

CHAPTER ONE

Birth of the Clerics

Ronpiru Delumere stared at the gash joining Venadok Mortokmar's groin to his throat. The High Mage lay face up on a table with his insides exposed. Blood-stained bone peaked from behind pulsating flesh. Ronpiru stepped closer and peered at his dead Master's face.

Venadok's eyes glistened. The dying Mage's lips quivered and a moan seeped out but was cut short as a pool of blood filled his mouth.

Ronpiru turned away and fought the surge of bile rising in his throat.

An explosion pierced the air outside of the tent followed by a shriek so loud his ears rang.

He froze.

Distant screams drifted to his ears and the earth shifted beneath his feet.

Ronpiru rushed outside.

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Ronpiru watched hundreds of his fellow Mages fleeing and dodging smoldering rocks raining down around them. *What is going on?*

As if in answer to his thoughts, the ground thundered and cracks opened up in every direction. The snow covered grass shifted left and right and undulated to the beat of a booming drum played by some gigantic being.

“Ron!”

Ronpiru searched for the person calling his name. He was lost in an ocean of cries and fleeing bodies. Everything was happening so fast, he was not sure what to do or where to go.

“Ron, you fool, you must run!” A bony grip squeezed his arm and yanked him along. Ronpiru did not fight. He ran.

“Who—or what are we running from? What is going on?” Ron wanted to ask more, but he was out of breath. A few seconds passed, yet no answer came. “Hold on a minute—stop!” Ronpiru halted and spun the person around to face him, “Venadok is dead!”

Mab Desolara’s eyes narrowed and he looked down his nose at Ronpiru. Thin lips surrounded by

a trimmed, dark-brown goatee curled into a smirk. "I knew one day you would knife him with your own two hands!"

Ronpiru sighed, "Enough, Mab," he shielded his face as a blast of wind seared the pair. "I did not kill him. I found him just a few moments ago."

Mab raised an eyebrow and started off again, but Ronpiru yanked him back by his robes. "Come on, we need to figure out who did this. Where is Ranok? He must be told before he discovers his father's body for himself."

Mab sighed and grasped Ronpiru's arm, "If Venadok is dead, then there is nothing we can do for him now. We must go!"

Ronpiru resisted him.

"Do you want to die? We must flee the settlements!" Mab's gaze darted every which way as if looking for an assailant.

"Why? What in the name of the Beyond are we running from?"

Mab's eyes widened, "Are you so blind?" He grabbed the back of Ronpiru's head and thrust his face eastward. "Look!"

The snow-covered, obsidian Northern Peaks scraped at the sky and loomed over the land. A swirl of white clouds encircled the top of the mountains. A dark shadow lurked beyond the white haze and the surrounding mists churned

faster and faster. A shapeless form pulsed and then exploded in a barrage of flames. The clouds blew away and Ronpiru saw why the Mages and other peoples of Danuk were trying to escape.

“By the Beyond!” Ronpiru beheld a reptilian beast covered in red and orange feathers as large as the mountains themselves.

Mab released his grip on Ronpiru. “What is to become of us Aemphalis now? Man or Mage, none have the might to stand up to this creature.”

As they stared, the beast leapt into the air and its feathers ignited, filling the entire sky with flames.

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A tear balanced on the corner of Ronpiru’s eye as he scanned the landscape. Everywhere he looked, the snow had been melted and the dead grasses beneath drowned in flames. As the Phoenix swooped over the burning land, it flapped its wings and spread the fire to their tents. The meager dwellings shot high into the air as volatile chemicals mixed and ignited. The flaming tents rained down and black talons swept the burning fields crushing any living thing they grasped. Fiery jaws swept down periodically and snapped up burnt wailing people and animals by the hundreds.

Ronpiru cringed and turned to Mab, “We must

find Ranok. He must be protected if our way of life is to continue!"

Mab grabbed his arm and dragged him to one of the few remaining tents. "No, we must get underground. The tunnels beneath the settlements are our only hope of survival!"

They found a hole in the ground where people were already fleeing down the earthen steps. Ronpiru and Mab descended and were quickly followed by another group. The earth shuddered around them and the winter air had grown unnaturally warm. They followed a series of wall torches down several tunnels keeping close to the groups ahead of them.

Ronpiru wrinkled his nose as the smells of singed flesh mixed with wet earth. His stomach churned and he hoped that this group ahead of him and Mab knew where they were going.

"We are here," said Mab.

They entered a well lit cavern. The space was so large that Ronpiru figured at least a few hundred people were inside. Mages and non-magic users alike were huddled together speaking in hushed voices and weeping softly.

The earth thundered overhead and streams of dirt fell upon their heads. Ronpiru's gaze came upon a man wearing black Mage's robes standing taller than anyone else around. His back was to

Ronpiru and Mab, and he was engaged in conversation with three other Mages whom Ronpiru recognized as Orusho Umera, the former High Mage's Seer, Magon Devrakmor and Drekmir Grulich. Their speech was hurried and too low for anyone to make out.

Ronpiru and Mab approached the four Mages. Mab tapped the tall one on the shoulder, "Ranok, your father is dead."

Ronpiru's eyes grew wide and he wished Mab had let him convey the grim news. He would have been more tactful, more sensitive, more—

"I am already aware," Ranok replied without even turning around.

A Mage with black robes that faded down into midnight blue turned to Ronpiru and Mab, "Ranok has already taken the oath. Venadok's rule is no more."

Ronpiru's face grew hot. "Magon, how can you have given him the oath without Mab and me present?"

Magon stepped up to Ronpiru so that their faces were inches apart. "Sho made the decision to proceed. For all we knew, you were dead. Our people need leadership. Waiting would have caused instability and—"

"You have broken one of our most important traditions, Magon, you—"

“Surely you are not arguing against a decision made by the Seer of the High Mage?”

A few silent seconds passed.

Mab raised an eyebrow.

Ronpiru glared at Orusho and sighed, “Fine, what is done is done. Now, what are we going to do about the Phoenix?”

Ranok turned and met Ronpiru’s gaze, “We are going to kill it. Once it makes its pass over the lands of Aemphalis and fills its belly, it will go back underground and rest. We will find it and slay it while it sleeps.”

Ronpiru scoffed, “Just who did you find crazy enough to go on this mission that will most certainly end in death?”

“Sho, myself and you. Do you know how to slay a dragon bathed in fire?”

Ronpiru swallowed hard. He most certainly did not.

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The next evening, Ronpiru, Ranok and Orusho waited a few hours after the phoenix had returned to the Northern Peaks before they left to find its nest. They headed east across scorched grass and steaming rocks and came to the foot of the crater. Ronpiru gazed up at the jagged black walls. A

rumble sounded and a few stones tumbled down and fell at their feet. "Ranok, this structure is unstable. Are you sure we can climb this safely?"

Orusho frowned, "Ron's right. This climb is a terrible idea. Maybe we can take the underground tunnels?"

Ranok ground his back teeth, drew back his hood and sighed, "Is this how you advised my father, Sho, with cowardice?" He then turned to Ronpiru and frowned, "Put your fear aside and focus on the task at hand." With those words, Ranok planted his hands on the wall of the crater and pulled himself up onto a nearby ledge. "Come on you two!"

Ronpiru and Orusho exchanged a look and then ascended after the High Mage.

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Hours later the three Mages had successfully climbed over the razor sharp wall and had begun descending into the pitch black crater. They moved purposefully, strategically placing their hands and feet in holes and cracks.

As they sank lower and lower into the blackness, the light of the stars and moon faded and the dark swallowed them up. Orusho uttered a few words and a glowing ball of blue and white light no bigger

than his palm appeared. It hovered in the air and emitted a soft hum. Orusho continued his descent and the ball of light followed.

When the three reached the bottom, cold winds swept around the vast cavern and whipped their cheeks. Ronpiru wrapped his cloak around him even tighter and shivered, "We need to hurry or we will freeze to death!" They rushed through a maze of caverns and passageways illuminated by Orusho's ball of light. They encountered nothing as the hours passed save for animal skeletons and blotches of cave mold hugging the grimy walls.

"This is ridiculous! We are getting no where. We could spend a lifetime in these caverns and never find this creature's nest."

Orusho stroked his goatee as he considered Ronpiru's words. "Ranok, I too am not so sure that coming here was the proper course of action."

Ranok scoffed and shook his head. He started off down another dark passageway leaving Orusho and Ronpiru behind with the ball of light.

"Wait for the light!" Ronpiru tore after the High Mage. He reached out and grasped Ranok's shoulder and then stepped into something squishy. He plummeted to the ground face first. His head was saved from smashing into the rocky cavern floor by something warm and moist with a sickeningly sweet odor. Ronpiru toyed the the

mass and pulled out what felt like scraggly hairs. His thumbs plunged into eye-sized holes and his blood ran cold. He knew exactly what he was feeling. He knew what covered his face and hands. "By the Beyond," Ronpiru frantically wiped his hands on his robes, "Get this off of me!" Orusho helped him to his feet and wiped his face.

Ranok eyed Ronpiru up and down in the blue and white light. "By the looks of what you have discovered we are getting close. Hurry up!"

Ronpiru scanned the ground and his face turned grave. He had smashed into one of their own. An old Mage wearing pieces of burned cloak lay gutted and eyeless before their feet. Ronpiru's hands flew to his mouth just in time to prevent a mixture of bile and his meager breakfast from escaping.

Orusho patted Ronpiru on the back. "Come on. We have come too far to turn back now."

They hurried down the tunnel where the eyeless corpse had greeted them until the rocky and cold ground became a carpet of squishy bodies, freezing cold metal armor, weapons, shields and broken bones. The macabre flooring grew into a large pile and they were forced to climb over the fallen people of Aemphalis. Burnt flesh and skin tore away beneath their grips, and they slipped on bloodied armor and oozing innards.

"They are fresher now; keep climbing!" Ranok

shouted.

Ronpiru regurgitated in his mouth and forced it back down. "Will this never end?"

As soon as Ronpiru had spoken, the pile grew so steep that it was impassable. Ranok cursed the cadaverous sculpture of twisted limbs, bloody clothes and burnt bodies. "Now I believe we are truly stuck. No Phoenix, no nest, nothing...there is nothing here but these damned souls!" He ripped a corpse out of the pile and flung it behind him, almost knocking into Ronpiru and Orusho.

Orusho looked up towards Ranok and saw that the pile was now a tower of corpses that stretched up as far as the eye could see.

"Ranok, let us return. There is nothing more we can do. This...this obstacle is insurmountable even with our magic," Ronpiru pleaded.

Orusho brought the light back to them and he studied Ranok's face. The High Mage scowled. "Ranok, we will find another way to fell the Phoenix."

Ranok closed his eyes and appeared not to hear the words of his Seer.

Orusho shook Ranok by the shoulders and shouted his name.

"Quiet! I am trying to pick up something." A few silent moments passed. "Can you two not feel that?" The High Mage's eyes popped open and

Orusho could see they were blood-shot. Ranok was indeed focusing perhaps harder than he should have been.

“You are expending too much energy. Come on let us return.” Orusho glanced at Ronpiru.

Ronpiru closed his eyes and tried to focus. In seconds, he could have sworn he was hearing the faint but rapid beating of someone’s heart. “A heartbeat...what in the name of the Beyond is in this pile of chaos with us?”

“Dig!” Ranok shouted as he began grabbing bodies and dragging them off of the tower. He tossed them behind him, almost smacking Orusho and Ronpiru. They stepped up next to Ranok and helped him haul away the fallen as they dug deeper and drew closer to the owner of the heartbeat.

“Ouch!” The High Mage drew back his hands as if he had been burned. He wiped blood off of his palms but his wounds kept gushing.

“Give me your hands.” Orusho waved his hand over Ranok’s bloodied flesh and mumbled a few words. The blood receded back into two punctures now visible in his flesh. “Looks like you grabbed the wrong end of a weapon.”

Ranok smirked and nodded up ahead, “Look closer.”

Ronpiru stared at the pile of dead bodies before him but he did not descry anything. He had no

idea to what the High Mage was referring.

Orusho shrugged his shoulders, "What am I looking for?" He moved the ball of light directly in front of his face and then suddenly his eyes widened. "Is that what I think it is?"

Ranok smiled.

Ronpiru peered harder and caught sight of what appeared to be an oval-shaped piece of granite the size of his entire torso. It seemed horribly out of place in the morbid heap.

"What is that?"

Ronpiru tore ahead, pushing Ranok and Orusho aside. He grabbed the rock and yanked as hard as he could. Bodies rained onto him and he stumbled but did not lose his grasp on the rock.

"Ron, stop!" Orusho started after him but his foot sank into the open belly of one of the Phoenix's victims and he slipped. While Orusho tried to free himself, he watched the rock break free and fall towards Ronpiru. An array of black spikes shot out and caught him in the face. He screamed and toppled backwards.

Orusho and Ranok tried to catch him, but the weight of what they now knew was a Phoenix egg caused him to plummet fast. They watched helplessly as Ronpiru rolled down the entire pile of corpses still hugging the egg. When he slammed into the cavern floor, the egg slipped from his grasp

and crashed down onto his face.

“No!” Orusho threw himself down the pile and reached the fallen Mage. He squeezed Ronpiru’s hand and the pinned Mage let out a bloodcurdling scream.

“My eye, help! By the Beyond...my eye!”

Orusho and Ranok lifted the egg barely an inch into the air. Their legs strained under the weight of the Phoenix egg.

“Ranok, use a spell to lift this cursed thing! Hurry before he loses his eye!”

“If I let go now it will fall back onto his face you fool!”

“Just...do...it!”

Ranok released his grip and the egg slipped down an inch. Ronpiru thrashed and cried out so loudly that Ranok thought they would soon be deaf. The High Mage spoke a single phrase and focused his gaze upon the egg. He raised his palm and the object rose into the air. They could now see that a spike was buried deep in Ronpiru’s eye socket. The Phoenix egg floated higher and higher until the full length of the spike finally came out along with some of Ronpiru’s bloody flesh and his right eyeball. Then as quickly as they had appeared, the spikes retracted.

Ranok held his hand steady and the egg paused and levitated. He focused with all his might to

prevent it from falling as Orusho tried to stop the blood from gushing out of Ronpiru's eye socket. Orusho raised one finger and started whispering the only healing spell he knew, but before he could finish the first word, the blood suddenly dried and then vanished from Ronpiru's face. The still moist eye socket transitioned from dark red, to peach and then finally silver. It sparkled and twinkled like any random star in the night sky.

Orusho's breath caught in his throat, "What magic is this?" He looked up at Ranok whose mouth also stood agape.

"What magic indeed...."

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By the time the two suns hit their apex the next day, Ranok, Ronpiru and Orusho had returned to their charred settlement. They hurried underground to a cave that only Ranok's inner circle knew about in order to hide the egg from the rest of the people of the Northern Plains.

Magon, Mab and Drekmir suddenly appeared.

"What did you find, Master?" said Magon as he folded his hands and smiled in anticipation. Magon sensed something of great power with them.

Mab pushed Magon aside and strode forward,

“Who cares what you found! Did you kill the Phoenix?”

Ronpiru shrank from Mab’s gaze and covered his right eye.

“Did you send that cursed creature back to the Beyond?”

“No, we did not. The Phoenix was hidden far too deep for us to find her, but we discovered this instead,” Ranok stepped aside and Mab and the others beheld the Phoenix egg nestled on the earthen floor.

Mab shook his head, “She will surely destroy us all now. Surely—” his words were cut off by the screeching of the Phoenix overhead. They looked up at the dirt ceiling and listened to the thundering footsteps of the great creature followed by the liquid rush of its fiery breath. Screams and cries of the remaining people echoed down the halls and filtered into their hidden grotto.

“Give back the egg, Ranok. It was foolish to take it!”

“Quit your sniveling, Ron, I have a plan!”

Just then, two armed Mages wearing leather armor instead of black Mage robes interrupted the meeting. “Master Mortokmar, the people are terrified. They need answers,” said one of them.

The other warrior Mage nodded in agreement.

Ranok sighed and rubbed his forehead. “I said I

have a plan! You two, get over here!"

They obeyed.

"Everyone, hold out your hands. I need to draw upon your life force." Ranok withdrew a knife from within the folds of his robes.

Everyone obeyed except Orusho and Ronpiru. Orusho glared at Ranok, "To draw upon another Mage's life force to power magic is forbidden Ranok!" He stepped away from the others.

Ronpiru also backed away. "The reason we channel our own life force is so that our powers have limits. This is one of the fundamental laws we live by; how can you ask us to break it?"

"How *dare* you ask us to break it!" Orusho clenched a fist.

Ranok scoffed. "Old men, long dead, made those archaic laws. Who is to say what limits must be placed on our powers...if any?" He approached Orusho and stood so close that their faces were inches apart. "Who are *you* to refuse me, your High Mage?"

Ronpiru swallowed hard as he watched Ranok loom over his Seer. All of a sudden his right eye burned and he began seeing shapes instead of blackness.

Orusho stared at the High Mage. He never flinched. He did not back down.

Ranok sighed and his shoulders relaxed. "Damn

it Sho. This is a one time thing. I am trying to obscure the egg from the Phoenix. Surely if she does not sense it here, we will all be safe for a time. Please just give me your essence," he glanced at Ronpiru, "and you too!"

The two Mages conceded to Ranok's request.

Ranok slashed Orusho's palm first and his dark blood poured into the earth. With a smirk he next sliced open Ronpiru's hand, cutting too deep and causing him to buckle in pain. After he had opened up everyone's flesh, Ranok made them pour their blood on top of the Phoenix egg. Ranok then held his palm out and chanted something in a guttural language punctuated by clicks and moans. A blood red aura appeared and enveloped the egg and an invisible wave rippled through the shell. Ranok lowered his hand and stopped chanting. "There, it is done. The bond between mother and child has been obscured."

The Phoenix suddenly screeched at a pitch so high that their ears rang. A crash sounded overhead and shook the ground so violently that chunks of earth fell upon their heads. When the rain of dirt stopped, silence filled the hidden cave.

"Go tell our people that they will soon be safe. I am going out to meet the Phoenix."

The two warrior Mages left through one tunnel while Ranok exited through the other.

“Ranok, wait this is suicide!” Ronpiru bolted after him and the others followed.

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Ranok stood in a charred field, now littered with black sand and tiny sparkles of glass courtesy of the fiery dragon’s impossibly hot breath. He glanced back to see his inner circle of advisers beckoning him to return and the rest of his people trembling at the sight of the smoldering beast crawling towards their High Mage.

Ranok looked ahead at the Phoenix. The back of its neck, body and wings were covered in orange and white feathers that pulsed with its own beating heart. The creature stopped a few yards in front of Ranok, sat upright and fixed its solid black eyes on the lone Mage.

Ranok raised his voice, “If you keep on this bloody warpath, you will never see your child born. I know you understand me, beast, you have speech.”

The Phoenix craned its neck upwards and it shrieked into the clouds. Its body ignited and the flames pulsed and raged, growing bigger and bigger, threatening to engulf Ranok.

“I will destroy your child, your only hope of continuing on in this world. I command you to

cease these attacks. Are you listening? I know you understand me!"

The avian dragon quieted and the flames once again died down to a low smolder. "I do hear you...two-legger," it spoke in between smoky breaths. "Now is the time for my sleep. When I awaken, if my offspring is not returned, I will turn this and every other land in this world to ash."

The High Mage listened to the soothing alto voice of the Phoenix. It felt as if warm honey was being poured in one ear and flowing out of the other. The euphoria of the experience almost knocked him to his knees.

"How long will you rest?"

The Phoenix unfolded its wings and flapped them once. It rose a few feet into the air and its feathers ignited. "One thousand of your years. Do not betray your words, deal-maker." With that, the beast exploded in flames, flew back to the distant peaks and descended into the crater leaving the High Mage of Danuk unscathed.

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"Here he comes!" Magon ran to Ranok as he made his way back. When Magon reached the High Mage, he hugged him and Ranok shoved him aside. Magon ignored the slight and followed

closely behind his leader and they joined the others. "What did you do? What did you say to make the Phoenix leave us in peace?"

The High Mage of Danuk pursed his lips together and paused for a moment. "Tell our people that we have been saved. I have spared them from a fiery death by driving away that beast."

Magon nodded and rushed off to spread the news.

Orusho, Mab, Ronpiru and the other Mages of his inner circle surrounded him and stared, mouths agape.

"How did you accomplish this?" Orusho asked.

"Nevermind the details! Suffice to say we have been spared. The egg must remain hidden in the cave. Tell no one of its location. Should the power of the Phoenix fall into the wrong hands, it would be our undoing."

They all nodded in agreement.

"What will you do with the egg now? Is it collateral? Are we keeping it to prevent the Phoenix from ending us?" Mab twisted his hands around his staff and raised an eyebrow at the High Mage.

"We have one thousand years until we must return it. If we do not, then she will burn the world. This gives us plenty of time to study it to

learn and understand its power. In fact Ranok's voice grew to a whisper and he seemed to now be talking to himself. "It may even be a new source of power to draw energy for our spells."

Orusho and Ronpiru's eyes grew wide and they suddenly understood where this road could possibly lead. Unchecked magic usage, no limits, no consequences...

"Hail!"

"Hail, Ranok Mortokmar, the Savior of Danuk!"

The Mages of the inner circle were startled out of their ruminations by a series of chants and accolades all praising the High Mage Ranok. A crowd of Mages and non magic-users came forward and knelt at Ranok's feet. More people followed and bowed before the High Mage until a ripple of standing figures all kneeling in sequence raced through the crowd. In minutes, all of the people of the Northern Plains were on bended knee venerating Ranok.

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Days after the deal had been struck with the Phoenix, the people of the Northern Plains were busy trying to rebuild the settlements that had been destroyed. People hauled basket after basket of cloth from their underground stores and began

sewing new tents for the displaced survivors. The two warrior Mages Jinson Ryoku and Asa Hamuribaba were tasked with the disposal of the dead. They organized groups to gather the charred and dismembered bodies and sort them—Mages on one side and non-magic users on the other. The non-magic users were descendants of the Etarian Clan from the Tribe of Spirit on Mospeldon, the continent north of Aemphalis. Their funeral rites differed from those of the Mages. Jinson and Asa wanted to respect those differences. They also wanted to give families a chance, however slim, to identify whomever they could.

Asa scanned the two growing sides of the fallen. His gaze lingered over the children and infants whom seemed to outnumber the adults. He wondered if they would ever recover from this loss.

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Ronpiru, Mab and Orusho oversaw the cleanup of destroyed homes and belongings. They helped cart away dead livestock and sort through personal belongings that could be salvaged. Black sparkling sand permeated every piece of cloth, page of a book, everything they found and Ronpiru wondered if it was worth saving anything. “Maybe we should just toss everything, start fresh,” Orusho

eyed Ronpiru as he spoke. "I mean, why do we not just finish what the Phoenix started and kill the past?" Ronpiru whipped a handful of burnt books onto the scorched earth and kicked them aside.

Orusho put down the basket he was filling with clothing scraps and shoes and went to him. "I know this is difficult, but we must not cast off old ways, nor must we forget who we were before this catastrophe." He watched as Ronpiru's now silver right eye rolled in its socket.

Ronpiru averted his eyes. Why couldn't he control that silver orb? It seemed to have a mind of its own.

Orusho smiled, "It really is not so bad. Silver looks good on you!"

They laughed.

Magon appeared next to the pair. Mab noticed his arrival and he stopped sorting and listened.

"The High Mage has commanded all to attend a ceremony where his leadership will be officially announced and our future plans laid out. People are growing restless," Magon looked down his nose at a group of women sorting junk from usable goods, "even with their endless busy work."

Orusho nodded.

Mab smirked and rubbed his goatee.

"Where, at the gathering circle?"

"Yes," Magon nodded then took his leave of the

trio.

Ronpiru watched Magon walk away, "Well that is good news. We need direction and reassurance."

Mab scoffed, "Do not be so excited. Things are changing, Ron, and not for the better. I am surprised you cannot see it. Come look at this." Mab led the two Mages over to where he had been working. "Look at that group of women. Look at what they are sewing!"

Ronpiru and Orusho noticed the women were working with purple fabric and had already made several hoods and full sets of Mages robes.

"New clothes," Orusho furrowed his brow, "But why?"

"I have not seen this color since we left Mospeldon. It is the color of the Mortokmar Clan from the Tribe of Spirit, Ranok's family. But—"

"I said no, Ranok!" a woman's shouts interrupted Ronpiru.

The three Mages searched for the source of the commotion and saw Ranok and his wife arguing outside of the late High Mage Venadok's tent. She ripped a small, bundled child from his arms, screamed more words at Ranok's face, and then fled. They watched his wife and child disappear behind many rows of black tents as Ranok's face twisted into a scowl. The High Mage suddenly noticed that he was under examination. He glared

at them and then hurried off in the direction of the gathering circle.

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Thousands of Mages and Eterian Clan descendents stood in a large dirt circle surrounded by numerous piles of debris littering the scorched grasses. They mumbled to themselves and each other as they waited for their leader to speak.

A frigid winter wind bit Ronpiru's cheeks and he wrapped his cloak tighter around his lanky frame. He gazed up at the gray clouds hanging above them and wondered how much smoke and ash could fill them before they dumped a sullied snow over the Northern Plains. He watched Orusho stroke his long goatee and noticed steam rising from his forehead despite the chilly air. He wondered how long his friend could hold his composure before releasing his thoughts on the group. He saw Mab gripping the top of his staff so tightly that his knuckles were white and his jaw clenched. Mab's gaze darted over the crowd and then rested on Ronpiru. Mab's upper lip curled and he shook his head.

"Settle down now, your Master is here!" Magon stepped aside just as the High Mage materialized behind him. Loud gasps rippled through the

crowd. The High Mage ascended to the top of the platform and stretched out his arms as if to embrace everyone. "My friends," the words made Orusho shudder, "We have all been through the worst terror imaginable. Our way of life has been threatened. Our friends and family have been slaughtered. Our livestock, crops and food stores have been obliterated. I have the solution to these problems. I have the answer to ease your minds!"

Mab chuckled to himself.

Ronpiru watched his fellow Mages and looked on with hope and the non-magic users, for the most part looked skeptical.

"Our way of life is now transitioning into one worthy of our natures, one that will carry us into this new Age of the Phoenix. No longer will you need your family and friends," Ranok placed his hands over his heart as a few gasps reached his ears, "I will be your family, your friend, your comfort from now on. No longer will you need livestock, crops or even food. I will be all the sustenance you require."

Orusho raised as eyebrow, "What in the name of the Beyond is he talking about?"

"Through the power of the Phoenix, we Mages are now made better. No longer are we to use our own life force as the energy source to power our spells. That practice is now forbidden and

punishable...by death."

Shouts and cries blasted the air and Magon silenced them with a wave of his hand then turned his attention back to Ranok.

"The new source of our power will be the essence of the Phoenix egg which I have already begun extracting. I have already started infusing it into my body. I am already made more powerful. You will draw your power from me, from the Phoenix!"

Ronpiru's silver orb burned. "Limitless power for spells?"

"He is mad!" Orusho glared at the High Mage.

Ranok continued, "All of your veneration belongs to the Phoenix and to myself. We are your new divine beings. You owe us your allegiance, your very lives. Through us you will live forever!"

Cheers erupted from the crowd.

"Hail Ranok!"

"Hail the family of Mortokmar!"

"The savior of the Northern Mages!"

"Ranok the Savior!"

"Hail"

Ranok scanned every face in the crowd. Ronpiru, Mab and Orusho watched a smile appear on his lips.

"We are no longer the Mages of old. We are now Clerics!" With those words Magon and Drekmir began handing out purple robes and cloaks to

everyone present.

“Destroy your old garb and proudly don your new Cleric robes! These clothes with this bold color—not used by any other in Aemphalis—will show this land our strength and our power. As your new High Cleric, I will lead you proudly into this new age. We will prosper. We will triumph over our enemies!”

Orusho jerked his head back as if someone had just slapped him, “Enemies? Who is he talking about?”

“The Men of the East are not our friends. It has been eighty-four years since they came from Outland and landed on our continent. They did nothing but war with their homeland, Palmatia for the first fifty years and prosper off of land that should have been ours. My next decree, therefore, is that further contact with the other lands—Borna, the Gardens or the Plains—is forbidden. Breaking this is also punishable by death!”

Silence this time. No cries, shouts, not even a whisper.

“There will also no longer be pilgrimages to Om to hone our skills to become Masters of our chosen magical arts. You will receive all of your training here. If the Monks of Om learn of our new power source, they will kill us and take it!” Ranok motioned for Magon and Drekmir to return to his

side. Once they did, all three Clerics raised their hands and a great storm formed above their heads. Thunder exploded, lightening crackled and rain fell. The storm clouds sailed over their destroyed settlement and suddenly row after row of black tents appeared. They were all connected by a winding dirt path where every few feet an onyx statue of Ranok loomed.

Ronpiru, Mab and Orusho could not believe what they were seeing. Hundreds of thousands of tents of all sizes now surrounded them. A new city had been created over the ashes.

Ranok gestured towards the new settlement, "Welcome to the Dragon Camps, your new home," the crowd cheered, "The time of limits and ignorance is over. A new age for our people has begun!"

The High Cleric of Danuk covered his face with his new purple hood. This was the last time anyone would ever see the face of Ranok Mortokmar.

CHAPTER TWO

The Plainswoman

Nalya Bloodroot dragged her eyes open and the rays of the two suns blinded her. She squinted and peered out of her bedroom window. Drove of people plodded past with carts filled with food, fabrics and other goods, while others lead pigs and cattle down towards the Bone Village market.

“Naly!”

Nalya buried her face with two pillows and cursed the birds whistling and tweeting outside her window. She shut her eyes and tried to rejoin the tall, armored soldiers of her dreams in faraway lands as they rescued people from evil magic-users and terrible beasts.

“Naly, get your butt-up-now! Get on those chores!”

"Fine!" Nalya whipped her pillows across the room and leapt to her feet. She quickly dressed, splashed water on her face and hurried to the kitchen.

"Good morning, Mother," Nalya sat at the table and lay her head down. "Can't I just keep sleeping?"

Her mother, Tessa, shoved a list into Nalya's hands, "Go get these from the market and be back by midday."

Nalya dragged her head up and examined the list. "Okay, I'll see you in a bit." She headed out.

"Take Tag with you," said Tessa.

Nalya rolled her eyes out of sight of her mother, "Really? Do I have to?"

"He needs to get out too."

"Aw Mom, but he's annoying and he just gets in my way."

"And you need to be watched."

"Mom, I'm sixteen, now. I don't need to be monitored like a child!"

"Nalya, this world is a different place now that we live under the threat of that creature."

"There's been no sign of the Phoenix since I was a baby. Why are you so sure it will return?"

Tessa stopped cooking and wiped her hands on her apron, "The Phoenix burned half of our village and slaughtered thousands of people on the Plains

alone. Who knows how many more it devoured in the other lands.”

Nalya watched her mother’s gaze drift towards kitchen window.

“I know it has only been about fifteen years since then, and you are too young to remember, but when the Mages in the north cut themselves off from everyone...”

Nalya waited for her mother to finish, but after her voice had become monotone, Tessa went silent. The hairs on Nalya’s neck stood on end.

Tessa refocused on Nalya, “Things just changed. You need to be careful.”

Nalya nodded and decided not to argue any further.

“Go grab your little brother and get moving!” She waved Nalya out and went back to her cooking.

Nalya headed out, but was stopped by her father tearing into the kitchen.

“I need russroot. My stores are depleted and the entire village is out!” He flipped the lids of every barrel in sight, ripped open sacks and tossed aside every object in the room except for Nalya and Tessa.

“Husband, please,” Tessa grabbed Lebaron Bloodroot by the shoulders, “Stop making a mess!”

He shrugged her off and took a deep breath.

"Tessa, do we have any stored in the barn, maybe something extra you may have hidden for an emergency? I need to make a potion to treat Elder Goodearth. She has caught the fever!"

Tessa frowned, "I'm so sorry. We're all out."

He cursed and pounded his fist into the table. "Then I have to go to Healer's Grove right away!" He hurried out of the kitchen and Nalya followed.

"Father, wait! Let me come with you."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"Please?"

"We'll be gone a few days, Naly. Are you sure you want to come?"

Nalya thought about the chance to see people from all over Aemphalis mingling, selling and trading in the largest settlement in the Plains and the center of all commerce in the land. She nodded and smiled from ear to ear.

He returned the gesture and took her face in his hands, "Okay then, go and get our horses ready." He kissed her forehead and she bolted outside.

"Thanks dad!"

*

Nalya led two horses over to her father as he waited in front of their home with a sack to carry their water, food and anything they purchased in

Healer's Grove.

A young man with skin a couple shades darker than Nalya approached Lebaron, "Father, where are you headed?" He towered over Nalya and did not acknowledge her presence.

She furrowed her brow, "It's too late Aru. Father is taking me not you."

Aru continued to ignore her. "Where are you going? I should ride with you." He grasped the reins in Nalya's hands but she yanked them back.

"Naly's right, Aru. I'm taking her to Healer's Grove. I need russroot to make more healing treatment for our Sister Elder before she runs out."

Aru sighed and glared at his sister, "But I always go with you." Their father opened his mouth to speak, but Aru continued, "How can you expect me to meet people, to find a wife and settle down as you keep demanding if I never even leave Bone Village?"

His father patted his shoulder and smiled, "You can come next time, okay?" Lebaron mounted his horse and motioned for Nalya to do the same. "You are not the only one who needs to meet people and start thinking about settling down, my son." He nodded at Nalya and she stuck her tongue out at her older brother when their father looked away.

Aru cursed under his breath as the pair started

towards the main road.

Nalya called back to Aru, "Why don't you just go help Mother in the kitchen?"

*

After riding across a mostly treeless and arid grassland and spending a night in Russroot Village, Nalya and Lebaron arrived in Healer's Grove just past midday. Green trees encircling the town greeted them and Nalya wondered if anything lay beyond the shadows between the tree trunks other than wild animals and bandits. They weaved their horses past the trees and the sunlight vanished until they reached the town proper. Lebaron paid to have their horses stabled, watered and fed before heading down to the center of town.

Nalya was awestruck by the sights and sounds of the bustling marketplace. She had never ventured outside of Bone Village before because the unpopulated land of the Plains was full of bandits, wild hyenas, packs of rabid dogs and other dangers. She examined everyone she passed and marveled at the different shades and shapes of each person. There were dark-skinned people with long and straight black hair hauling carts of dried and salted fish, orange and black striped animal skins, and scaly dark green snakes with heads the size of

Nalya's own. She shivered as she thought of those serpents actually being alive, slithering around and eating people.

"Disgusting!"

As she turned away from the dead reptiles, Nalya suddenly caught sight of a group of men of great stature, a few inches taller than her father, with tanned white skin and golden hair. Nalya had never seen men dressed as they were with royal blue cloaks, black and blue clothing and silver plated armor pieces covering their chest, shins and forearms. She had to squint to look at them because the midday suns were at the top of the sky.

"Who are those men, father?"

"Those are Bornan soldiers, Naly. You know about the Men of the East."

"Oh," she continued her study until one caught her gaze. She stumbled and looked away.

Her father redirected her past a group of people peddling more exotic animals and all sorts of foods Nalya had never seen in her mother's kitchen. They soon reached a spread of carts full of all manner of plant. Lebaron began his search among the greenery and Nalya glanced back at the Bornans.

One of the soldier's nodded at her and Nalya's stomach fluttered.

She tore her gaze away and hurried after her

father who was already digging through his second cart.

*

Nalya lay in bed beneath layers of blankets. She flipped onto her side, then to the other side, and then finally onto her back. She sighed and stared up at the ceiling wishing it were morning. She thought about the people she had seen in Healer's Grove the other day, in particular the Bornan soldier who had noticed her. She wondered how many wars he had fought in, if he had ever killed anyone, if he loved anyone, and if he had a family. Tales of the Northern kingdoms—soldiers, horses, battles, kings, riches—flooded into her brain. She wished she was at the village tavern, hidden in a corner and listening to storytellers spin yarns about their travels throughout the world.

Movement outside of her windows caught her attention and she sat up.

"Who's there?" Her gaze darted around the room.

She crept over to the windows and peered out into the backyard. Flames enveloped her family's barn and figures dressed in purple robes raced in all directions.

"Mom, Dad, the barn's on fire!"

Her parents bolted across the yard. Her father shouted something and her mother started off, but a group of intruders appeared and grabbed her arms and legs.

“Mom!”

A hand gripped Nalya’s throat and squeezed. She smacked and clawed the pair of hands to no avail. Her vision blurred and the grip tightened.

She watched beyond the windows at her mother struggling against her own assailants. One grasped her father by the hair and dragged him out of view.

She gasped for breath as she grew light-headed and her body weakened.

Nalya’s attacker raised her off of the floor and squeezed harder. Blackness appeared on the outer edge of her vision and seeped inward, but she fought to stay conscious. She watched her mother scream and wrestle with the intruders. One of them raised a hand before Tessa Blooroot’s eyes and she stopped struggling. Her gaze went to her daughter.

Nalya squinted through tears and made out the words *I’m sorry* just as a barrage of orange flames consumed her mother.

*

Orusho Umera hurried along a maze of black dirt

pathways, weaving in between row after row of black tents on his way to meet the High Cleric. Ranok Mortokmar had summoned his inner circle to the passageways beneath Danuk. Orusho reached a tent the size of five others put together and went inside. He descended earthen stairs and followed a dimly lit passageway as the cries of Ranok's latest victims echoed in the distance. Every wail sent a chill up Orusho's spine. Each choking sob made the pit of his stomach sink. His pace slowed and he wondered why he still raced to Ranok's side when called. He did not agree with the experimentation on their own people and especially on the Eterian Clan descendants whom they had sworn to protect. Just because he was the High Cleric's Seer did not mean that he had to continue to serve him, did it?

Another scream pierced the air and Orusho froze. He placed his hand on the crumbling dirt wall to steady himself. What sights awaited him? What did Ranok have to show him and the others?

His hands found his beard. His fingers curled around the wiry strands and then combed through them all the way down to his waist. Patches of skin fell from his chin. In the amber glow of the tunnel it looked like someone had shredded pieces of parchment at his feet. He gritted his teeth as he recalled the day five hundred years ago when

Ranok had ordered them to stop taking in nourishment. He had just saved them all from the Phoenix so everyone obeyed without question. The more they channeled from Ranok's life force, the less pain they felt. The more power they drew from the Phoenix egg, the less sensation they felt. Finally, after a couple weeks of starvation, all sensation from their internal organs had vanished.

Now, Orusho wondered how many more pieces of skin would slough off before he had no face left. Yes, he lived—they lived—but they were slowly decaying. Orusho felt his physical self wasting away despite the growing clarity in his mind and power in his words when he mediated or uttered a spell.

The screams died just as he came upon a musty, wooden door with a bloody handle. He inhaled and exhaled slowly and tried to slow his racing heart but to no avail.

Orusho entered the room.

*

"Finally, I was beginning to worry! Sho, where were you?" said Ronpiru as he grabbed Orusho's arm and yanked him close.

"We are all here, Master. Please begin," Magon gestured towards two stone slabs in the center of

the room each containing a naked, shackled man, one pale and one dark.

The High Cleric stood in between the two men and faced a room full of purple-robed Clerics. "Let me show you what half a millennium of study has yielded. This wasting that is taking our bodies will plague us no longer. Watch!" He nodded at Jinson and Asa and they approached the supine men while each brandishing a mace with a spiked head. Ranok reached into his robes and pulled out a blade as long as his arm.

Ronpiru shifted his weight from one foot to the other as he watched the Etarian and the Plainsman struggle in place. He heard Orusho's breathing speed up and saw him tugging on his beard.

Without warning, Ranok brought the blade down along the pale man's shin and sliced off all of the flesh in one swoop, exposing the bone.

Ronpiru's eyes watered as the man shrieked. The surrounding Clerics mumbled to themselves and Ronpiru caught Mab smiling.

Ranok sliced off the flesh from the pale man's second leg and then turned on the Plainsman. Two great slices were not enough to break completely through this man's muscle, so Ranok hacked away until the Plainsman's lower leg bones were visible.

Screams reverberated around the room and blood flew everywhere.

Orusho covered his mouth to keep from protesting. He bit into his hand and tasted his own blood.

The High Cleric stared at the naked bones and the chunks of flesh lying on the ground. "These men have not been injected with the essence of the Phoenix egg," Ranok nodded and Jinson and Asa slammed their weapons into one of the men's legs and shattered them into dust. Drekmir and Magon appeared at the victim's sides and forced them to swallow what looked like small vials of yellow, incandescent mucus. "Now, witness the power of the Phoenix!"

Jinson and Asa smashed the men's remaining legs and were abruptly launched across the room the instant their weapons made contact.

Ronpiru stared at two intact leg bones and his one silver eye burned in its socket.

*

"We have to kill him. That is the only way," Orusho pulled at his beard and loosened a few skin flakes.

"What? H-how?" asked Ronpiru.

"That is impossible, and even if you did succeed, you would never get away with it. The Clerics would tear you apart," Mab twisted his hands

around the head of his staff and smirked.

Orusho poked his head out of his tent and glanced outside. Orange fires flickered on top of torches and the walls of every tent rippled in the wind. No movement could be seen and no sounds reached his ears.

“Are you waiting for someone?”

Orusho popped his head back inside and rejoined the conversation, “Nilas is on his way, Ron. I have something to ask him and he needs to say yes. I am fairly certain that he will. I am sure that he feels the way we do...about Ranok.”

Mab scoffed. “None of us feel much of anything anymore, Sho. That is the problem.”

Orusho frowned and began tapping his foot. He watched Ronpiru pace while Mab hovered in the corner.

Black folds of cloth parted behind Orusho and a Cleric entered. “I am here. Now what is so important that you pulled me from my studies?”

Orusho grabbed Nilas Alazad by the shoulders. “Take them East, Nilas, you must take the Etarians to the land of men! We are leaving tonight and you are the only one who has a chance with the Eastern Men. Surely they will not turn away a Healer.”

Mab raised an eyebrow at the pair.

Nilas swept his silver and black hair out of his eyes and smiled through chipped teeth. “Are you

mad? Why would I do that?" He twisted out of Orusho's grip.

"We have just seen what Ranok has been doing all this time with the Etarians and the Plainspeople. He is experimenting with them. He is breaking their bodies and torturing them. In all of the Beyond, there can be no greater horror than what Ranok is doing to these poor souls and to us!" Orusho's eyes watered and he trembled.

Nilas's smile faded. He looked to Ronpiru for confirmation of Orusho's findings.

"It is true, Nilas. He has gone mad. We want no part of this. Sho has a plan for those of us that want to defect, but you—you must save the men."

Nilas shrugged his shoulders. "What can I do? I do not see how taking them to Borna is even an option. The High Cleric will hunt and destroy us all. He will never forget this treachery!"

"As Ron said, I have a plan. I have been working on something for quite some time. The power of the Phoenix egg was not used solely for misdeeds. I have created another physical plane in the Realm of Reality."

Mab, Ronpiru and Nilas gasped.

"I am taking us back to our Mage roots. All those who wish to flee are meeting me in Port Manejad." Orusho placed a hand on Nilas's shoulder, "You must take the men away or it will be

the end of their race. Our exodus will be just the diversion you need.”

Nilas cringed as he thought of what the High Cleric would do to him if he were caught.

“We promised the Etarian Clan that we would protect them. That is why we brought them with us to Aemphalis, remember? We must keep that promise.” Orusho walked over to a table and picked up a long object wrapped in black cloth. He nodded at Mab and Ronpiru, “Come on. There is nothing left for us here.”

*

Orusho, Ronpiru and Mab met Asa and Jinson in Port Manejad. The five Mages then led several hundred Clerics south out of Danuk, through the Aurora Woods and into the Grasslands of Aemphalis.

Orusho stood in the waist high grasses and motioned for Asa and Jinson to halt the group. He then turned to Ronpiru and Mab and reached for their hands. He raised his palm and withdrew a tiny white light from their flesh. These lights entered Orusho and he began to chant. The grasses swayed all around them, birds raced overhead and the earth trembled beneath their feet. A storm cloud covered the entire sky and they were encased

in a gray haze. Rain poured from the cloud, lightening cracked and thunder boomed. In seconds, a pool had formed before them. It grew and grew until a black lake extending as far as the eye could see appeared.

The sky above the lake turned midnight blue and countless stars appeared. On the horizon sat a distant island with one lone city of marble brick buildings some with silver-trimmed towers. The city and everything in it was draped in a shimmering, white and blue glow. The most beautiful dream they could ever have imagined now beckoned them to cross the lake.

Orusho shook violently. His sweat poured into the ground and he collapsed. Ronpiru and Mab helped him to his feet. Orusho craned his head up to gaze across the still obsidian waters, "The Isle...it is the Isle I have dreamed into existence with all of the power I drew from the essence of the Phoenix egg." A coughing fit overtook him and his knees buckled.

Ronpiru looked at the sea of Clerics who had defected with them. Murmurs raced across the crowd. The faces of Asa and Jinson, normally set in stone, were now damp with tears and they smiled. "What is this place, Sho? Where are we?"

"It is the Isle Mirage, my friends. We are home," and with those words Orusho Umera collapsed to

the ground and fell unconscious.

*

Nalya awoke to a gray haze obscuring her vision and pressing down on her chest. She shivered till her joints ached. The surface beneath her dug into her back and she squirmed. She pounded it with her fist. It was solid. She was not dreaming.

Shrieks echoed around her and she leapt to her feet. Nalya gasped in horror as she beheld a sea of writhing bodies and flailing arms. Naked people lay on each slab clawing at their flesh as if trying to get out of their skin.

She walked past pair after pair of blood-shot eyes and quivering lips.

A hand seized her arm and she screamed.

A man with milky eyeballs and a twisted mouth tightened his grip. She tried to shake him off but he held on and wailed until her ears throbbed. He released her arm and Nalya bolted.

What is this place?

As Nalya rushed ahead the smell hit her. Rancid and metallic odors invaded her nose. She covered her mouth and her stomach lurched. She trudged deeper into the macabre scene not knowing where else to go until she came upon someone familiar: a woman with dark skin and black twisted hair much

like her own lay on a slab. Blood, scabs and holes covered her naked body. Tubes ran from her neck and attached her to a pumping mechanism suspended over a large barrel. This false heart pumped and filled the barrel with the woman's blood.

"M-m-mom?"

Her mother was speaking to someone lying on the next slab. As Nalya gazed into her mother's eyes, terror gripped her.

"Darling, you must hold on. Please don't give up. You have to get out of here. You must survive." Her mother's eyes closed and she fell limp.

Nalya wiped a tear from her eye and examined the other people. She found her father and her two brothers also swooned. She could barely make out their coppery skin beneath all of the dried blood and bruises.

Nalya turned her attention to the stone slab next to her mother. On it lay a young girl huddled in the fetal position. Her coppery skin was unbruised and free of blood. Nalya drew closer and made out small punctures in her neck and chest. A viscous and luminescent fluid was being infused into the side of her neck while small tubes carried blood from the side of her chest and emptied into a basin. Nalya turned the unconscious girl over and looked

at her face.

She was staring at herself.

Nalya shook her mother's shoulders, "Mom?"
Her chest heaved and she sobbed uncontrollably.

"Dad? Aru? Tag? What happened to you?"

"Mom, where are we? What's happened to you?
Who did this?"

The dead woman did not respond.

"MOM!"

CHAPTER THREE

The Men of the East

“Why won’t he surrender?” King Laethold Sturbund swept his hand across a table sending his map of eastern Aemphalis to the ground. He was tired of sitting with his officers in his makeshift headquarters. No matter how ornately they decorated the shoddy tent, its walls were unfamiliar and they were not home. The squeals of his little boy, Frederick, and loving words from his wife, Bryn, drifted to his ears from outside. He wanted to join them, not sit here figuring out how Captain Luke Bask would move the Swords of the King into position to take and hold the Brine River crossing so that his cousin Seth and the Riders of Bask could race onto Silverton unimpeded. Taking the rebel city where Dartrais Vincent, the Duke of

Silverton, lived and issued orders from would hopefully end the uprising his father began almost thirty years ago.

"This is no longer a war for secession, Captain. It is a war of attrition," said Laeth as he kneaded his brow.

Seth nodded, "We need a more permanent solution, Your Majesty."

"Agreed, cousin," Luke replaced the map. "What we have laid out will work. My men and I will head out at first light." He bowed and took his leave just as another officer entered Laeth's command tent.

"Your Majesty?"

"What is it Lieutenant?" Laeth rose as Anan Bask stood in place holding the heavy folds of royal blue fabric open instead of coming inside. The smell of putrid wounds, human waste, grass and mud wafted to the king's nose.

Anan bowed, "Your Majesty, the Queen has insisted that we dine with her."

Seth raised an eyebrow, "Are you running errands for the Queen now, brother?"

The three officers laughed, but Laeth remained silent.

*

“To the Beyond with this heat! Will Harvest Season ever come?” said Bryn as she dabbed her spilling cleavage with a cloth and smiled across the table at Seth and Anan. “Laeth, take me home before Freddie and I perish.”

King Laeth patted his wife on the shoulder, “Of course, dear.” He kneaded his forehead and tried to block out the scent of festering wounds and sweaty clothes that had not been washed in who knew how long. He eyed the boiled rabbit and smoked pheasant sprinkled with whatever spices were left after months of being away from Sturbund. Laeth cringed. He could not smell any of it. The stench of the war camp drowned out the pleasant aromas. Sight alone would have to suffice.

“Dada,” Freddie toddled up to Laeth and reached his arms out. The king scooped him up and sat the child on his knee. Laeth squeezed Freddie’s round cheeks and ran a hand through his golden curls. “How are you, my son? Ready to eat?”

Freddie cooed and smacked the king’s face with both of his chubby, drool-covered hands. Laeth laughed as Bryn took the child in her arms. As Freddie was whisked away, he latched onto the king’s hair and knocked his crown onto the table.

Servants cleaned the mess and poured everyone a cup of wine.

Bryn gulped her drink down and demanded more right away.

Laeth rolled his eyes and gestured to the servants. He eyed Bryn as she mashed up some of her food and placed in into Freddie's awaiting mouth. His son mostly sucked on it and drooled, but Laeth knew soon he would get the hang of chewing.

Bryn placed two wet kisses on Freddie's cheeks as he ate and then rubbed his tiny bloated belly. She caught Laeth's eye and he smiled. Bryn did not return the gesture. She averted her gaze and frowned.

Laeth opened his mouth to address Seth and Anan, but he was cut off by a series of violent coughs.

Freddie's face had turned blue and his eyelids drooped.

"By the Beyond, what's wrong with him? Laeth?" Bryn jostled Freddie and swept his mouth for a chunk of food, but found nothing.

Freddie quieted and went limp in his mother's arms.

Bryn shrieked and everyone darted to her side.

Laeth grabbed his son and shouted for a Healer. When she arrived, Bryn began coughing and her face turned red. Laeth grabbed the queen and clutched Freddie to his chest. He tried to beg the

Healer to save them, but his voice had gone.

Seth and Anan immediately swept the entire contents of the table to the ground and ordered a search of the camp for an outsider.

*

Elreich Degenhardt raced through the Etarian Army encampment not bothering to pause as he heard his soldiers call out for him. He knew they wanted to know when they would be paid and he did not have an answer. Thirty years of war with the Bornan crown had depleted the Lord of Etar's treasury and had almost consumed his family's wealth as well.

Elreich reached a charcoal gray tent with six soldiers standing at attention. Upon seeing their Captain, they saluted and he paused,

"Is he alone?"

One of the soldiers snickered, "Is that a real question, Captain?"

Elreich smiled and ducked inside.

"Lord Dartrais?"

Elreich stood in the dark space and scanned the table, chests, barrels and piles of clothes looking for Dartrais. A waft of body odor and blood flung itself up his nose and he gagged. He could not believe that the smell inside of this tent was worse

than the smell of sick, gangrenous wounds and sweaty soldiers outside. He covered his mouth and nose and called out for Dartrais again.

He spotted movement in a chair at the far end of the tent.

“My lord?”

A series of forced breaths sounded and he approached the chair.

“Now get out of my sight!”

A naked woman was suddenly tossed aside and landed against a barrel. She cried out and Dartrais shoved her clothes in her face. He grabbed her hair, pushed past Elreich, and flung her out into the camp.

“Now, what is it, Captain?” Lord Dartrais grabbed a bottle of brown liquor, swigged it and then handed it to Elreich.

He refused the drink. “My lord, we have a situation.”

Dartrais took another drink.

“Silverton is burning, my lord.”

Dartrais dropped the bottle and liquor dribbled down his chin, “What did you say?”

“The Bornans have set fire to the city and the surrounding land for at least fifty miles. All the farms and villages have been destroyed.”

“To Silverton, Captain!”

Dartrais grabbed his sword and riding cloak and

the two men darted outside.

*

“A little over sixty days, Master, that is how long we have until the Phoenix comes looking for her egg,” said Magon as he took a seat across from the High Cleric. A black and silver flame flickered on the table between them and drew his gaze. The only other object he could make out on the table was a blade as long as a hand with serrated edges.

“What have you seen of the beast, Magon? Does it stir, or is it still resting?”

“It stirs.”

Ranok sighed, “Then it is time to move forward with the next phase of my plan.”

“The conversion of the Eastern Men?” Magon asked while dust trickled from the corners of his mouth. He traced his jawline and skin flakes fell away.

Ranok shook his head “Not yet, first I must get my eyes, my ears and my voice out into the three lands.”

“How will you—” but before Magon could finish, Ranok grabbed the knife off of the table and grasped Magon’s head. He held the blade up between them. “Are you my most loyal and devout servant?”

Magon trembled and his breath stopped in his throat. "Y-y-yes, Master. Of course I am!"

Ranok handed Magon the knife.

"There is but one way to enter these three lands," He sat back in his chair and the wood creaked beneath him, "Through sacrifice."

"Sacrifice, Master? I do not understand."

"Would you give your eyes for the Clerics, Magon. As an adept Seer, you see much with your mind. Are your eyes necessary? Do you still cling to physical sights?"

A few silent seconds passed as Magon turned the knife over and over in his hand. He knew what the High Cleric was asking of him, but Magon could not believe that he was being given this honor to prove himself worthy.

"I have seen all that this world has to offer, Master Mortokmar. There is nothing left for me to witness," without hesitating Magon plunged the knife into his eye socket and twisted it hard. The metal blade ground against his skull and he popped one eye out. It fell onto the table and rested next to the silver and black flames still dancing before him.

Dust and a few chunks of dessicated flesh fell from his opened socket. Magon breathed heavily as his chest swelled with sensation. He had not felt anything for the majority of the one thousand years they had been worshiping the Phoenix and infusing

themselves with its essence. The warm waves gripping his insides were more than he could bear and Magon cried tears of joy from his remaining eye until he removed than one too.

Magon set the knife on the table and held his hands out, "My eyes, they are yours!"

"And your ears, what of them? Will you give them up for the Clerics too?"

"Yes!" Magon lowered his hood, took up the knife and sliced off his ears. "My ears, they are yours, Master."

"And what else, my servant. What else are you willing to give for the Clerics?"

Magon moved his head from left to right as if gazing across the tent at the High Cleric. He saw nothing, but he now felt the freezing cold of the silver and black flames for the first time in nearly one thousand years. He squeezed the knife in his hand and brought it to his lips, "My voice, Master. I give you my voice!" He grabbed his mummified tongue and hacked at it until it came off in his hand.

Ranok took Magon's gifts and held them over the silver and black fire. He uttered a few phrases that sounded more like guttural moans and clicks and then rose.

"You are indeed everything you have insisted, Magon. You shall always have a special place at my side." Ranok waved his hand in front of

Magon's eyes and they became milky orbs. Black wisps swirled within them and red blood vessels continuously burst and reformed.

"Open your mouth and I will give you a new voice."

Magon obeyed.

A plume of smoke poured from Ranok's hood and plunged into Magon's awaiting mouth. He felt his tongue reforming, yet this one was different. It was not dried, dusty and still, but instead moist and it pulsed with life.

Magon fell to his knees at the High Cleric's feet and wept.

*

Lord Dartrais, Captain Degenhardt, and a handful of Etarian soldiers galloped towards Silverton as chunks of earth and grass flew up behind them. Thunder echoed in the ground as they rode.

When clouds of black and gray smoke appeared and orange fires flickered in the distance, they slowed.

"How dare he, that bastard!" Dartrais clenched his fist and narrowed his gaze as he beheld the burned landscape around Silverton. The grass had become ash and the earth beneath was blackened.

The smell of salt and oil took their breath away.

"Laeth knows you set up the poisoning, my lord. This is his revenge," said Elreich as they scanned the surrounding hills and Silverton in the distance.

"How did all but the child survive?" Dartrais dug his heels into his steed and bolted ahead as he muttered curse after curse. When he arrived at Silverton Castle, the drawbridge was still down and neither the first nor the second porticullis had been dropped. He shouted for the castle guards but no one answered. He bolted to the back of the outer ward, dismounted and shoved his reigns in a stable boy's hands. He fled to the top floor of the keep and into the comfort of his solar.

Lord Dartrais flung himself into a chair in his private sitting room and shivered. "Boy!"

A young man entered and immediately handed Dartrais a bottle of brown liquor and then made a fire. He stood aside, head down, and awaited his next command.

Dartrais smirked at the young man as he took a long swallow of whiskey.

"Silverton is burning and yet you remain here when not one of my guards can be found?"

The young man shifted his feet. "I awaited your return, my lord. The—the guards took every able-bodied man and woman to help quench the fires in the coal mines and in the fields."

Lord Dartrais grunted and drank down half of the bottle. He kneaded his brow and clenched his teeth. *After thirty damn years of this, I've lost father's war. We don't have the numbers to continue fighting the Bornan Army!*

Dartrais closed his eyes and leaned back. He curled his lips around the bottle, opened the back of his throat and let the rest of the poignant liquid slide down and coat his insides. His hand faltered and the bottle toppled onto the rug. Lord Dartrais felt the room spin and he smiled. He placed his hands in between his legs and squeezed. "Get over here, boy." Dartrais listened to the soft footsteps of his servant as he crossed the carpet and knelt down in front of him. The young man untied the front of Dartrais's pants and placed his hand inside.

A few moments passed and Lord Dartrais felt nothing. He could not stop thinking about how the entire Bornan Army was plotting against him and now his own body seemed to have joined the cause.

He opened his eyes and swatted at his servants hands. "Just stop and turn around!"

The young man obeyed.

Dartrais dropped to the floor on his knees and moved up behind his servant. He grasped the back of young man's head and pushed him to the floor. Lord Dartrais waited for his body to respond, but it did not. He cursed at the top of his lungs and

shoved the young man aside. "Fetch me a woman!"

"Yes my lord."

While he waited for his next visitor, Lord Dartrais made his way to his bed chamber, dropped his sword on the trunk at the foot of his bed and made another fire for himself. He then lay back onto his bed and let the layers of blankets swallow him up. He started to doze off but the doors to his solar creaked opened and woke him.

A shriek sounded and Lord Dartrais's eyes popped open.

"Take your wretched selves away from my sight!"

Dartrais bolted upright as a guttural voice reached his ears. The voice was unlike anything he had ever heard.

"Who's there?" He held his breath almost hoping there was no response.

A few silent seconds passed and he sighed, "Damn whiskey!"

"A simple messenger, Etarian. The High Cleric of Danuk has a proposition for you."

Lord Dartrais reached for his sword.

"You wont be needing that, Lord of Etar."

Dartrais entered his sitting room and beheld a tall, cloaked being clad in dark purple robes looming between himself and the fire.

Stories of Clerics and other magic-users from his youth flooded his mind. He knew he should be afraid, but all he could muster was a smile. His smile grew into a laugh so boisterous that he began crying. "Are you—are you here to finish me off?" He held his stomach and continued laughing. He grabbed a half empty bottle off a nearby table and took a drink.

"If I wanted you dead, you would already be so."

"Are you sure? I'm sure Laeth would just love it if you would. You may as well kill me, I am sure he and his men will be here any day now to finish me off!" He drank more and tried to laugh but began coughing when the alcohol went the wrong way down his throat.

"Just what I need now, a damned magic-user! My assassin! Well, better you than that blond-haired, broad-nosed bastard!"

"Damned...yes. Your assassin...no. I am not he."

"Well then what do you want?" Dartrais stumbled and grabbed a table to steady himself. He drained the bottle and whipped it at the Cleric.

The Cleric did not move.

The bottle flew across the room and stopped inches from the Cleric's hooded face and then dematerialized before them.

Lord Dartrais wiped his mouth and tried to straighten himself.

"I am Magon Devrakmor, Advisor to the High Cleric of Danuk."

"So you, you are really a Cleric?"

Magon nodded.

"What is this message you have for me? Why should I care what the Clerics have to say?"

"You are weak, Vincent son. Too weak to fell your father's enemy. Too weak to claim and rule a land for your people. You are too weak to bring your father's dream to completion."

Dartrais scoffed. "I don't need you to tell me this!"

"The High Cleric offers you assistance in both matters in exchange for your silence." Magon reached into his robes and produced a small blue bottle with a dark liquid inside. "This elixir will ensure your triumph over Borna. Take it, tell no one of it, and please the High Cleric."

"And if I do not?"

"Then fall and join your fellow men in the Beyond when the Clerics descend upon the East."

Magon held the bottle out to Dartrais and he took it.

"How could something so small do so great a thing as you say, Cleric?"

Magon folded his hands. "Drink and the deal is

sealed.”

*

“Ranok must die,” said Orusho as he entered the Inner Chamber, home of the Island Council.

“With all due respect, Grand Master, that is surely impossible,” Mab glanced around at Jinson, Asa and Ronpiru and they nodded in agreement.

“There must be a way. There is always a way. Nothing lives forever!” Orusho’s face burned.

“Ranok has had one thousand years to infuse himself with the essence of the Phoenix egg and to perform his experiments. Who know how strong he and his Clerics are now. Who knows what magic they can perform. The idea that we can take them on is absurd!”

“Give us ideas then Mab, not criticism,” said Ronpiru, “It is Harvest Season already and the Phoenix will soon awaken. If we do not find the egg and return it, the year will end and the world will follow!”

Mab twisted his hands around his staff and stared past the others at the marble walls of the Inner Chamber. “The end...Maybe that is the way it needs to be.”

Everyone stood aghast.

“Do you not fear death by the fires of the

Phoenix?"

Mab did not meet Asa's eye, "There are a lot of things worse than death. Ranok is likely beyond the reach of the grave."

"I refuse to believe that," Ronpiru's one silver eye rotated in its socket.

"Well then Ron, you are a fool," he sneered at Ronpiru and stared until the silver-eyed Mage turned away.

"We will destroy Ranok. We will use the spear, that is the only way." Orusho stroked his beard and the others remained silent. The Grand Master continued, "I stole this relic from Ranok before we left. It was to be used as a last resort." He met their eyes. "I cannot ask any of you to use this, so I will do it myself."

"Absolutely not, Grand Master!" Ronpiru shook his head.

"You cannot damn yourself to that place," said Jinson.

"Who then? Who among you is willing to endure an eternity in the Beyond on the Plane of Pandemonium *with* Ranok?"

"I will," Mab spoke up, "I will kill the High Cleric with the Pandemonium Spear."

*

The suns rose in the eastern sky sending their rays through the lancets along the walls of Fort Mason Keep. The well illuminated room now allowed Lord Dartrais to see every sparkling jewel and intricate carving in King Laeth's crown at the other end of the table. Dartrais glared as he prepared to surrender to Borna. His first instruction after making a deal with the Clerics of Danuk was to make peace with Borna. Dartrais had no idea how this was to ensure he conquered them, but he was not about to argue with the Clerics.

"The High Constable of Borna, Karl Sturbund, will read the main points of this agreement. When he has finished, you will both sign and part as allies." King Laeth's Seer, Nilas, handed a long piece of rolled parchment to Karl who immediately unfolded it and began, "You and your people," he eyed Dartrais, "will recognize the sovereignty of the King of Borna, His Royal Highness, Laethold Laurs Sturbund."

Dartrais shifted in his chair.

"You are granted northern Borna including its main cities of Woodland, Northport, Charles Harbor, Silverton and Sturbund Hold. This new land will hereby be recognized as Etar. A percentage of all tax collected on this land shall be paid to the crown to pay for all damages suffered

during the past thirty years until such time as His Royal Highness sees fit to grant you reprieve.

“The nobility of the Etarian Clan from the Mospeldon Tribe of Spirit is hereby recognized by Borna. You, Dartrais Adonis Vincent, are to remain the Duke of Silverton. You are to be known as the Lord of Etar inside the Bornan court. Your father, the Etarian descendant Duke Adonis Ehron Vincent of Silverton, late husband to the Bornan born Duchess Michaela Alexander, is posthumously recognized by Borna as the former Duke of Silverton and Lord of Etar.

“Silverton and everything in it shall still belong to the Vincent family, this includes the castle, the silver and coal mines beneath its surrounding hills and all the farms. All taxes resulting from any commerce, trade, labor on said land shall be rightfully yours.

“Additionally, the entirety of the land of Sturbund Hold and its surrounding hamlets is granted to you and your heirs so it will henceforth be called Vincent Hold. You are named Earl of Vincent Hold as are any future sons. All taxes resulting from any commerce, trade, labor on said land shall be rightfully yours.”

Karl eyed the newly recognized Lord of Etar and then looked upon the men on Dartrais’s right, “Elreich and Gerhard Degenhardt, the nobility of

your family will still be recognized. Elreich, you are named Lord Protector of the Realm of Etar and will be addressed exclusively as Lord Protector by your military subordinates and either Lord Protector, Lord Captain, or Captain by your fellow officers.

“No blemish on either the Vincent nor the Degenhardt family names shall exist because of this war. However, arms must never again be raised against Borna, its king or its people. Furthermore, should Borna call upon you in a time of war to defend the land, you must answer said call.”

Elreich made a fist so tight that the sound of the leather rubbing between his skin could be heard all around the room.

“Other details concerning steel production and tree harvesting in Woodland, fishing in the Eastern Cove, et cetera, are summarized below,” Karl held a dipped quill out to Dartrais and pointed to the bottom of the sprawling parchment, “Sign here, Your Grace.”

Dartrais’s eyes and cheeks burned despite the cool Harvest Season air flowing into the building. He slammed his fist into the table and leapt to his feet, “I am the rightful ruler of Etar! I am its Prince! You fashion me as a simple vassal of Borna?” He spat on the parchment before him and the Bornan soldiers reached for their blades, “You

can take your titles and stick them up your—”

“He will sign, he will sign!” Elreich grabbed the quill from Karl and shoved it into Dartrais’s hand, “Your Grace?”

Dartrais scribbled at the bottom of the treaty and whipped the quill across the table. The King of Borna signed and Dartrais and his men strode away.

*

Lord Dartrais rode through the hills outside of Silverton ahead of Elreich, his lieutenant, Baliss Alexander, and the rest of his soldiers. As Dartrais examined the landscape around his capital city he ground his teeth. The fires had been quenched only a few weeks ago. Black soot still blanketed the soil and he doubted grass or any other plant life would grow back any time soon.

Lieutenant Baliss turned to Elreich, “This peace with Borna, is it real Lord Protector?”

Dartrais overheard the question and smirked.

“It is as far as you and the Eterian people are concerned, lieutenant.”

The three men rode until the hills shrank and their edges softened. Silverton came into view and the castle awaited.

Lord Dartrais fled to his bed chamber as fast as

he could and called for his servant. The young man came, bottle in hand. Dartrais drank and eyed him up and down. He frowned as he swallowed the burning liquid. "Fetch me a woman, boy."

The young man hurried away.

"Make it two!"

Dartrais removed his riding cloak, sword and scabbard and tossed them onto his trunk. He untied his coat, unlaced his shirt and tossed both aside. He grabbed his bottle, stood before his fire and breathed. The Bornan Army was no longer a threat. He and his men could sleep in peace for the first time in their lives. Dartrais could not recall a time when Bornans were not killing Etarians. It preoccupied his father until his death. Now it no longer had to preoccupy Dartrais.

"My lord?"

He turned to find two women in the doorway wearing white dresses that had been washed and scrubbed so many times that the fabric was see-through in places.

As he approached, one of them spoke, "Where would you like us my lord? The bed, or the floor, or the trunk perhaps?" She giggled and the other woman joined her.

He grabbed the woman by the throat and smothered her mouth with his other hand, "You are not here to speak!" He flung her onto the bed. He

turned to the other woman and kissed her so hard that she clenched her fists and cried out. He sat her on his bed, straddled her and kissed her even harder. When he released her she gasped for breath and he laughed.

Lord Dartrais eyed the other woman, "What are you waiting for?" She scurried over and joined the pair.

Dartrais craned his neck back and let out a long sigh as the women tried their best to please him. His entire body felt warm, yet he could not help but shiver. He glanced at the roaring fire and peered into the flames. He could feel his blood serpentineing its way through his veins carrying the Cleric's elixir into every inch of his flesh.

He gazed up at the portrait of his father looming above the mantle. The brush strokes moved and pulsed with the beating of his heart. He took a deep breath, but his breath stopped in his throat.

Something about the mantle was out of place.

He scanned the stone and noticed a small wrapped bundle. "Where did that come from?" He shoved the women aside and rose. He picked up the small package, removed the binding and eased open the cloth folds.

The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

"Get out of here, both of you!"

The women grabbed their clothes and fled

without protest.

Lord Dartrais stared at a severed tongue, dried and pasty white, caked with blood.

He dropped it onto the floor and called for his guards.

*

On the 30th day of the harvest season, King Laeth wandered to a hidden room in the north tower of Sturbund Castle. He waved aside two guards who bowed and moved out of the way. Laeth took a key from around his neck and unlocked the door. He glanced across the room at a woman smothered in a mess of overgrown frizzy red hair who was stroking something in her lap.

“Bryn,” Laeth moved in closer, “My queen?”

Bryn chuckled to herself and seemed not to notice Laeth. “Yes, Freddie dear. Your daddy is coming for us, soon. He did not abandon us. I did not abandon you, my darling.” Bryn squeezed the object tighter and began to rock back and forth.

King Laeth opened his mouth to speak, but realized that no matter what he said, the situation would not change. The Queen would not acknowledge his presence. She was stuck in some past memory with their late son, Frederick. She was locked in a place where he had not eaten his

mother's food, had not choked, had not died under his parents watch. Laeth envied Bryn sometimes. He envied that she saw, felt, and touched Freddie. His son was buried in the cold ground. Her son was in her arms, safe from Borna's enemies.

"Shhh, little one. It will not be long. Your daddy will be here soon." Bryn rocked and rocked as she stroked what Laeth knew to be a worn pillow Freddie had slept on every night no matter what. He had awoken with his head on that pillow on his last day of life.

King Laeth began to cry.

He fled to his solar before his sobs could echo throughout the castle. He ran through his sitting room and into his bed chamber. He hurried onto his balcony and scanned the grounds of the inner ward. When he was sure that no one was around, he sobbed until his throat hurt and his chest ached.

When he finished, he spun around and collided into someone. A young man bounced off of the king and fell to the ground. Laeth remained standing.

"My lord, I am so sorry. Please forgive my clumsiness!"

Laeth nodded, "Why do you disturb me?"

"Sire, a message has arrived!"

The young man got to his feet and handed a small brown bundle to the king. A dark liquid had

seeped through the tightly woven cloth. Laeth shivered, "What is this?"

"I know not, Your Majesty," said the young man and he hurried away.

King Laeth untied the thread binding the gift and unfolded the blood-stained cloth. He examined the contents and cringed as two milky eyeballs stared back at him.

*

Nalya awoke encased in a musty sack that scratched her skin as she was carried by someone unseen. Smoky air and occasional flashes of orange light seeped in through tiny holes in the woven cloth.

The person carrying her flew forward at an incredible pace, yet she could not feel his or her footsteps. Other people shuffled all around her. Twigs snapped and hurried whispers reached her ears,

"Stop making so much noise!"

"Hurry!"

A symphony of creeks, snaps and groans erupted in the distance and she undulated up and down. Nalya heard tree roots twisting and writhing all around her.

"Get away from the trees!"

“Take cover!”

The creaking and ripping noises sounded right next to her and she was lifted up into the air and then crashed to the ground. Her carrier seemed to have lost hold of her. The earth churned underneath and now a howling wind joined the orchestra of trees.

Someone picked her up just as thunder exploded all around her. Her sack was illuminated by an orange glow and her skin grew unbearably hot. Her carrier stumbled and Nalya heard objects flying overhead.

“They are almost upon us,” a new voice spoke. “We must make a stand!”

Footsteps rushed past her and faded away as more trees shuddered and snapped. Her carrier stopped and turned around.

“No, no, keep going! Get her out of here!”

Something monstrous crashed down and exploded and she was dropped to the ground. Projectiles broke through her fabric prison and pierced her flesh.

She struggled and clawed at the cloth and finally found the opening. She climbed out of the sack and more projectiles cut into her flesh. She lay prone and shielded the back of her head.

“Run, we cannot hold them back!” Footsteps raced towards her but her body had gone numb and

she could not move.

A shadowed figure bent down next to her and she saw that it was a man. "You are awake?" She closed her eyes, afraid to look at him as he cradled her in his arms. "Damn!"

"Finish it before they reach us! Put her down and move aside!"

Nalya eased her lids open a tiny bit just as chunks of earth flew up around them. She opened her eyes a bit further to see flames shoot up to the treetops, split into two waves, and then race towards them in a wide arc. As they were surrounded by the flaming circle, her eyes dried and her skin burned hotter than any summer she had known. She coughed and gagged. She squinted through the smoke and made out dark figures skulking beyond the fires and moving closer to them.

"Come on, we must try again to hold them off and give them more time!" Two men bolted towards the shadowy figures and a series of high-pitched whines and guttural shouts echoed in the air.

"Put her back to sleep and get her out of here, now!"

She shut her eyes.

"Go, hide that cursed weapon!"

Nalya strained to hear the rest of the conversation as she was whisked away from the group.

“Where is he going?”

“He can hide her.”

Her carrier stopped and laid her down on the snow.

She caught a quick glance at him but saw nothing but darkness and the stars above. He waved his hand over her and she sank into the frigid earth. Branches and dead leaves piled themselves on top of her. She tried to move but her limbs were still numb and she could not cry out.

Fire erupted behind the man and trees crashed down.

He muttered an unintelligible phrase and exhaustion gripped her. She fought against sleep long enough to see the man overtaken by shadows and flames before she fell unconscious.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Island Mages

Jen Dilucia dragged his feet as he approached a familiar marble brick dwelling. A dark-haired boy waited in the doorway.

“Jen, you’re back! Where were you? Did you see the Mages? Did they use magic? What kind of magic? Tell me-tell me-tell me!”

The boy jumped up and down and grabbed at Jen’s waist as he attempted to enter his house. “Get out of my way, Dash,” Jen grasped the top of his little brother’s head and thrust him aside.

“Ouch! Mom, Jen’s abusing me!”

“In the name of the Beyond, shut up!” Jen shoved Dash to the ground.

A woman with an ivory scarf covering her hair entered from the kitchen and wiped her hands on

her dress. "Jen, please stop bullying your brother. He's so much younger than you. Set an example for him."

Jen scowled and eyed a few tangles of hair sticking out from under her scarf. "An example? I should be an example to him? What about you, mother? What example do you set? Cover your hair. No one wants to look at the hair of a common woman," he turned to Dash, "and you should cut his hair. He looks like a girl. If the Mages were to ever grace us with their presence in this shack you call our home, I would die from the embarrassment! If anyone should be an example to him it is father, but that can never happen can it?"

"Hold your tongue! It is your father's fault that we live like this. He abandoned this family and left us destitute. He—"

Jen grabbed her shoulder. "You drove him away. You never supported him wanting to become a Master Mage. You may as well have killed him!"

She struck him.

Jen's cheek burned but he did not soothe it with a caress. He glared at his mother and moved closer to her until their noses almost touched. "Now I understand why he left. I see what he had to deal with," his voice quieted, "Serving the Mages was his way of getting away from *you*."

Tears fell from the corners of her eyes.

Dash reached out to his mother but Jen pulled his hand back. "I will not stand by and watch you poison him against our father. Someday I will take him away from here. I will save us both by following in father's footsteps. I see now that that is the only way to escape this place."

"You will not become like him, Jen. Your father cared more for the Mages than he ever did his own family. You will use your hands and your back, not magic, to do the work it takes to make a life. Stay away from them!"

"It is too late. I have an appointment with Master General Hamuribaba later today; you should remember him. He was father's best friend until you made him sever his ties. Through his instruction, I shall one day sit on the Island Council, or possibly serve in the Island Army. You may have stopped father, but you will not stop me!" With that, Jen fled to his room and threw himself on his bed in tears.

*

"Leave me...please!" Jinson cried out so loudly that Orusho, Mab, Asa and Ronpiru's ears rang.

"Sho, damn it, listen to me! Just leave me," Jinson groaned and a bubble of blood popped in his mouth, "I am beyond help."

Orusho glanced back at Jinson and cringed as blood poured from a gash in the Master General's abdomen. The skin on half of his face was burned black and still steaming. He hung limp with his arms draped around Ronpiru and Asa. "I will hear no more of this, Son. You are still a Master of my council and you will obey me, now move!" Orusho's eyes welled with tears and he averted his face.

Asa stopped to shift his grip, "I will not abandon you Son. Our Healers will save you, they must!"

"Asa," Jinson coughed and spat blood, "always the optimist." His eyelids fluttered and he winced.

"What do we do now, Grand Master? We have to return to the woods. If we do not, we risk—"

"I am aware of the risk, Ron."

Ronpiru started to say more but Jinson's leg buckled and he stumbled. Something warm and moist seeped out of the rip in Jinson's clothing. It peaked past his chest plate and brushed against Ronpiru's thigh.

Jinson felt Ronpiru flinch and then saw him cringe. The Master General caught sight of a bloody, dark purple bulge protruding from his blackened flesh. He laughed.

Ronpiru paused.

"Those Clerics got me good," Jinson gazed up into the starry midnight blue sky. He sighed. "In

all of the world, there is not a sight more beautiful than the eternal night that blankets the Isle Mirage. It is just as captivating as it was when you created it, Sho.”

Orusho smiled.

“I cannot believe it is the last time I will see it. It is truly a wonder. Do not ever lose your grip on its boundaries.”

“Stop talking like you are going to die. We will get you to the Healers.” Asa’s heart sank as he lied.

“Come on you two, hurry!” Orusho led them down the Lighted Path towards Leti City. “We will figure this all out when Mab returns.”

Ronpiru and Asa dragged the wounded Mage as quickly as they could, each pretending not to hear the increasingly loud groans and ignoring the growing trail of blood they were leaving in the grass.

*

Orusho burst through the double doors to his private chambers. He crossed the sitting room, entered his bedroom and fell to his knees.

“What have we done?” He held his face and stared ahead. “We have to go back to the woods as soon as possible. We must retrieve her before the Clerics—”

"Orusho?"

He jumped with a start at the unfamiliar voice speaking inside of his mind. His heartbeat raced and pain radiated through him. He remained silent and listened.

"Grand Master?" Someone called from outside of his chambers.

Orusho got to his feet and went out to the sitting room, "Who is it?" He scanned the walls, his rugs, the marble floor, everything. *What is wrong with me? Why does it feel as if something is out of place?*

"Orusho?" The unfamiliar voice returned and the hairs on his neck stood on end.

His vision sharpened. "Who is here? Show yourself!" He tossed aside furniture, flipped tables, and tore books off of shelves, but he did not find the source of the whispering. He slumped against the wall and wiped his sweating brow.

"What is happening to me?" He shut his eyes and took a few breaths before opening them again.

He saw it.

A small bundle wrapped in cloth lay on the floor in the center of the room.

He shuddered, *How did I miss that?*

Orusho moved closer to the package. His heart pounded and his skin burned more intensely with each step. His fingers trembled as he grasped the object, untied the string and pulled back its folds.

The Grand Master of the Isle Mirage tucked it beneath his robes and raced out of the room wondering how the boundaries surrounding the Isle had been breached.

*

Ronpiru stared up at the dome on the ceiling of his sitting room and reveled in the silence. He forced the sounds of raging flames and trees being ripped from their roots out of his head so that he could concentrate on locating the Phoenix egg. Ever since they left Danuk, Ronpiru had been searching for a window into the High Cleric's mind in order to find the location of the egg. If they could find it, they could return it to the Phoenix and prevent her from destroying Aemphalis.

Ronpiru sat on the floor and closed his eyes. He slowed his breathing to a pause and his body rose into the air. He then traveled without form through a cold, black space. Murmurs and whispers drifted to his ears.

A blood-soaked Jinson Ryoku flashed across his vision.

Panic seized Ronpiru and he was tossed out of the Realm of the Mind.

His eyes shot open and his chest heaved. He shook off the morbid vision and caught his breath.

I must focus!

Ronpiru sank back into his thoughts and traversed the vacant space until his ears picked up a familiar stream of whispers. He waited as if expecting someone or something to arrive. Voices from long ago spoke, and he listened:

"We must return it, Master, to keep it would destroy us all!"

"There is so much more we can absorb from it, you fool! Our power can be expanded in ways you could never imagine!"

"Master, let us take it back. We will study it for the time she has given us then we must return it."

"No, one thousand years is not enough!"

The voices quieted and Ronpiru was once again alone on the Plane of Thought.

"Master? Master Delumere, are you there?" A voice broke into Ronpiru's thoughts and the instant that he focused on it, his body plummeted to the floor.

"Master?"

Ronpiru lay prone and cold sweat glued his robes to his back. "Yes? Who is it?"

An Island Mage entered the sitting room and flashed his palm to Ronpiru.

Ronpiru dragged air into his lungs and grimaced as he stood, "What is it?"

"The Island Council is assembling. The Grand

Master requests your immediate presence.”

Ronpiru nodded and the visitor left.

He changed into a fresh set of robes and lumbered out onto the second floor landing. He leaned against the railing and watched groups of Mages in the first floor atrium rushing this way and that, entering and exiting from various rooms. They exchanged few words aloud, so Ronpiru focused in on their thoughts. A flurry of words exploded between his ears and he quickly tuned out. *Something is amiss on the Isle.*

“Are you joining us, Ron?” said a voice. Ronpiru whipped around and saw Mab towering over him. He frowned as his silver eye rolled in Mab’s direction.

Ronpiru glared, “Stay out of my head.”

Mab smirked, “Learn to keep your mind closed.”

Ronpiru turned his attention back to the first floor. “They speak of a traitor among us.”

Mab did not respond.

Ronpiru went to the stairs.

Mab stroked his chin and watched Ronpiru ascend for a few seconds before he too made his way up to the tenth floor.

*

Jinson lay on his back with a stack of plush

pillows supporting his swollen and bandaged head. His eyelids drooped and his vision drifted in and out of focus. A coughing fit stole his breath for a few moments. As soon as it had passed, the doors to the Leti Palace Healing Rooms opened just wide enough to reveal the svelte figure of a woman with raven black hair braided down her back. She was dressed in the ivory clothes and silver-plated armor of an Island warrior.

“Naisun...my daughter,” Jinson attempted to stretch an arm out to her, but only managed to lift his hand.

“Father?” Captain Naisun Ryoku rushed to the Master General’s bedside.

“Your service to the Isle Mirage has been above reproach. You have—”

Naisun leaned in closer, “Father, do not talk like this. I know what you are trying to say but—”

“Please,” Jinson coughed and filled the room with mucus-filled rattles and strained wheezing. “Listen to what I have to say.” His eyelids opened a bit more, and he smothered her hands in his weakening grip.

She quieted and stared into her father’s worn face ignoring the tears running down her cheeks.

“I will not last much longer. We...we have made a terrible error, and I will not be able to help the Grand Master solve it. My part is done. You will

lead the Island Army as its new Master General. You will take my place on the Island Council and continue what we have started.”

Naisun shook her head, “But, Father, I have only been a Captain for a few years. I have neither the experience nor the desire to divide my duties between the Island Army and the Grand Master’s council. Surely someone else—”

A raspy moan seeped past Jinson’s lips and Naisun held her breath. Gurgles emanated from the back of his throat and his chest stopped rising.

Naisun shut his eyelids, covered her mouth, and stifled her sobs.

“Captain?”

She composed herself, but did not turn around to see who had addressed her.

“The Island Council is assembling,” said Ronpiru, “You must take your place now. The Healers will prepare Son’s body for its reunion with the Beyond.”

Naisun remained motionless and Ronpiru was not sure she has even heard him. He sighed, turned on his heel and left her alone with her grief.

*

Grand Master Umera entered the Inner Chamber and crossed the marble floor to join Ronpiru, Mab,

Asa and Naisun. He removed the package from his robes and released it into the air. A wave of his hand sent it drifting to the center of the room where it paused and hovered. "This was waiting for me in my private chambers. I would like to know how it got there."

The five Mages focused on the bundle as its folds peeled back. They gasped at the sight of a pair of dessicated ears.

Ronpiru took a step forward, "Both King Laeth and Lord Dartrais have received similar *gifts*."

"They have?"

"Yes, Grand Master."

"This is indeed disturbing," Orusho pulled at his beard, "I have no wish to see conflicts erupt in our lands. We must find out who sent them."

"Nilas has suggested that we meet to discuss this in a neutral location," Ronpiru began, "He also—"

"We should convene at the Aurora Village," said Mab.

"Yes, that is what I was going to suggest."

Grand Master Umera raised an eyebrow at the pair and sighed, "The Aurora Village will do fine. Send word to Borna and Etar." He then turned his attention to Master Generals Asa and Naisun, "Decide which of you will go to this meeting and which of you will stay behind to search for an intruder on the Isle."

*

After sneaking out of his house, Jen now found himself skulking down the main hall on the first floor of Leti Palace searching for Master General Asa's personal chambers. He replayed the fight he had just had with his mother in his head and the back of his neck burned. He clenched his jaw and exhaled forcefully. "I will find the Master General and be done with you forever."

He reached the end of the hall where he came upon a set of double doors with silver trim, covered with matching intricate designs. The symbol of an Island warrior's shield was drawn on the left door, and in the right door, a slender blade had been carved.

"This has to be it," Jen pushed through the doors and searched a large circular room with couches, chairs and tables. Maps of Aemphalis and the surrounding continents—Mospeldon, Outland and Nifland—lined the walls interspersed with spears, swords, shields and other weapons Jen did not recognize.

"Master General?"

Jen received no response.

"Asa?" The young Islander crossed the room and sat down. A few minutes passed and he began

to squirm in his seat so he stood. Jen paced for a few minutes and then started to leave when a small piece of parchment on a nearby table caught his eye. A long and flowing script extended to the bottom of the page where it became barely legible. When Jen read the note, he understood why Asa's handwriting had faltered:

Jen,

An urgent matter has left me no choice but to postpone our meeting. For how long I do not know. Something of the utmost importance has befallen the Isle Mirage and warrants my full attention. The Island Council has been assembled. The fate of the Isle Mirage, no, of all of Aemphalis may be at stake. I will contact you in time.

Asa

"Damn it!" Jen balled up the note and whipped it across the room. "What can be so important? This is my future he is jeopardizing!"

After a few deep breaths Jen ruminated for a moment on Asa's chosen words: *the fate of all of Aemphalis*. "This is much more interesting than asking the Master General for an apprenticeship!"

Jen fled the room and raced back down the hallway. He crossed the main atrium and approached the staircase. Not one Mage could be seen in the entire first floor. *Where is everybody?* A chill ran up his spine. He shrugged it off and climbed to the top floor where the closed silver

double doors guarding the Inner Chamber greeted him. He sneaked a glance over his shoulder and then crouched at the base of the doors, and pressed an ear to the smooth surface.

Chills seeped into Jen's cheek, but he did not move. He instead pressed his ear harder against the door and strained to hear what was being discussed. He was able to make out the tail end of a few phrases:

"...have to go back and get her, Grand Master."

"...too much trouble as it is..."

"...the Clerics will do as retribution!"

Jen jumped with a start, "Clerics?" He fell against the door and heard footsteps approaching. He leapt to his feet and tore down the staircase, barely touching the ground. He heard the silver doors opening. He ran faster as the bickering voices of Masters Desolara and Delumere reached his ears.

A hand dropped onto his shoulder.

Jen cried out and spun around.

"M-Master General? I was just, um..."

"Eavesdropping, yes, I know."

Jen swallowed hard and Asa squeezed the young Mage's shoulder.

"It is okay. I am not angry. I broke that appointment with you, so naturally you were curious. Besides, I would not have told you where

I was had I not wished you to sneak a listen.”

Jen smiled.

Asa patted his shoulder and escorted him to his chambers.

Once inside his rooms, Asa began to pace back and forth, dragging Jen’s gaze with each stride. The Master General seemed to be examining his weapons as if wondering which one to rip off the wall and use. After a few moments, Asa paused with his back to Jen.

“You have no doubt heard about what has befallen the Isle Mirage?” Asa folded his hands behind his back.

“Um,” Jen poked and pulled at his clothing, “No, I did not hear much at all.” Asa turned and looked Jen in the eyes. The young Mage averted his gaze.

The Master General waited.

“I may have heard something about going to a meeting, and then something about the...the Clerics.”

Asa’s face softened and he chuckled when he noticed how nervous he was making Jen. “It is okay. I would actually like you to accompany me to this meeting. Would you like to go the Aurora Village?”

Jen’s eyes brightened and he sat up as straight as he could. “Really? Travel to a city outside the Isle Mirage? Of course I will come. Thank you Master

General, thank you for this opportunity!" His chest swelled.

"Very good, I am glad to hear your enthusiasm. This will be key to your training. You will learn how interactions with the other lands proceed. Politics, Jen, are very *very* important."

Jen nodded and forced a serious look.

"We leave tomorrow morning, so be ready!"

*

King Laeth rested comfortably in his bed beneath many layers of quilts. He watched the firelight dancing off of the stone walls in his bed chamber.

Images of his queen and his late son raced through his mind. He could almost smell her fresh cut flower and straw scented hair, and hear his son's laugh echoing down the halls of Sturbund Castle. Today was the 56th day of the harvest season, a time for good food and drink with family and friends. The thought of never getting to see Freddie gnawing at a turkey leg like a little animal gutted him. The pain was so great that he was sure someone had pierced his heart with a spike. The tears started again, and he blinked them away.

Laeth rolled onto his side and focused through blurry vision on a trunk where the morbid gift rested. As he stared, his eyes burned and he

struggled to draw breath. He turned his back to the package and his chest immediately expanded to full capacity.

What's happening to me? He pulled his covers up to his neck.

A wave of paranoia washed over him and a prickling sensation crawled up his spine. *Someone approaches!*

He flipped onto his other side.

The package sat untouched and unmoved.

King Laeth got up, crossed the room and grabbed the bundle. He carried it to his chest of drawers and shoved the wrapped eyes inside.

He rubbed his temples and leaned on the chest. The wood creaked and shuddered beneath his weight. Cold sweat broke out on his forehead. He returned to bed and called for a servant.

A young man entered with his head bowed, "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Wake Captain Seth, I have a message for him. He is to go in my stead to meet the Mages and the Etarians at the Aurora Village tomorrow."

The servant bowed and took his leave.

Laeth shivered and lay back, anxious for morning.

*

Nalya awoke in the Aurora Woods lying on her back at the bottom of a pit. Layers of dead branches, twigs and leaves pressed down all around her poking her flesh and obstructing her view of the sky. A few snowflakes trickled through the tangle of branches and landed on her cheek. She shivered as they melted and cold streams ran down her skin. She traced her fingers over her face and felt crusty, jagged lines and a few swollen and tender lumps. She moved aside the branches pinning her down and caught site of a crumpled piece of parchment suspended in the tangled mess. Nalya reached for it, ignoring the twigs and thorns cutting her forearm. She read the flowing script: *Trust the Mages.*

“Mages...” she shook a haze from her mind and rubbed her forehead.

Nalya shoved more branches out of her way and covered her arms in new scratches. She grasped the frigid dirt walls and pulled herself out of the hole.

She scanned the area and saw that she was surrounded by falling snow, and black-speckled, white tree trunks.

Nalya shivered and rubbed her arms.

She moved forward and stumbled along until her muscles grew heavy and she collapsed at the base of a tree. She clawed at the bark and pulled herself to her feet. She continued forward through the

woods not sure where she was, how she had gotten there and where she should go next. The last things that she remembered were purple cloaked shadows taking her parents, a man running with her in a sack, right before he succumbed to a barrage of flames.

Nalya halted and remembered her family, lifeless, lying on stone slabs in a place that smelled of blood and sweat. She massaged a pang in her chest and wiped a tear from her eye.

“I’ve got to get out of here!”

She looked skyward to find the position of the suns. One pale yellow and a second bright orange orb hung at the top of the sky. “I need to find my way out of here before dark.” Nalya hurried ahead and soon a clearing and a dirt road came into view, “Finally!”

*

Lord Dartrais, Elreich and Baliss were galloping down the Aurora Road when a shadow leapt out of the trees and landed directly in front of them. Baliss’s horse reared its front legs into the air and he toppled to the ground.

Dartrais grabbed the spooked horse by the reins before it could bolt and ripped his sword from its sheath. He rode up to a dark-skinned woman

standing wide-eyed in the middle of the path and thrust his sword against her neck.

"An assault upon the Lord of Etar's escort is an assault upon the Lord of Etar himself punishable by death. Do you wish to explain yourself before I deal out your judgment?"

She raised both of her hands in protest and opened her mouth, but no sound was heard.

"SPEAK!"

Baliss remounted and glared at the woman at the mercy of Dartrais. Her leather boots were worn and her fitted, animal-skin short dress and pants were torn and covered in dirt. Her shirt sleeves had been ripped away and a large blood stain sullied the back. Baliss did not see any weapons, water skins or even a supply pack.

Dartrais poked the tip of his sword at her neck and squinted at the woman, "What is a Plainsperson doing so far from home?"

"Looking for someone to rob I gather," Baliss frowned.

"Nah, just look at the state of her. She has run away from whomever she belongs to," said Elreich.

"Hey!" Nalya pushed Dartrais's blade aside.

He leaned down and grabbed her by the hair, "So, you can talk!"

She covered her bleeding nose and spat blood.

The Lord of Etar scanned her. Baliss was right.

She looked to be on the edge of death. Her face was gaunt and scratched up and her clothes were stained with blood. Her dark, woven hair was full of briars and moss, and her skin had been cooked for too long by the suns.

He released his grip and sheathed his sword. "What is your name? Who have you run away from?"

She remained silent.

"You will answer when the Lord of Etar addresses you!" Elreich rode up to her.

She smirked, "Etar? Never heard of it. Don't you mean Borna? Isn't that where you men of Aemphalis live?"

Elreich smacked her cheek with the back of his hand and she cried out. "What is your name, girl?"

She rubbed her face and glared, "It's Nalya you pig!"

Dartrais shifted on his horse. "To *whom* do you belong?"

Nalya scoffed, "No one. I've no husband and I'm no one's slave!"

"Good," he sheathed his sword. "Then I will not be bothered with killing anyone who comes looking for you! Lieutenant, bind her hands."

Baliss dismounted and tied Nalya's wrists together. He led her to Dartrais and handed her over.

The Lord of Etar looked her up and down as he tied the free end of the rope to his saddle. “We are running late so you’d better keep up or you’ll end up smeared along the road!”