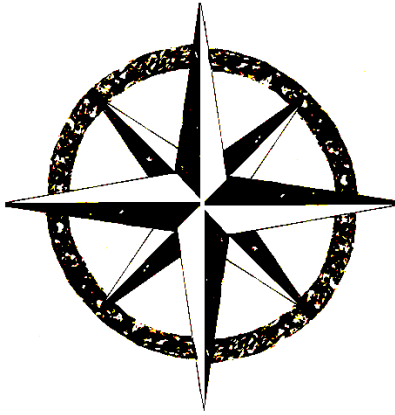


M.L.
Spencer



Darkstorm

Book One of the

Rhenwars Saga

Stoneguard



Publications

The Southern Continent



1,000 Years Ago

*Praise for Darkstorm,
Book One of the Rhenwars Saga*

★ “An engaging and heart wrenching tale of love, loss, deceit and desperation...draws you in and breaks your heart.”

—Melinda Hills, *Readers' Favorite*, Five Star Review

★ “I couldn't stop reading it once I started, and found myself reading well into the night...the author's world-creation abilities are second to none.”

—Tracy A. Fischer, *Reader's Favorite*, Five Star Review



Prologue

**Bryn Calazar, Caladorn
1,000 Years Ago....**

Braden Reis.”
He did not look up at the sound of his own name being spoken from the doorway. Instead, he swallowed, squeezing his eyes shut as he ran his tongue across his parched lips. The sound of his own breath was a turbulent noise in his ears. He forced himself to concentrate on that sound, focusing his mind on every sharp hiss of air he forced into his chest.

The sound of approaching footsteps made him flinch. His mind felt glazed. Try as he might, he could not stop his hands from trembling.

“On your feet.”

Braden ignored the command. He knew there was going to be a penalty for his defiance, but he was beyond the point of caring. He squeezed his hands into fists in anticipation of the pain. For seconds he waited. When nothing happened, he allowed himself to relax slightly.

The pain hit with force.

Molten-silver lightnings raged like a firestorm across his mind. He threw his head back, sucking in air through clenched teeth. He slumped

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to the floor, convulsed as liquid energies raged throughout his body. Bile rose to his throat, choking him as he writhed in scalding anguish.

The pain lessened only gradually, taking a long time to completely go away. He lay on his back on the cold floor, staring upward, spent and gasping.

A different voice, soft and repulsively familiar, addressed him from the doorway. "Think very carefully, Grand Master Reis. There are many kinds of deaths, some much worse than others."

He shuddered at the sound of that voice. It was vilely seductive, gliding like soft velvet down the length of his nerves. Braden kept his eyes squeezed closed, so loathe was he to gaze upon that face.

He could feel her moving toward him across the cell. Her hands brushed against his skin, a silken caress as she slid her arms around his torso. With gentle pressure she compelled him to his feet. He stood, swaying, naked from the waist up, arms chained behind his back. His breath still came in gasps.

"It doesn't have to be this way," she whispered gently in his ear as her soft fingertips stroked the skin of his back. "You can still choose to make a difference. Think of the lives you would be saving. It's the right thing to do."

His eyes shot open, glaring his contempt at her.

"Don't lecture me on morals, woman," he grated. "You have no idea what they are."

The smile that bloomed on her lovely face was only a dim reflection of the delight that filled her eyes. His response had pleased her. It sickened him, knowing that he had given her exactly what she'd wanted.

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“I want you to die knowing that they chose me to inherit your legacy,” she informed him with a grin. “One way or another, your gift will be put to the service of Xerys. With your power inside me, *I* will be the one destined for greatness. And you?” She looked at him sadly and scoffed with a shrug. “You’ll just be dead.”

Hearing her words, Braden Reis closed his eyes and bowed his head in acceptance of defeat. Never before in his life had he ever felt so utterly powerless.

The sound of her slippared footsteps moved away from him across the floor. Then hands were upon him, compelling him forward. Thoroughly broken, Braden allowed himself to be guided by his guards out of the cell.

The despair that gripped him dulled his senses. It was as though he were moving through a dim and murky haze, the world around him distant and strangely muted. They led him up long flights of stairs, the dance of magelight that churned at their feet only serving to confound his senses all the more.

Braden gazed ahead with bleary eyes at the woman who strode before him. She glided in a sway of blue silks, platinum curls spiraling to her waist. She moved with an easy grace, every motion poised, every step a deliberate, calculated seduction. Arden Hannah was just as alluring as she was vile. It was a powerful and frightening dichotomy. She gazed back at him and smiled, her wide eyes glistening in the magelight.

He dropped his stare back to the floor.

They reached the ground floor of the Lyceum. There, his guards wrenched back on his arms, forcing him to a halt. Three loud knocks

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resounded throughout the hall, the sound of a staff rapping thrice upon wood. There was a pause. Then the knocks were answered in kind, echoing from the other side of the barred doorway.

The bars were thrown, the enormous double doors cast open, shuddering on their hinges with a throaty groan. Braden avoided Arden's eyes as his guards forced him forward. He could see very little, only shadowy silhouettes of people gathered above in the galleries. Within, the room was completely dark, lit only by a single sphere of brilliant light in the exact center of the hall. It was toward that orb of light that he was made to walk.

Braden forced himself to hold his head up despite the chill fingers of dread that caressed his bare skin. Nervous sweat trickled down his brow. He couldn't help trembling as he stepped within that sphere of light. There he stood, hands bound behind him, completely blinded by the white intensity of the glare. That was the purpose of the light: to protect the anonymity of those gathered above in the galleries.

The doors shivered against their hinges, sealing the chamber shut with a resounding *thud*. As they did, the room was stricken with an awful, gaping silence. The silence lingered, long moments stretching on and on. Braden continued to stand, blinking against the glare, eyes groping desperately for the sight of just one face he could recognize. But he could make out nothing; the thick wall of light was dense and unyielding.

A deep and resonant voice addressed him:

"Braden Reis, you have been convicted, attainted, and condemned of High Treason committed against the State of Caladorn and the Lyceum of Bryn Calazar. A sentence of death has been pronounced

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against you. May the gods have mercy on your soul.”

Braden bowed his head under the sheer weight of the words. A paralyzing numbness overcame him. He stood there trembling, withered by the miserable knowledge that he had failed so utterly in his purpose.

He was forced roughly to his knees in the circle of light as ropes of energy twined around about him, restraining him completely. He fought to draw breath, but succeeded only in producing a strangled wheeze.

It was Zavier Renquist himself who stepped forward into the wash of light to carry out his death sentence. Panic seized him at the sight of the object displayed in the Prime Warden’s raised hands: a stone of many facets, lifeless, dull and black. It hung from the bands of a silver collar that shone like satin in the light.

The sight of the Soulstone was ghastly, terrifying.

Braden Reis might have screamed, but even the breath for that was denied him.



Chapter One Jumping at Shadows

**Aerysius, The Rhen
Three Weeks Prior....**

Rain pelted the dark streets of Aerysius as thunder rolled expansively across the cloud-choked night. Merris Bryar shivered as her feet splashed through growing rivulets in the street, hugging her black cloak tightly against her body. She was drenched, her toes almost numb in her wet slippers. It was a terrible storm, the worst yet of the season. There was really no good reason for anyone to be out in the city streets on such a night.

Which was exactly why she was stalking the man who walked ahead of her through the storm.

Of all the people in Aerysius, the person Merris followed had the least excuse to be skulking through the shadows of the city streets. Merris hung well back from him, relying on her black cloak to obscure her in the darkness. She knew very well that what she was doing was dangerous, but that did little to daunt her. Rather, the thrill of the risk she was taking compelled her forward.

Merris was no stranger to the night. She knew perfectly well how to

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navigate the city streets unseen. Her father had been a cutpurse, her mother a sot and a swindler. Their combined examples had served Merris well in her youth. This was not the first time she had tracked a mark through the city streets under the cover of darkness.

It was just the first time she had done so since becoming an acolyte of the Hall. And back in the days when she had forged an existence by relieving unsuspecting noblemen of their change, Merris would have never, ever, considered selecting Cyrus Krane himself, the Prime Warden of Aerysius, as her quarry.

Merris moved as silently as she could, keeping at least a block's distance between herself and Cyrus Krane. She kept to the shadows, moving low, using the pillars of balconies and the arches of doorways to offer concealment. The rattle of the downpour covered any noise her slipped feet might have possibly made. Merris smiled slightly. She knew exactly what she was doing; she was in her element.

She watched as Krane turned and, adjusting his cowl, crossed the cobbled street toward the opening of an alleyway. Tonight, the Prime Warden was absent the white cloak with the Silver Star on the back that was the emblem of his office. In its place he wore just the thick, black cloak of a common mage.

As Krane disappeared around the corner, Merris dashed forward. She didn't dare take the chance of losing him in the darkness. Ducking down behind a large bin, she wedged her body behind it and peered around the edge of a building. By the light of a street lamp, she could barely make out Krane's shadowy figure. The Prime Warden had stopped, glancing around as he reached for the handle of a door. He cracked the door open. Into that opening Cyrus Krane quietly slipped,

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pulling the door closed behind him.

Merris pulled back behind the bin, pressing up against the chill stone wall. She sat hugging her knees against her chest, shivering, wondering what she should do. She bit her lip, considering. She knew better than to follow her quarry inside the building. The right thing would be to turn back and return to the Hall of the Watchers. But she had no proof. Without proof, she would be sorely punished, most likely expelled from Aerysius altogether.

There really was no decision to be made. She rose from her hiding place behind the bin and slipped quietly into the alley. Here, the cobblestones ran with icy rainwater that flowed over the tops of her slippers. She splashed across the street through fast-moving rivulets, pausing beside the building Krane had disappeared into.

She stood there considering the door as the rain came down steadily, plastering her hair against her face. It looked like any other back-alley door in the heart of Aerysius. The wood was made of age-grayed pine, reinforced with iron bands.

Merris reached up and gripped the rusted metal handle. She started to pull it open but stopped herself. She took a deep breath and held it. Then, with gentle pressure, she pulled the door open just a fraction. She leaned forward, glancing in, then slipped quietly inside.

She found herself in some type of storage cellar or undercroft. The room was very dim, lit only by two tapers that glowed from sconces on opposing walls. All around the room were stacked row upon row of wooden crates, the floor littered with straw. The only exit was another door at the far end.

The cellar appeared empty, but anyone could be hiding within those

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rows of crates. Merris strained to listen. All she could hear was the sound of pattering rain. She considered the door on the opposite wall. Krane must have gone through there ahead of her. Merris did not want to follow him into guts of the building; she had pushed her luck much too far already.

But she had come this far. Gathering her courage, she took a step forward into the cellar. Then another.

She reached the door and pressed an ear up against the wood, straining to listen. There were no sounds coming from the other side. Her hand trembled as she reached for the handle, depressing the latch. The door swung inward, revealing dark depths beyond.

The corridor ahead was lightless, narrow and empty.

Merris moved forward into the shadows, pulling the door closed behind her. She lingered there for a moment, uncertain, trailing her hand along the cold wall. The stone was rough and uneven, carved by the harsh strokes of tools. This building was old, she surmised, possibly as old as Aerysius itself. So unlike the rest of the structures in the city, which had been seamlessly wrought by magecraft.

Merris stepped into the darkness, using her hands to grope along the walls to either side. She strained to hear the sound of footsteps that might be following. Her fingers traced the walls, searching for a doorway. Ten paces. Fifteen. Twenty. Still, no sign of either door or passage leading off. The narrow corridor led straight ahead into the dark bowels of the ancient building.

When her next footstep felt only air, Merris drew up short. She reached down ahead with her foot, finally encountering stone.

Stairs. Leading downward into blackness.

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She shivered, knowing in her heart that she should turn around and go back.

Merris forced herself to press forward, anyway.

She followed the stairs cautiously as they curved around and down into darkness, arguing with herself at every step. She should not be here; this was becoming too dangerous. She greatly feared what she would find at the bottom of those stairs. Or worse, what would find her. In the darkness, her imagination was starting to run rampant. She wished for magelight or even a taper to light her path.

A loud, metallic *clank* echoed up from far below.

Merris startled, flinching to a crouch. The noise was followed by another, echoing up the stairwell.

Trembling, Merris regained her feet and turned, preparing to flee.

From the depths below echoed the sound of voices.

Merris stopped in her tracks, straining to listen. The voices were distant, too indistinct to make out words. They did not seem to be coming any closer.

She bit her lip, trembling, glancing behind and ahead in desperate indecision. Her foot kept wanting to slide back up the stair behind her. She kept willing it forward, instead. Courage nearly spent, Merris continued down the stairs in the direction of the voices.

She moved slowly, cautiously, creeping forward as silently as she could. There was another sharp, metallic groan. The sound of the voices ceased.

Then came another noise: that of approaching footsteps.

Merris turned and fled. Dizzy with fear, she was not at all careful about her retreat. She took the stairs two at a time, curving back

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upward in the direction she had come. She staggered and almost fell as she gained the top of the steps, catching herself on the rough stone of the passage. Then she was sprinting forward again on unstable legs, down the corridor in the direction of the cellar.

She spilled through the cellar door, swinging it closed behind her and pulling it firmly shut. Wondrous light confronted her vision. She started toward the outer door, but brute stubbornness made her turn back.

Determined to glean some answers from this harrowing night, Merris dropped to her knees and squirmed herself into a corner between two stacks of wooden crates. She wriggled her body between them as far as she could, pressing herself tightly against them and pulling the cowl of her black cloak down to cover her face. She fought for control over her panting breath, willing the speed of her heart to slow its frenzied pace.

Confident as she could be in her hiding spot, she waited as long moments dragged by. She strained to listen. Outside, there was the constant sound of the rain hitting the cobbled street. Inside the cellar, she could hear only the faintest noise of soft, scurrying feet. Mice, or even rats, were about their business among the crates.

Abruptly, the cellar door creaked open.

She could see nothing; her eyes were veiled behind her cowl. The sound of voices only feet away made her flinch.

“All seems to be progressing well,” echoed the familiar voice of Cyrus Krane. “Have Master Umbridge keep working on the cipher. There’s not much time; we have little more than a fortnight.”

“All shall be made ready,” responded the voice of another man who

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was with them in the cellar. That voice Merris did not know. It was calmly authoritative, resonant and deep. Softly, Merris tried pulling back the lip of her cowl just enough to try to get a glimpse of the speaker. It was useless; the stack of crates in front of her completely blocked her view.

Merris realized that the air around her was starting to feel atrociously cold. The fear in her gut was like a tight knot that was slowly writhing, working its way upward to choke her throat. She shivered, hugging her arms tightly about herself. The dread within her grew along with the cold, condensing into icy panic. The panic swelled, evolving gradually into terror.

Merris's eyes widened with realization: there was...something else... in the cellar. Something in there with them. Something *wrong*.

"I'm still working on the required payment," Krane's voice continued evenly, as if the Prime Warden himself sensed nothing at all out of sorts. "I have someone in mind, but nothing definitive as yet."

"Be certain there is no deviation from the covenant," the deep voice responded imperiously. "Failure is greatly disliked by our Master."

Merris chewed her lip on the edge of panic, the terrible feeling of dread becoming almost unbearable.

There was a stir of movement in front of her. Something streaked across her vision, coming to a rest on top of the stack of crates. A hand. A man's hand with thick fingers relaxed against the edge of the crate in front of her. A wide, silver band encircled the third finger. Merris shirked back away from the sight of that hand, her eyes welling with tears as she struggled to keep from crying out.

"There will be no failure," Krane's gravelly voice echoed, his tone

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full of dire promise.

Merris heard the sound of the outer door creaking open and then closing once again as the Prime Warden took his leave. The other man yet remained behind, his hand still resting on top of the crate.

The loss of Krane's familiar presence came almost as a blow to Merris. She resisted a powerful urge to bolt out of her hiding place and run for the door.

There was a rustle of fabric as the hand slowly withdrew.

The sound of footsteps, walking away.

Then came the noise of the inner door shivering open and then closed.

Merris lingered, trembling violently, not daring yet to move. The awful fear within her refused to subside. Moments crept by, painfully slow. She strained to listen, hearing nothing. Even the scurrying of the rats had ceased.

Just then, a blur of dark motion streaked across the edge of her vision. The form of a man, all in black, faceless and in shadow.

Sephana Clemley rolled over in bed, groaning in her sleep. She had been tossing fitfully most of the night. The sound of the rain needling the panes of her leaded glass window had been keeping her awake. Normally, she would have found the sound of the raindrops soothing. But there was something different about this night. Even the cadence of the rain seemed charged with tension.

Sephana's hand groped blindly across the mattress, exploring, but finding only empty space at her side. Her groggy mind fumbled toward

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the vague rudiments of a question. But before the thought could even halfway form, an urgent clatter jolted her sharply out of sleep.

Sephana jerked upright, throwing off her covers. Her eyes quickly scanned the dark interior of her bedchamber as another round of boisterous knocking echoed from the hallway.

Her eyes darted to the empty mattress beside her as she reached for the cloak she always kept hanging from the poster of her bed. She pulled the black wool cloak on over her shoulders, holding it closed as she fumbled her way out into the dark hallway of her suite.

“I’m coming,” she growled at the door, which was fairly shuddering from the abuse it was taking. Sephana paused, warily eyeballing the door. Then she threw back the bolt and swept it open, glaring her ire at the person on the other side.

Sephana blinked in shock at the wet, bedraggled woman who stood shivering on her threshold.

“*Merris?*” she gasped, peering intently into the girl’s face.

Her young acolyte’s skin was pale as chalk, her brown hair falling in wet disarray about her face. Her black cloak was drenched, dripping rainwater all over the freshly polished floor tiles. Merris’s usual composure was thoroughly shattered; she stood trembling, furiously wringing her hands. Her wide blue eyes were haunted by fear.

“The Prime Warden is a traitor!” Merris gasped, sweeping past her into the room.

Sephana closed the door to her chambers firmly, considering her acolyte with a vexed expression. Merris was dripping rainwater onto her costly Tiborian rug, she noted with a flare of annoyance. She reached a hand out and guided the girl back onto the tile, pulling her in

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almost conversationally.

“Be still,” she commanded, placing a steadying hand on the younger woman’s shoulder. “Come, now. First things, first. Let’s get you out of these wet clothes.”

She led Merris to her bedchamber and threw open the door of her wardrobe. Then she left the girl alone to dress. Sephana wandered out into her sitting room and made her way toward the hearth, her eyes narrowing slightly. Before her gaze, the gray andirons that held the logs began to blacken, taking on a deep red glow. Within seconds, the hearth was ablaze with a lively dance of flame.

Sephana busied herself by pouring a cup of wine from a wineskin that hung from a peg on the wall. Upon second thought, she poured another. Then she took a seat in one of the high-backed chairs before the fire, sipping her wine and observing the flames grow and spread throughout the kindling.

Reaching out with her mind, Sephana tasted the flow of the magic field that moved like a swift current through the heart of Aerysius. It felt like a soothing cadence in the back of her head, like the soft tempo of a waltz. She grasped ahold of it, taking in just a small fraction and savoring the comfort of it in her mind.

When Merris returned, Sephana noted with a flare of irritation that her acolyte had managed to select one of her own favorite gowns from the wardrobe. It was a pale yellow dress with a flowing skirt. It looked better on Merris than it did on herself, she noted.

“Wine?” Sephana offered, extending her hand toward the second cup she had poured as she forced a smile to her face.

Merris approached slowly, timidly, at last dropping down into the

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chair across from her. Her hand trembled slightly as she raised the wine to her lips. Sephana studied her acolyte's face as Merris closed her eyes and drank deeply from the cup. She shifted her gaze up to Sephana with obvious reluctance.

Brushing back a lock of her burnished gold hair, Sephana invited her, "Now, why don't you tell me what's troubling you, dear."

Merris squeezed her eyes shut, her hand coming up to rub her temple. "I followed the Prime Warden tonight," she admitted in a tremulous voice that was little more than a whisper.

Sephana's mouth dropped open, but then she snapped it shut again quickly to contain her first gut reaction. Her stomach twisted into knots.

Merris was the Prime Warden's own personal secretary, a highly coveted position. It was an honor reserved only for acolytes of the most unblemished reputation. That Merris might have abused her position troubled Sephana deeply; she was the girl's own sworn mentor. Ultimately, Sephana herself was responsible for Merris's actions. Or crimes.

"I'm afraid I don't understand." Deceptively calm, Sephana's carefully chosen words were fairly saturated with ire. "Could you please explain to me what, exactly, made you think that it would be wise to shadow *the Prime Warden of Aerysius*?"

"Please, hear me out," the young woman begged, a note of near-hysteria cracking her voice. "He's been meeting with strange people lately and receiving messages that are written in some sort of code. It's all very irregular! And every time I turn around he's—"

Sephana threw her hands up in exasperation. "We are on the brink

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of *war* with Caladorn, Merris! Surely, a few encrypted communiqués are not too far out of the realm of possibility?”

“Not like this,” Merris was adamant, leaning forward in her chair. “Please, just listen! I’ve never seen runes like these before. And every time he receives one of these notes, the Prime Warden tells me he’s feeling ill and has me cancel all of his appointments for the remainder of the day. Then he just leaves. Every time! I always thought he was just retiring to his chambers. But then this evening I actually caught him slipping out.”

The sound of her chamber door creaking open made Sephana startle. She sprang to her feet, nearly losing her grip on her cup of wine. Whirling, she brought her hand up to her chest in relief as she recognized the face of the man who entered. She heaved a long sigh, closing her eyes. Then she rounded on Merris, blaming the fool girl for inspiring such fear in the first place.

“Now you have me jumping at shadows,” Sephana snapped as she rushed forward to greet their guest with a kiss on the cheek.

Braden Reis did not return the gesture, still paused in the act of closing the door as his eyes slid slowly from Sephana to Merris.

“I wasn’t aware that you were expecting company,” he said in a questioning voice, eyebrows raised. He pulled the door the rest of the way closed behind him, latching it quietly. His eyes never left Merris.

“Ambassador Reis,” Merris exclaimed, hastening to her feet with a look of dismay. “What are you doing here?”

Sephana paused in mid-stride, turning back to her wayward acolyte with a seething expression on her face. “I’m afraid I am going to have to trust you with one of my own secrets for a change.”

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A frown of consternation nettled Merris's brow before her eyes widened in sudden insight. "You're lovers," she gasped in realization. There was more than a trace of disapproval in her tone. "Master Sephana, I don't understand...how can you be sure he's not a spy for the Lyceum? I mean...*how could you?* He's the enemy!"

"I am *not* the enemy," Braden Reis assured her quickly, taking a step forward and drawing himself up. "At least, not yet, anyway. And not if I can help it."

"He's been working night and day to forestall a war," Sephana snapped defensively.

Without taking his eyes off Merris, Braden slipped an arm around Sephana's waist and returned his lover's gesture of a kiss. He was a tall man, muscular enough to fill out the indigo robes of the Lyceum better than most mages of his stature. He was the Ambassador of Bryn Calazar, and the blood of Caladorn was very obvious in his appearance. His skin was tanned olive, his wavy hair thick and black, worn shoulder-length. He had the characteristic full lips and almond eyes of a Northerner. A closely-trimmed beard lent a chiseled look to his features.

Sephana could tell by the wary expression on his face that Braden was anything but comfortable with the situation. They had worked hard to keep their relationship a secret, especially from other members of the Assembly. She should have been more careful before allowing Merris to become privy to their affair.

"Braden, you've met my acolyte, Merris Bryar," Sephana offered curtly.

Braden nodded stiffly, "Of course." His dark eyes were clouded

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with concern.

Sephana nodded. Braden met often with Prime Warden Krane in his capacity as the Lyceum's ambassador. More than once he had been forestalled by Merris while seeking an audience unannounced. He could be rather brazen when he wanted to be, one of the myriad qualities that Sephana found so compelling about him.

"Come in, Braden," Sephana sighed, stepping away from him. "Grab some wine for yourself and have a seat. Merris has quite a story to share with us."

Braden's confusion was obvious as he complied, helping himself to the wineskin. When they were all gathered in the chairs before the hearth, Sephana leaned forward in her seat and directed Merris firmly:

"Now, start over from the beginning. This time, take your time and try to elaborate as much as you possibly can. Details, my dear. As many details as you can remember."

Merris swallowed. Then she obeyed. Sephana sat back and listened carefully as Merris unfolded her story for them, relaying all of the events she had experienced earlier that night. Sephana often found herself trading startled glances with Braden, who was leaning forward attentively, his broad shoulders tight with concern. A worried expression clouded his features. By the end of Merris's account, Braden's look of concern had become eclipsed by an expression of incredulity. Sephana herself felt slightly nauseous. She regretted ever drinking the wine.

"And then I fled," Merris finished with a shrug. "I ran all the way back to the Hall. I didn't dare return to my cell; the man in black saw me. He might know who I am."

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Sephana turned to Braden. He was no longer looking at Merris, just staring down into the embers of the hearth. His left hand scratched absently at the dark whiskers on his chin.

“What do you make of all this?” she pressed him.

Braden threw back his head and swallowed the remainder of the wine in his cup. He looked almost dumbfounded as he shrugged, shaking his head. In a voice colored by a slight Northern accent, he remarked, “I’m not sure what I *can* make of it. It could be anything...or nothing.” Narrowing his eyes, he turned to Merris. “This ring you saw. Can you describe it?”

Merris nodded eagerly. “It was a silver ring. It had a blue stone. I think it might have been lapis. There was a rune overlaid in gold, but I didn’t recognize it.”

“Do you think you could draw it?” Braden pressed.

Merris nodded. “I think so.”

Sephana stood and went to her writing desk, retrieving parchment, ink, and quill. She handed them over to Merris and then sat back down again. As her acolyte sketched, Sephana felt Braden’s hand on hers, massaging her fingers with his thumb. The sensation was comforting, easing the tension within her. When Merris was done, she handed her sketch over to Braden.

He squinted down at the parchment, studying it for seconds. Sephana peered at it over his shoulder, eyes narrowing.

Frowning in consternation, she wondered, “Do you recognize it?”

“No,” he responded, still staring at the marks Merris had made. Slowly, he rotated the drawing first one direction then the other. He ran a hand through his tousled hair. Then he reached out, plucking the

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quill from Merris's hand, and added two strokes to what was already there, tracing the ink boldly down at a curving angle:



“Are you sure it didn’t look more like this?” he prodded her, handing it back.

Merris stared for a moment at her altered sketch with a frown. At last, she nodded and looked back up at him with excitement in her eyes. “Yes—that’s it!”

Braden’s somber gaze latched onto Merris’s, capturing her stare with rigid intensity. “I cannot emphasize enough how important this is, Merris,” he uttered slowly. “Don’t just guess. I need you to be certain.”

Merris paled, her eyes ticking upward to Sephana and then back again to Braden. She licked her lips. “I’m certain,” she whispered. “That’s what I saw.”

Sephana looked back and forth between her acolyte and her lover. Braden was a mage of the Order of Chancellors, well-schooled in the history and lore of his culture. He did not look pleased with Merris’s confirmation. His face was set in a grim scowl.

“What is it?” Sephana pressed, gazing down at the completed rune.

“It’s Venthic,” Braden explained, handing the parchment over to her as he rose to his feet. He paced away toward the hearth. “An ancient dialect of my people. It’s almost a dead language, now, used only by a few of the original clans. This particular rune is *dacros*. It’s used as a symbol for the cult of Xerys.”

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Sephana found herself scowling. Turning to the young woman beside her, she tried to form her words as carefully as she could. “Merris, I’m not trying to scare you, but I do have to ask you one question. This man in black you spoke of...are you certain that it *was* a man? Or is it possible that it was not a man at all?”

From his position by the hearth, Braden stiffened at the import of her words.

Merris bit her lip. “He...looked like a man made of shadow. He terrified me.”

“A necrator!” Sephana hissed.

“What’s a necrator?” Merris wondered, looking suddenly very frail.

Braden spun around, eyes wide with stark realization. He turned to Sephana. “We have to get her out of Aerysius. *Tonight.*”



Chapter Two What Lies Beneath

Aerysius, The Rhen

Braden scrubbed his hands through his hair, fuming as he paced the length of the chamber. A dozen or more jumbled thoughts churned in his head, making it all but impossible to chase any single one of them. He glanced sideways at Merris, who sat across the room from him busily scribing away at the writing desk. She sat hunched over, thoroughly engrossed in her task.

Braden swirled the wine in his cup absently. His eyes darted to Sephana, who stood staring out the window into the dark, rain-clad night. Her hand was poised beside her face, absently stroking a lock of her red-gold hair between her fingers. She had changed into a pale green dress with rose embroidery, the affair covered by her black Master's cloak with the Silver Star of Aerysius embroidered on the back.

"Merris, if you please...." Sephana groaned, eyes sparkling with irritation.

"Almost done," the girl muttered, not bothering to look up from her work.

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Braden tossed his head back and downed a mouthful of wine.

“There,” Merris announced, setting her quill down on the writing table with finality.

Braden crossed the room toward her in two large strides. He scooped the parchment she had been working on up in his hand and held it before his face. His eyes hastily scanned the lavish, flowing script of the message, lingering for a moment on the signature at the bottom, then read back over the whole affair one more time.

“Remarkable,” he muttered at last. The letter could have been written by the Prime Warden’s own hand. The signature was a perfect forgery. Braden had carried enough of Cyrus Krane’s letters back to the Lyceum to know that Merris was a marvel.

“The Prime Warden is too busy to sign every slip of parchment that crosses his desk,” the young woman explained. “I’ve been rendering his signature for months, but recently he’s had me drafting most of his official documents, as well. He’s scarcely ever in his office of late.”

Braden scanned the letter one last time, just to be sure. “This will do,” he assured her gruffly. He rolled the parchment up into a scroll. “We should try to copy his seal.”

“There’s no time,” Sephana hissed from the window. A flash of lightning briefly illuminated her face, making her eyes gleam from the shadows. “She has to go *now*.”

Braden nodded. He handed Merris back the scroll along with three other documents he had drafted earlier. “The first letter is for the guard on the Lyceum side of the portal,” he explained to her hastily. “Without that introduction, you’ll likely end up dead or in a cell. The second letter is for Grand Master Quinlan Reis, my brother. Ask for

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him the moment you arrive. The third letter is for Prime Warden Renquist. Use it only as a last resort. Give it to Quin, and he'll know when it's time to pass it along."

Merris's eyes darkened with uncertainty as she received the scrolls into her hand, glancing quickly at Sephana in concern. "I didn't realize that I'd be asked to commit treason."

"Oh, do shut up, Merris," Sephana growled irritably. "Just pass the damn letters. If Prime Warden Krane is compromised, then don't you suppose Renquist has a right to know before he commits his mages to a war?"

"Yes, I suppose...." Merris mumbled, sounding altogether unconvinced. She shoved Braden's letters into the inside pocket of her cloak, retaining only the one scroll she had forged in her grasp.

"Then let's be about it," Braden snapped as he set his empty cup down on the writing desk. He was already halfway to the door when Sephana's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Wait."

He turned, brows raised in question.

"Go softly," she muttered. "You have no idea what they already suspect. I'll meet you by the fountain."

Braden acknowledged her only with a troubled nod.

He cracked the door open and peered out, glancing up and down the length of the hallway. It was empty; most of the Masters were asleep in their beds at this hour of the night. Beckoning to Merris, he strolled casually out of Sephana's suite toward a wide spiral stair.

It was a long way down to the Chamber of Egress in the lowest subbasement below the Hall of the Watchers. Braden trailed his hand

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along the wooden rail as he hurried down the stairs, Merris following behind in his wake. They made no attempt at conversation; the descent was taxing. Braden loathed the way Aerysius was spread out so vertically; the Spire of the Hall was just an acute exaggeration of the rest of the city. Aerysius was built into the granite face of a mountain precipice, its towers and arches sequestered high in the clouds. Its streets were often switchbacks contorted with many bridges and skyramps that spanned the mountainside.

Braden longed for the sprawling balconies of the Lyceum that overlooked the dark waters of the sea. He missed Caladorn, missed the expansive openness of the plains, its fragrant gardens and fertile orchards. In Bryn Calazar, his spirit had always felt free and unconfined, so unlike the imprisoning embrace of mountain-born Aerysius, where he had spent the past nine years of his life.

Wistfully, Braden mused that his time in Aerysius was most likely coming to an end.

His thoughts drifted to Sephana as his feet continued to carry him, spiraling, down the stairs. Both of them had known from the beginning that their affair was destined to be but a temporary thing. But that didn't mean that he had to be happy about leaving. His feelings for Sephana ran far deeper than he cared to admit.

Braden glanced back at Merris. She was nimbly following behind without complaint, having no trouble keeping up. She was strong and vigorous with youth. She would have need of both those qualities in the very near future. Life for a young woman in Caladorn was extremely different from anything she was used to. Merris had grown up sheltered by the coddling ways of the Rhen. In the Lyceum, she

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would be forced to explore facets of herself she had never yet encountered. Either she would survive and flourish or she would fail; either way, she would be empowered. Her destiny would be completely in her own hands.

The stairs finally ended in a wide hallway at a level below the ground floor. Here, Merris pulled up short, as if hesitant to move off the last marble step. Braden turned back to her, seeing how her eyes darted nervously up and down the corridor. He understood her agitation; that same hallway led to the Prime Warden's own Solar. Placing a steadying hand on her shoulder, Braden guided her down the passage in the opposite direction.

"Keep your mind focused," he advised her under his breath. "We're almost there."

Merris nodded, biting her lip. "Will it hurt?"

Braden shook his head. "No. There will be no pain. It's actually very quick."

Again, Merris nodded. Her brow was furrowed with doubt.

As they turned a corner, he leaned into her and uttered quietly, "Remember my brother. Ask for him first, before anything else. The Lyceum is not Aerysius; you will be in need of his guidance. You don't want to be snatched up by just any passing mage. In fact, I'd advise you not to speak with anyone at all until you find Quin."

They rounded a corner and were confronted by a closed door ahead. Braden shoved it open, allowing Merris to pass through before he followed. "If you get into trouble, I mean real trouble, find the biggest man around and ask him to take you under his protection," Braden advised as he guided Merris toward the opening of another

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stair. “He’ll have no choice but to defend you. It’s a matter of *sharaq*, what we call honor. If you can get his word, any man will defend you to the death.”

Braden continued to guide Merris forward with the pressure of his hand on her back. He could feel the tension in her shoulders; she was frightened. Perhaps even frightened enough to balk. They were well below the Hall of the Watchers, in the levels carved out of the mountain centuries before the Hall was ever built or even imagined. This room, as well as those beneath it, had been cut out of solid rock by the first mages who had come to dwell in this high place. It was ancient, almost as ancient as the mountain itself.

He took her hand, squeezing her fingers in reassurance, and led her down another flight of stairs. At the base of the steps, he guided her across a dim foyer to a large door, feeling Merris’s hand trembling in his grasp.

“This is it,” he told her gently. “You have nothing to fear. It’s not as bad as you’re imagining.”

“I’m scared,” she whispered.

Braden nodded, knowing she had every right to be. He placed a comforting hand on her arm. “This is as far as I go. I’m sorry, but I can’t take the risk of being seen with you.”

Merris nodded. Then, perhaps on impulse, she leaned forward and pressed a kiss against the whiskers of his cheek.

“Thank you, Ambassador,” she smiled shyly. “I really do appreciate all you’ve done. And don’t worry; I will deliver your letters. Is there anything else you’d like me to tell your brother for you?”

Braden shook his head with a scowl. “No. Absolutely nothing. And

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don't worry; you'll do just fine."

He drew himself up and offered her a formal bow. Then he turned on heel and strode away.

Merris stared after him, her eyes following the sway of his indigo robes as he disappeared back up the stairs. She felt suddenly very alone. Clutching the scroll she had prepared, Merris pushed open the shod door and started forward. A frown troubled her features as her eyes took in the large chamber on the other side.

The Chamber of Egress was a wide, natural cavern. In the midst of the room were two concentric rings of freestanding, cross-vaulted arches. Stationed beside each individual arch was an armed guardsman. All of the sentries in the chamber wore the black uniform of Aerysius with the emblem of the Silver Star embroidered on their chests. But these guardsmen were altogether different from any Merris had ever seen. Every man within the Chamber of Egress was heavily armed and well-armored. And the discipline of these men was absolute; each stood with spear and shield in hand, back straight in a stance of rigid attention beside the portal he warded. Not one face so much as swiveled in her direction at the sound of Merris's entrance.

Which one do I choose? she wondered as she scanned the many choices before her in consternation. Each portal must lead somewhere different in the Rhen. Perhaps some even led to lands far more distant. Some may lead nowhere at all.

Clutching her letter against her chest, Merris wandered toward the nearest arch. The portal's sentry made no sign that he even took notice

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of her approach. Trembling, Merris moistened her lips before daring to address the stony figure.

“Is this the way to Bryn Calazar?” she inquired timidly.

At first, the portal’s guardian showed no sign that he had even heard her. But then his arm shifted slightly. The spear in his grip now pointed across the room in the direction of another archway. Merris allowed her gaze to follow the direction indicated by the spear, her eyes widening in understanding.

“Thank you,” she whispered and, gathering her skirts, made her way across the chamber.

As she approached the second cross-vaulted arch, its guardian took one step forward, lowering his spear and barring her path.

Swallowing, Merris looked down at the scroll in her hand. She extended it toward the sentry, announcing, “By order of the Prime Warden, you are commanded to let me pass.”

The guardsman appeared to take no notice of the scroll. Merris frowned, her eyes darting around the room in consternation. There was no one else to give the letter to. Completely befuddled by what she was supposed to do, Merris took a guess. She held the scroll up before her face and delicately unrolled it. She read the contents aloud in a firm voice that miraculously did not falter:

“The acolyte Merris Bryar is granted passage to Bryn Calazar through the Portal of Egress.” The scroll is signed, *‘Cyrus Krane, Prime Warden of Aerysius, Guardian of the Eightfold Light.’*”

She turned the scroll around, showing the guardian her perfect forgery of Cyrus Krane’s bold signature. There was a pause of five slow heartbeats. Then the man raised his spear and stepped back, returning

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to his station beside the arch. Merris rolled the scroll back up, unable to contain the sigh of relief that escaped her chest.

She nodded her gratitude at the guardsman as she tucked the scroll back under her arm. She took one last glance around the chamber then moved forward under the cross-vaulted arch, positioning herself right in the center between all four columns.

Merris closed her eyes and held her breath.

A sudden gush of light surrounded her as the world shifted and lurched beneath her feet.

The rain had stopped. For now, at least. In its place, a murky layer of fog had descended to enshroud Aerysius in a pall of gloom. The lights from the oil lamps that hedged the avenues formed diffuse, yellow orbs. The fog was almost palpably thick; it was impossible to make out even the outline of structures just across the street.

Sephana only knew she was standing beside Regent Font because of the trickling sound made by the water. The soft gurgling noise it produced was the only evidence that the font even existed at all.

She paced away and then retraced her steps back again slowly. Glancing over her shoulder, Sephana regarded the gray entrance to Torte Street. No one had come from that direction in minutes. Aerysius seemed like a city deserted; it was as though she was alone in the chill thickness of night. It was either very late or already very early. The bakers had not yet risen to prepare the morning dough.

A distant *clop-clopping* noise echoed from far away. A coach was moving through the cobbled streets, somewhere high above on an

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upper terrace of the city. Sephana's eyes darted in the direction of the sound.

A hand on her shoulder made her flinch.

She whirled, gasping, her heart leaping from her chest into her throat. She had to choke back a sigh of relief when her eyes took in Braden's familiar features. Her glare shot daggers at him; Sephana did not like being startled. She liked it even less when her nerves were already affray.

"What took you so long?" she hissed, swiping a golden curl back away from her face. Her eyes squinted as they raked sharply over him. He was dressed in the same deep indigo robes he always wore, the Silver Star of the Lyceum embroidered on his breast. His expression was careworn, but otherwise he looked hale. Relieved, she collapsed against him.

Braden put an arm around her, rubbing her back and replying gently, "I came as quickly as I could."

Sephana pulled away enough to stare up into his face. "I was worried," she admitted, although it sounded more like an accusation.

He scowled, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. "I still am. You'll be the first person they come looking for once Merris turns up missing."

Sephana dismissed his statement with a wave of her hand. "Then let them come. I have a few questions myself for Prime Warden Krane. And I'm certain the Assembly would be very interested to hear his answers."

"I'm certain they would," Braden agreed stiffly. "But you're going to need evidence. You can't just accuse the Prime Warden of Aerysius of

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conspiring with cultists without evidence, Seph.”

“Then let’s go get some,” she announced, already walking away from him, black cloak flapping in her wake. Behind her, she could hear him jogging to catch up. He grabbed her arm, pulling her to a stop.

“Wait.”

She looked up into Braden’s gentle eyes and was troubled by what she saw there. Worry was written in them, and something else, as well. Troubled shadows of fear darkened his expression.

Sephana couldn’t think of another time when she had ever seen Braden Reis afraid. He was one of the bravest men she knew. He was no Battlemage; he had never wielded his power in the taking of a life. His was a different kind of courage entirely. Braden was the lead negotiator between two rampantly hostile nations on the eve of all-out war. That took more nerve than Sephana knew she could ever possess.

“I don’t think this is a good idea,” Braden muttered, running a hand through the dark strands of his hair. “Why don’t you go back to the Hall and wait for me.”

Sephana couldn’t help the grin that sprang instantly to her lips. “It would seem, Grand Master Reis, that you don’t know me well at all.”

He sucked in a cheek and shook his head, thoroughly indifferent to her attempt at levity. “I’m going alone, Seph. It won’t do us any good if we both get discovered. I want you to go back to the Hall and wait.”

“No,” Sephana insisted doggedly. Despite the cold logic of his argument, she was having none of it. “You need me, Braden. You may have knowledge that I lack, but the one thing I do know better than you is Aerysius itself. And if we do run into trouble down there, then you really *will* need me by your side.” She was referring to the fact that

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she was a Querer, schooled in a far broader range of magical applications. As a Chancellor, Braden would lack many of Sephana's talents. He would be easy prey if he were assaulted; his specialties lay in other areas.

Braden just stared at her blandly for a long moment. Then he sighed. "Easier to teach a fish to fly than a woman to use reason."

She glared at him in feigned outrage. "There *are* fish that can fly, you ignorant boor."

"Thank you for proving my point," he retorted gallantly. Before she could react, he gestured forward with his hand. "Lead the way, my dear. Before the sun comes up, if you please."

Sephana wanted to growl in frustration, but instead she found herself smirking as she followed his directive. She set out through the foggy night, Braden sauntering along at her side as if out for a leisurely stroll. He walked with one hand tucked behind his back, the other guiding her arm. At the corner of Torte and High Street they passed by a lone constable standing in the murky yellow glow of an oil lamp.

Braden gave a curt nod in the man's direction. "Good evening, officer," he said by way of greeting.

At the sight of Sephana's black cloak, the constable tipped his hat in her direction. "Evenin', Great Lady."

Sephana dipped her chin regally, noting as she did that Braden's presence by her side had gone completely unremarked. The constable probably had no idea what his dark blue robes even signified. They marked him as a full Master of the Lyceum, the equivalent of the ceremonial black robes worn by the mages of Aerysius. The only difference was the color and the position of the embroidered Silver

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Star. Braden wore his Star over his heart, while Sephana wore hers on the back of her cloak. The site of a mage of the Lyceum was not common on the streets of Aerysius, even in good times. The hostility that existed between Caladorn and the Rhen was not a recent inception, but rather the culmination of conflicting interests and ideologies that spanned millennia.

Sephana led Braden around a corner and onto a cobbled side street. Here, the fog was thickly nestled between buildings. She paused, eyes scanning through the mist, until at last she found the landmark she was searching for. Walking toward it, Sephana bent down to examine a wooden bin near the entrance to an alleyway.

She placed a hand on the container's lid, using her other hand to grope into the empty space behind it. There was just enough room there, she figured, for someone slight of frame.

"This must be it," Braden muttered at her side, his breath warm against her neck.

Sephana nodded as she withdrew her hand. Straightening, she peered into the alley. So heavy was the fog that she could make out nothing. She started forward into the thick grayness, but Braden's firm grip on her arm stopped her short. The acrid look he shot her was enough to remind her of his peculiar Caladornian sentiments when it came to gender roles. Sephana knew better than to argue with him.

So she followed Braden into the mist. He walked cautiously forward, boots splashing through puddles that had gathered on the cobbled street. His shoulders were rigid with tension, fists balled at his sides. There was nothing soft or gentle about his face anymore; his lips were compressed in a straight line, his brow deeply furrowed.

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Reaching the other side of the alley, he drew up and raised his hand to signal a halt. Slowing, he pulled open a door that Sephana hadn't even noticed was there. Her eyes widened as she watched him step inside, the door swinging closed behind him. She made no move to follow; she was fighting a strong impulse to run the other way. Instead she waited, nerves on edge, eyes intently focused on the handle of the door. After only moments the door cracked open again, enough to admit Sephana through the opening.

The cellar she found herself within was exactly the way Merris had described it, complete with rows of stacked crates and straw-covered floor. But it was to the door at the far end of the room that Sephana's eyes were immediately drawn as if compelled. That door now stood closed. For a moment, she forgot to breathe. She stood transfixed by the sight of it, completely rooted in place.

Braden moved forward, but Sephana could not force herself to do more than track his motion with her eyes. She watched as if from a distance as he rested his palm against the door's rough texture as if trying to get a feel for what might be lingering on the other side of it. For seconds he just stood there, hand planted squarely in the center of the wood. His fingers went to fumble with the rusty knob. He set his shoulder against the door and gave a push. With a shudder, the tired oak gave way beneath the weight of his body.

Beyond, a dark passage was revealed.

Braden glanced back at Sephana with eyes that seemed more saddened than worried.

She forced herself to cross the cellar floor toward him. As she tried to walk past him through the doorway, he caught her by the hand and

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stopped her short.

Gazing adamantly into her eyes, his voice grated in a near-whisper, “Last chance. There’s really no sense in risking us both.”

Sephana scowled. Then she kissed him.

Hand in hand, they entered the lightless corridor together, allowing the door to swing fully closed behind them. Sephana winced as darkness enveloped them. She stopped, unable to make out Braden’s outline even though he stood only a pace away. She could not even see his hand in hers; the blackness of the passage was too complete.

This would never do, she decided. She opened her mind to the magic field, allowing its rhythmic cadence to soothe her. Awash in the soft comfort of the field, Sephana produced a glow of magelight at their feet.

The mist she summoned flowed out ahead of them, a churning blue incandescence that writhed across the floor, lighting their way. In its glow, Braden’s image sprang into lurid focus. His features had the appearance of a portrait rendered by a novice’s crude hand: all harsh strokes punctuated by bold contrasts.

He nodded his head in wary approval of her use of the magelight. Sephana could almost sense the turmoil of conflicted thoughts that seethed just below the patient expression of his stare. The light could easily give away their presence, but it was necessary. Without it, they would only fumble blindly through the dark.

He took her by the hand and together they made their way down the narrow passage, the dim tendrils of her magelight groping vaporously ahead.

The walls of the corridor were narrow, carved from the dark granite

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of the mountainside. The passage before them led straight ahead. Her magelight served only to illuminate the stone right beneath their feet; it did nothing to drive back the darkness either ahead or behind.

The corridor they travelled became a treacherous, narrow stair that angled sharply downward. There, they paused. Sephana closed her eyes, straining to listen into the black depths below. But there was nothing; only the distant sound of trickling water broke the gaping silence that surrounded them. They descended the stairs together, hand in hand, her magelight like roiling fog cascading down the steps.

“This is as far as Merris got,” Braden whispered at her side.

Sephana nodded her agreement. She looked up and noticed a rock archway overhead. A symbol was carved into the keystone of the arch: the Silver Star. She could feel Braden’s fingers tightening on her own.

The sound of dribbling water was louder now and seemed to be coming from all directions at once. It was as though the very walls of the mountain were weeping. It was much colder down here than it was at the top of the stairs, a damp and penetrating chill.

The steps came to an end at a narrow, rock-encrusted passage.

Sephana let the magelight that had guided their path fade quietly away. The corridor ahead was lit by fiery torches ensconced upon the walls. Sephana swallowed a nervous lump in her throat as she wondered who the torches were meant for.

“Let me go first,” Braden whispered against her ear.

Numb, Sephana could only nod in response as Braden started down the corridor ahead of her. The floor was sloped, leading them further down into the bedrock of the mountainside. All around them the flickering light of the torches cast a lurid shadowplay on the stone. The

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walls themselves were wet, oozing dark water that dribbled down their rough faces to gather in stagnant pools on the floor.

The passage made a sharp turn, doubling back upon itself, then angled steeply downward.

Braden stopped and pressed his body up against the wall. He peered around a corner ahead. At last he pulled back, casting a troubled glance back her way.

“There is an intersection just ahead,” he whispered in a voice so low that she could barely make out his words. “I thought I heard something. I can’t be sure. Just be ready.”

Sephana nodded her understanding. She felt for the pulse of the magic field and took ahold of it. She would keep it there, just at the edge of her mind, within easy reach.

Swallowing, Sephana followed Braden as he edged forward, rounding the corner. Ahead, she could make out the intersection he had spoken of. Another corridor crossed their path.

“Stop,” Braden hissed sharply.

He ran his hand down the wall beside him, feeling its damp, rough texture. His fingers paused at a circular indentation in the rock. Frowning, he reached for the torch on the wall opposite and took it into his hand, holding the crackling flame up as he bent forward to examine the small depression in the wall.

“Smart,” he muttered. “Whoever they are, these people certainly don’t want any visitors.”

Sephana frowned, wordlessly pressing him to elaborate. He indicated what looked like a small button recessed into the stone. She could make out some sort of glyph that had been carved into the center

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of it. The markings looked fresh and precisely wrought; it was a recent addition to the ancient wall.

“This symbol is *callebra*,” Braden whispered, his fingers tracing over the small circle. “The hunter’s horn. It’s a trap; walking through the intersection probably sounds an alarm somewhere.”

“How do you know?” Sephana demanded.

“I’ve seen it’s like before,” he explained. “In the Lyceum. We use devices such as these to control access to certain critical areas.”

“Interesting,” Sephana muttered, gazing up into her lover’s face in wordless speculation. “So, why do we find one here beneath Aerysius?”

Braden shook his head with a troubled shrug. With his finger, he depressed the button on the wall. There was a small clicking noise.

Sephana jerked back, glancing at him sharply in alarm. “What was that?”

“I think I disarmed it,” he informed her. “But let’s hurry—for all I know, I might have just set the damned thing off.”

He replaced the torch in its sconce and led her forward through the intersection ahead. Their feet splashed through pools of water. The walls themselves were weeping crusted minerals down their faces.

Suddenly, Braden’s fingers clamped down hard on her hand. He stopped so fast that she almost ran into the back of him. He turned and threw an arm across her chest, forcing her back against the wall.

Sephana gaped ahead, mouth wide open, at the sight of a man crossing the corridor just ahead. He was there for only a second and then was gone again, disappearing through a passage on the right. The sound of his footsteps continued on, the noise slowly receding.

“This is getting too dangerous,” Braden grumbled. “We need to

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turn back.”

“No,” Sephana insisted stubbornly. “We’ve come this far.”

“It’s a warren down here,” he argued roughly. “We could get lost. Or what if I miss one of those traps? It’s no good, Seph. We need to go back and report what we’ve already found. Let the Assembly deal with these people.”

But she was adamant. “Just a little further. You said so yourself: I need evidence, Braden. I’m not leaving here until I get some.”

Braden glared at her hard for a long moment. In the wavering glow of the torchlight, he looked subtly older, subtly more dangerous. Finally, he released a beleaguered sigh, shaking his head.

“I’ll give you five minutes,” he allowed. “Then we leave.”

Ahead, the corridor widened, the walls rounding, until it looked more like a natural cave than it did any human-carved passage. The torches here were spaced out at much greater intervals, creating long stretches of darkness between pools of wavering torchlight. The tunnel was icy and wet, the water beneath their feet stagnant and foul-smelling.

Before them, the passage came to a sudden end.

They both drew up to stare at the wide doorway that was carved into the wall just ahead. There was no light at all beyond. The opening in the rock was little more than a gaping hole that led straight ahead into blackness.

Glancing at Braden, Sephana quickly produced another glow of magelight at their feet. To this he added his own, a golden amber shade that mingled with Sephana’s mist, became a churning fog of roiling colors. The magelight trailed ahead of them through the opening in the

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wall, illuminating a dark chamber just ahead.

Through the glowing fog they walked hand in hand, their shadows cast in tormented display upon the walls to either side.

As they stepped into the chamber, Braden pulled up short.

Sephana shivered, feeling as if a cold wash of water had been poured over her head, running down her neck and trickling down her back.

The room they entered was just as dark and wet as the rest of the warren of passageways they had traversed. On one side of the floor was a large slab of granite, waist-high. It had the look of a table or altar, hewn from a single slab of rock. A foul, dark liquid oozed down its sides, congealing on its surface.

To the other side of the chamber was a circular well made of staggered granite blocks.

It was toward the stone table that Braden moved first. He paused beside it, eyes contemplating the rough texture of its surface. Slowly, he extended his hand and dipped a finger into the dark liquid pooled on its surface. His finger came away coated with thick, coagulated blood.

Sephana recoiled with a gasp. The sheer amount of blood was appalling. It was pooled on the surface of the table, running in thick rivulets to floor. She was standing in it. The blood had mixed with water at her feet, rendering it impossible to tell how much there actually was.

She shook her head and whispered, “Animal sacrifice? To what purpose?”

“No.”

Braden’s voice was empty and hollow, completely drained of all

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emotion. The sound of it chilled her heart. He lifted something from the floor next to the slab of rock. It took Sephana a moment to recognize the object in his hand: a thick iron shackle anchored by a heavy chain to the side of the granite block.

“Human,” she whispered.

She covered her mouth with her hand as Braden cast the chain away from him, repulsed. The iron shackle slapped hard against the slab with a sharp ring of metal.

Sephana flinched at the harsh sound. Braden hardly seemed to care if anyone heard. With a grimace of contempt, he wrenched himself back away from the altar, swinging around to face the well. He stalked across the floor toward it, kneeling down beside the granite ring. His hand rose, tracing over a series of vile-looking markings that were carved into the well’s rim. They looked more like claw marks raked into the stone by some ghastly creature than they resembled any language Sephana knew.

She crept up beside him and observed Braden’s study of the gruesome marks.

“I want to go,” she insisted, voice quavering.

But he did not act as though he even heard her. He was kneeling beside the well, inching his way slowly around its circumference, eyes and fingers exploring the hideous markings all around the rim.

At last, Braden finished his scrutiny of the well’s texture and pushed himself to his feet. His gaze remained fixed on the vile markings, stare narrowed in thought. He brought his hand up to his face, absently stroking his thumb over the whiskers on his chin. He rested his other hand on the well’s cover, a thick slab of granite stone.

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“This is a portal,” he uttered finally. His voice was cold and dispassionate. Utterly flat. He did not look up at her; his eyes remained captured by the cruel markings of the well’s rim. “They’re boring a gateway to the Netherworld. And they’re using human sacrifice to finish the job.”

Sephana could only stare vacantly ahead, mouth agape.

“They call it the Well of Tears,” Braden continued impassively, indicating an inscription set into the very base of the well itself. “If they succeed—if this gateway is ever opened—then more than just Aerysius will be in danger. They will unleash the powers of Chaos across the earth.”

The sound of a loud, metallic crash rang out across the chamber. And then another noise: a distant thundering sound, low and throbbing, echoing up from the depths.

“They know we’re here,” Sephana gasped.