

CHAPTER ONE



‘Chief Mage Rinduran was attacked by the nightmare creatures of the Forest, drained his magecraft to protect the Citadel. Until all he had left was his last drop of blood.’ Bastien choked on a sob, his voice quavering as he continued, ‘But that was enough. His giant sacrifice was greater than the Forest could fight and the Citadel is safe. The war is over!’

He paused to allow his audience to show its enthusiasm. When the roars had died down, he announced, ‘I’ve been asked to take on the role of Chief Mage.’

Here, Bastien cast a sideways look at Hamel, who might have hidden a sceptical twitch of an eyebrow before he squeaked, ‘Quite right, quite right.’ It was hard to tell what Hamel thought. His expressions were as alien as his appearance, from his pointed head and greenish skin to the claws he tapped impatiently on the High Table.

‘So,’ Bastien resumed, ‘I must try to fill my father’s shoes. We need time to mourn and time to choose new Councillors but, rest assured, the Forest is defeated! Our Perfect society is safe once more! And we shall celebrate with the Courtship Dance that was postponed because of the war. Our Perfect Society has overcome those who would destroy it!’

Cheering was clearly required again at this point so hearty hoorays ensued. A dance would allow new adults to pair up and weddings would follow, as sure as light was grey; undoubtedly a good thing.

This time when he paused, Bastien looked towards the slight figure beside him. He took her hand, kissed it. 'My sister Verity will be with me at the dance as she is with me in mourning our father.' His voice broke and the white-faced girl squeezed his hand.

Sister? Verity? There had been rumours that Rinduran had another child, hidden away because she suffered from allergy, and now here she was, thin and pasty-faced but sitting at the High Table all the same. What to make of that?

Not only was the girl sitting with the Council of Ten but she even presumed to speak, in a sweet whisper amplified by speech magic. Her magecraft? Or Bastien's?

'I...' she began and quickly corrected herself. 'We want to commemorate Daddy...' A child's slip. 'Our father. If you have any suggestions for how we should do so, please let Hamel know. We'll say goodbye to our beloved Chief Mage before we hold the dance.' Her voice trembled.

Hamel's face darkened to bilious green. He was clearly not impressed by the role he'd been given. He was one of only four Councillors who'd returned from the battle, out of the ten who'd fought. Wasn't he a hero too?

Nobody challenged the triumphant speech made by the new Chief Mage from the High Table but, later, rumours spread like a virus around the Citadel and the forbidden word 'Forest' was on everybody's lips.

The most hushed question concerned what had happened to the freak, the girl who'd infested the Citadel with Forest. The one they called – barely mouth the dangerous words – Queen of the Warrior Bees. Those unfortunates who'd seen her, wreathed in a cloud of her vile familiars, still had nightmares. Was she dead? If

the Citadel had won the war, and they were all safe, she must be. But why did none of the mages say so? Who knew the truth?

One person did know but he was not in the Great Hall or his *harrumph* of disbelief at Bastien's speech would have been the focus of attention. Instead, the absence of Kermon, the new Mage-Smith, went unnoticed amid the hubbub after the speeches.

Had he been missed by the other mages, they'd have merely concluded he was mourning his dead master and preparing for his new role in the Citadel.

If the servants noticed the blue fires that leaked raw power from the smithy, through every crack in the stone, none of them was foolish enough to say so. Nor to comment on the food and drink left untouched for three days outside the closed door to the forge.

On the fourth day, the Mage-Smith emerged and sent for sustenance, another indication that the Citadel was returning to normal after the war. But Kermon was not the man he'd been when he entered the forge. And the Citadel rippled with unease.



