcana's door. Hrazon didn't need to know that Lord Taiman had ripped Godric's inheritance from his greedy fingers and handed it to his sister. And he certainly didn't need to know about the fire in the stable—the fire that had consumed both Ofersey'n Taiman and his daughter before anyone knew of the change in plans. The harlot would have been there as well, but she turned out to be more than she appeared, and no plot for murder would remove her. Godric's bitterness grew when the ofersey'n's council chose Darne Wold the Third instead of Godric to take the senior Lord Taiman's place with the esteemed group.

Godric had been trying to ingratiate himself with the group ever since. Two years ago, he'd appeared at a meeting of

the ofersey'n's council as a guest of Lord Wold. The council was set to appoint the sorcerer Jamieson Drake to the position of ofersey'n of Kida, a region in the northwest of Onweald. Hrazon and Chariss had attended the gathering as guests of Lord Gint, and Godric came to serve as a character witness for Hrazon because the wizard brought a serious charge against the impending leadership of Kida—murder. Hrazon had been incensed at the need for a character witness. He was the greatest of the wizards the gods had created and had agreed not to harm Drake during the trial if the ofersey'n would agree to hear his arguments.

Hrazon had swallowed his pride and requested Drake be imprisoned, not exalted. He challenged the court to stand up for morality. The implication that they might ignore morality had offended them. By the time the court adjourned, Godric was forgotten again, and Drake was handed the leadership of Kida and an order never to come within a league of Amanda Chariss Derdriu. The latter was merely a nod or a 'thank you for trusting the hierarchy' tossed at Hrazon. The wizard could have turned every one of them into charred piles of bone with the blink of an eye, and Godric would have applauded him.

Hrazon could feel Godric growing agitated beside him, and spoke gently to bring him out of his reverie. "Thirty years can go by in the blink of an eye. The last sixteen with Chariss have flown by too quickly. I remember every moment with her as if it happened yesterday."

Godric shook off his self-pity enough to show interest in the old man's story again. "So you've trained her then?"

"I have. And others have helped along the way."

"Helped? I can't recall a name of one more powerful than you. When did you need help?"

Hrazon didn't smile at the compliment. "Others have

trained her in all those feminine refinements—dancing, pottery, and poetry reading. She calls them ‘mostly useless skills women should refuse to learn’. Although she does enjoy music. She hasn’t played the harp for two years now; Lord Baine didn’t have one. But she applies herself to it each time she has the chance. Then other skill masters trained her in the useful arts. Some taught her with the sword, some with hand-to-hand combat, some with strategy and weaponry. And, as it would appear, I need someone’s help now. I had no idea she could weave a teleporting spell.”

Godric had ignored Hrazon’s last statement. “Sword? Weaponry? Hrazon, have you turned her into a killer?”

“No, I wouldn’t say that. She’s obviously capable of it, as is every person in this room. She can defend herself against anything Drake throws at her.”

“But you’ve taught her to kill?”

“You shouldn’t be surprised. We Geasa’n refine methods of self-defense because there are still so many bigots in the world. How many stories have you heard of the gifted having to defend themselves against an ignorant mob? And then there’s the whole issue of Drake. You were at court two years ago, so you know her need for caution.”

“But the court acquitted him of the charges you brought against him.”

“The court was wrong. If you didn’t know it then, you surely know it now. The man hunts her to kill her, and has never let up. What if he finds her some afternoon when I’m on the other side of the city? She must be able to defend herself to the death.”

“I don’t mean to offend you, but it sounds as if you’ve instilled vengeance in her.”

“No, no. She’s never once sought to kill him. But that

young lady can stand her own against anyone.”

Godric shook his head. “It goes against everything we teach here.”

“Self-defense?”

“Murder.”

Kora’s gentle voice surprised them with its contrast to how agitated they had become. “Alan, will you get something from my room for me, My Love?”

He cleared his throat. “Of course.”

“I want something pretty to put in Chariss’s hair. Perhaps a ribbon or a clip. Whatever you find out on my dressing table will be nice. Oh, and another lantern, please.”

Godric grunted a response and nodded to Hrazon to excuse himself.

The older man watched him leave, watched the way his former pupil carried some weight on his shoulders, and he wondered if the man had ever shared his troubles with Kora.

“Hrazon,” she now addressed him with that simple kindness. “You mention that Chariss can play the harp?”

“Yes, and she plays beautifully.”

Loetha, the older servant at Kora’s side, laughed. “You may be biased in your assessment.”

Hrazon liked the lilt in her voice. Not only was it a welcome change from the conversation he had just experienced, it was a sign that the lady was no longer tense. Chariss was going to make it out of this alive.

“I’m telling you the truth. She plays beautifully. When she was fourteen years old, she played for the King and Queen of Jovera, and the lady was moved to tears. The king asked her to return, but, well, we had to move on. But she has played for many of the families we’ve stayed with over the years, and they’ve all enjoyed it.”

Young Kaylin, Kora's daughter, had come in while he spoke and now climbed into the chair next to him. She was a study in contrast to her father when she smiled up at the wizard with her bright green eyes.

"And I'm sure we'll enjoy it as well," Kora answered. "I know we have a harp stored away upstairs. Do you remember it, Kaylin?"

"I've seen it. It belonged to my Aunt Alise, but she passed away before I was born, so it hasn't been played for a long, long time."

"A long, long time? As long as you've been alive?"

Kaylin blushed at his teasing. "I've only been alive for eight years."

"I see. You read very well for someone who's only eight years old." He tapped a finger on the book she'd brought with her. "Are you going to read from this to Chariss after dinner?"

"If Mama says it's all right."

"It is. And it's also all right to turn around. We've finished here."

The third woman carried the wash basin past him, and as Hrazon stood to turn, he heard a faint howling sound. "Do you hear—"

Kora put a finger to her lips and they all held still, straining to hear, straining to discern what the sound was as it began to swell, moving closer.

Chariss's eyes flew open, but Kora and Loetha didn't notice. They had turned to look out the window and balcony doorway, as if they expected to see what made the rushing sound. Hrazon, on the other hand, felt his girl jump into consciousness, frantically weaving a spell as she came to.

"Get away from the window!" Loetha yelled.

But she was too late. A violent wind slammed into the

mountain. As if it were alive, the wind screamed into the room. It caught Kora, pulling her toward the window.

Chaos erupted. Shouts of alarm echoed through the house. But all Hrazon heard was Chariss's voice, low and angry, speaking to someone not in the room, speaking with her geasa: "When I see you, I will know you by this mark."

Kora screamed for help, and Loetha clung to her for life as the wind pulled her up, almost out of the room.

When Godric appeared in the doorway, the wind took his breath. His daughter dropped to her knees, eyes closed, hands clasped, and she prayed aloud: "Our Master, please come to our aid."

Candles extinguished and toppled from sconces. The lantern near the bed went out, but he could still see Chariss, her upper body rising slowly. Her head tilted back as if someone pulled a string attached to her rib cage, and her long auburn hair hanging behind her on the pillows began to whip about wildly with the hurricane gales now tossing things about the room.

Above the shrill cacophony of the wind, he heard his wife screaming. He ducked to dodge a candlestick that flew past his head. Kora flapped horizontally like a rag doll, her dress tangled with the curtains. Loetha had her feet braced against the wall, clinging to her mistress and screaming for help.

Godric ran to their aid, knocking Hrazon to the side. Muttering a quick curse under his breath, Hrazon righted himself against the blustering forces buffeting them and rewove the spell he'd begun. He at least had hold of Kora with his gift, but the wind surrounding her made it a tenuous grip.

"Our Master, please come to our aid," Kaylin repeated the prayer she'd learned as a small child over and over. Then with a sob she added, "Oh, please help Mama."

“Kora, hold on!” Godric barked.

The wind pried her fingers from his arms one by one. Hrazon knew his spell wasn’t working, and wondered why Godric didn’t use his own gift.

“I can’t,” she yelled back, but the shrieking wind took her words. It squeezed her, pressing her chest so she couldn’t draw breath. Hrazon altered the spell he wove, but something distracted him. A form began to materialize next to him.

Chariss lifted her arm toward the window, and, twisting her wrist, brought it all to a stop. As if suspended in time, all movement froze. For just a moment, the howling ceased as if the beast inhaled. Godric, Kora, and Loetha fell as a lump to the floor, the curtains ripping from their anchors. The shutters slammed shut. The balcony doors slammed closed. The candles leapt to their sconces like soldiers coming to attention, and their wicks came to life with flames.

The wind slammed against the house with a violence that spoke of unadulterated anger, howling around as if seeking an entrance it couldn’t find.

Kaylin swallowed against the pressure in her ears, and cried out, “Mia! You came!”

Despite their disorientation at the sudden violence, and sudden calm, the three in the floor looked up to see who Kaylin spoke to. Indeed, a short, plump, grandmotherly woman now stood at the foot of the bed. Kaylin leapt up to embrace her, but Godric didn’t appear pleased at all. He set about untangling his fellow captives from the curtains while Kaylin spoke rapidly to the woman she clung to.

“Oh, Mia, thank you! I knew The Master would send you, and I’m so glad He did. Thank you for saving Mama.”

The woman smiled calmly, as if dismissing the scene they’d just lived through. “There, there, My Dear. I don’t de-

serve the thanks. Chariss has saved your Mama.”

Then all eyes turned to the girl sitting up in bed. Chariss chose Kora’s gaze to return, and asked, just loudly enough to be heard over the wind outside, “How is the baby?”

Now this got Godric’s attention. No one knew Kora was pregnant yet. How could this girl know? Kora took a second to search inwardly, and then announced, “She’s fine.”

“She?” Godric said.

Kora didn’t hear him; she still spoke to Chariss. “Thank you. You woke up just in time.”

“I don’t know who sent this wind, but I marked him...or her.”

Kora nodded, understanding what Chariss said. Hrazon had taught his girl that Geasa’n have the ability to trace the pattern of a spell. It takes years of practice before a student learns to throw a spell back along another one’s track. It was something else he didn’t realize she could do. That worried him. But he would save a conversation on the subject for another day. Now he just wanted to make sure she was all right.

He moved to her side and picked up her hand. And as if no one else existed, as if no one struggled with heavy fabric and ties, as if a lesser goddess from Mahriket didn’t stand at the foot of the bed, he looked into her eyes and spoke with trembling voice: “I’ve been so worried about you.”

She placed her other hand on his cheek, as if to impart some message to calm his fears for a moment. She spoke softly to him, “I know, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know what harm I was doing.”

He shook his head. “It’s my job to protect you. I should have stopped you when I realized you were about to teleport us.”

“I don’t think I’ll do it again any time soon.”

He let the hint of playfulness in her tone relax him further. Yes, his girl had returned, thank the gods in Mahriket. Brushing a lock of hair back behind her ear, he asked, “How do you feel?”

“Nervous. I know Mia wrapped a spell around the house and grounds, but I worry the beast will find a way to get in.”

He nodded. “I’ll help set spells around the house as well.”

His intimation was that they would work to protect the estate and all its inhabitants, but Chariss bestowed on him a smile that acknowledged the truth—he would set the spells to protect her. She closed her eyes as he leaned in to kiss her forehead and she knew that he would stand before the very gates of The Dragon’s lair to keep evil from getting to her.

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