SETH RING

BATTLE MAGE FARMER

BOOK FIVE: TRANSFORMATION

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aethonbooks.com

TRANSFORMATION
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From Seth
Groups
LitRPG

CHAPTER 1

A whole lot of people are going to die before this is over.

The soft clink of Ellie's spoon tapping on the edge of her cup snapped John out of his daze. They were sitting at the kitchen table with their tea, trying to decide their next move. They had just returned to the farm after driving off the Iron Monarch and saving the capital city of Lepiera from annihilation, and John had been feeling pretty good about everything. Sure, there was the growing threat of a magical beast invasion, and the possibility of a cult-like organization of mages called New Dawn being tied to the Soaring Cloud mages, but overall, the world had seemed stable.

Even the addition of interdimensional pirates hadn't fazed John all that much—after all, if they were foolish enough to come to this world, he was confident in being able to deal with them as he dealt with most threats. What was eating at him was the message Katrine had passed on from the world beyond the first Mage's doorway. John was finding it impossible to erase the bloody image from his mind, and the rage it stoked in his heart was growing stronger and stronger.

"John."

Realizing he had drifted off again, John looked up and saw that Ellie was pointing at his cup with her spoon. Following her gaze, he looked down at his tea and realized that most of it had boiled away. Grimacing, he pulled most of the heat out of the tea and let go of his cup, taking a deep breath as he placed his hand on the table.

"Sorry, I'm having a bit of trouble controlling myself."

"Understandably," Ellie said, picking up her own cup to take a sip. "You said Katrine is in a dire situation, right?"

"If she's even still alive," John said, his expression grim. "She said something about being betrayed, and when she sent the message, it seemed like she was being hunted down."

"And Togene?"

"Dead."

Letting out a sorrowful sigh, Ellie held her cup in front of her chest, as if its warmth could drive away the chill the news brought.

"I knew that going through the doorway was a bad idea," John said, his voice oddly calm. "I should have made Katrine stay here."

Shaking her head, Ellie put her cup down and reached across the table to grab John's hand.

"No, it was her choice. But now, we have to make a choice. And there is only one right answer."

His forehead furrowing slightly, John glanced at her.

"What do you mean?"

"You need to go get her," Ellie said, her expression growing fierce as she spoke. "We can't leave her to suffer, and the people who did that to her need to be punished."

Dropping his gaze to the table, John took a moment to respond. He desperately wanted to agree with Ellie and rush through the doorway to find Katrine, but he had no idea if she was even still alive. She had been in such rough shape when she sent the message that there was a good chance of her dying to her wounds before he could get to her, and even if she was still alive, the people who had tortured her were undoubtedly still hunting for her.

On top of the uncertainty, the thought of leaving Ellie and the others behind on a world that was about to implode caused John's heart to shake. There were world-ending threats at every turn, and John wasn't sure he would be able to handle it if he were to leave and then something were to happen to Ellie.

"Ellie, I…"

Trailing off when Ellie lifted her hand, John saw her shake her head firmly.

"This is not a discussion, John. We don't abandon family, ever. I will be fine here in the valley. I have Ferdie, Sigvald, Thomas, and Rebya. If need be, we'll all retreat into the Shadow Tower and Rebya can protect us. Even if multiple sages show up, they won't be able to breach the tower. As for the other threats, the beast wave is nowhere to be seen, Allera has been crushed, and the Mages are in hiding. However, if you don't go now, you're going to miss your chance. Every moment you delay is a moment that Katrine is alone and suffering. You have to go."

A thread of warmth spread through John's heart as Ellie spoke, but mixed with it was a fear he couldn't shake.

"What if I can't come back?"

"You're not thinking clearly," Ellie said, a small smile playing on her lips. "Katrine said the people who captured her have the ability to open

doorways into worlds, right? If they can come back, so can you."

Feeling slightly foolish, John chuckled. Ellie was completely right. He had been so caught up in his emotions that he'd completely missed that. Pushing back his chair, John stood up, an intense feeling of gratefulness flooding through him as he looked at Ellie. When he had first arrived at the farm, she had been barely holding everything together, but her courage and steadfastness had transformed her into a powerful and wise partner. Reaching out to take her hand, he slipped his arm around her waist as she stood up and gave her a kiss that lingered on her lips.

"Thank you. I'm sorry for rushing off, but you're right. I can't abandon Katrine."

"Make sure you talk to Rebya before you go," Ellie said, hugging John as hard as she could. "And then stop back by here. I'm going to make you some healing potions."

"I will."

Kissing her again, John left the house and went down into the cheese cellar, taking the portal stone to the Shadow Tower. Stepping into the cool, dark halls of the hidden tower, he was met by one of Rebya's flowers which had clearly been waiting for him. The plant Mage had a small seed that she offered to John as soon as he appeared.

"This is one of my seeds. It will work similarly to the seed I sent with Katrine in that it can send a message back to me. However, it will also give you an approximate sense of Katrine's status and location. It can only indicate rough direction, and even then probably only within a certain distance, but it should serve to help you find her."

"Thank you, Rebya," John said, bowing his head to her.

"Of course. If I could I would go myself and choke the life out of everyone even remotely related to the group that harmed Katrine and Togene," Rebya said, her eyes glittering with a terrifying light. "But I feel relieved that you will punish them in my place."

Smiling grimly, John put the seed away in his pouch and turned back toward the portal stone to go back to the farm.

"Oh, I will," he said, right before he stepped onto the platform. "Have no fear about that."

Back on the farm, John carefully prepared all his equipment. He wasn't taking much, but he double-checked his weapons and the potions Ellie had prepared for him. He wore his silver bracer on his left wrist and belted his

daggers and sword around his waist. Dressed in a simple linen shirt with dark pants and leather boots, John caught sight of himself in the mirror and had to laugh. Add an eyepatch, and he would be the spitting image of a pirate from a swashbuckling adventure.

Hesitating for a moment, he unbuckled his sword and wrapped it up, adding it to the pack Ellie had prepared. In it, he had a few changes of clothes, a bedroll, and food, along with his spell book. He was expecting to find Mages through the doorway and thought it might be better to arrive in something more appropriate. Going over to his large trunk, he opened it up and dug through the clothing it contained, eventually finding the dark blue robe he had squirreled away.

Slipping it on, he paused slightly when he saw the blue flame motif embroidered into the cuffs and lapel. Of all the threats that he faced, it was impossible for him to forget the biggest one. Sleeping in his soul was the fiercest of his enemies and the main culprit behind the slow death of this world, the dragon, Farroutef the Deceiver. Shaking his head, John walked over to the corner where a smooth metal staff stood, gathering dust. As he reached out to touch it, the staff let out a flash and the dust vanished, revealing the shining silver surface.

It's been a long time since I've used a staff, but it's probably more appropriate for where I'm headed than my swords.

With everything packed, John left his room and joined Ellie, who was waiting on the porch. She gave him a soft smile when he stepped out of the door and reached up to brush some lint off his shoulder.

"You look great."

"I'm not going to a party," John said, with a grim smirk. "I'm going to introduce a whole lot of people to a world of hurt."

"Still, there's no reason not to go in style," Ellie replied with a chuckle. "But don't go overboard. The last thing you need right now is to lose ground to the dragon."

"Right," John said, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. "I'm going to save Katrine."

After saying their goodbyes, John took off, flying through the air toward the cave that would take him down to the first Mage's doorway. As he flew he opened up his status, looking at his progress.

Name: John Sutton

Age: 29
Class: Mage
Active Quests: [A Covetous Gaze]
Skill List: [Mana Breath: 00], [Arcane Tongue: 00], [Mana Control: 00], [Mana Reinforcement: 00], [Mental Model: 00], [Astral Insight: 25]
Skill Points: 0
Spell List: [Fire Spells (91)], [Earth Spells (24)], [Air Spells (24)], [Water Spells 57)], [Arcane Spells (132)]
Quest List: [A World on the Brink], [Feed the Nations], [Reclaim the Forbidden Lands], [The King of Beasts], [A Covetous Gaze], [A Dragon's Heart]
[Apocalypse Points: 9/10]

Landing outside the cave, John's body flashed and he vanished into the earth, his feet leaving burning footsteps behind. Opening each quest, he looked over them to make sure he wasn't missing anything before he left this world. While he knew that rescuing Katine was the right choice, he couldn't help but worry that the situation would collapse while he wasn't around.

[A World on the Brink: Though the world has been saved from immediate doom, the apocalypse has begun. The wheels of causality spin, causing threats to rise from all corners of the land. Numerous threats that could destabilize the world and send it tumbling into the abyss have begun to stir. It is up to you to stop them. Bring this world's Apocalypse Points down to zero or watch as this world perishes.]

[Feed the Nations: You have managed to do the impossible, creating a type of wheat that consumes mana to grow yet is still edible. However, in the face of the sea of mouths that go hungry every day, the wheat you have grown is less than a drop. Expand your production of this new wheat, propagating it until it is sufficient to provide food for the world. Be careful of those who would take the wheat for themselves, trying to monopolize in order to generate wealth.]

[Reclaim the Forbidden Lands: The wheat seeds in your hand hold the secret to reclaiming the lands blighted by the forbidden spells. Rewards will be dependent on the size of the reclaimed land. This is a repeatable quest.]

His first three quests were quests he had possessed for a while, and for the most part he didn't need to worry about them. [Feed the Nations] was well underway, and currently it was being handled by other people. Between Thomas watching over the farm in the valley and the Moritoi planting in the Forbidden Lands, food was being grown in increasing quantities. Adding to that the massive mill they had installed in the Shadow Tower, and it wouldn't be long before there would be enough food for everyone. What worried John, however, were the other three quests.

[The King of Beasts: You have learned of the impending arrival of Gorraleck the Destroyer, the king of all beasts. Connected by a mysterious fate, you must face her in battle or risk the destruction of every human in this world.]

There was still too much unknown about Gorraleck. Even now, John couldn't forget the strange humanoid beast lounging in the tree at Soaring Cloud Tower. He had no idea when the beast king would arrive, and he was concerned he might not be here to stop it. Currently, however, his focus was on the second of the three major apocalyptic threats.

[A Covetous Gaze: You have learned of the impending arrival of forces from the Cabal of the Broken Gate, a group of interstellar pirates who raid lower worlds, stripping them of their resources and enslaving the people who inhabit them. Known for destroying everything they cannot take with them, they are a plague on any world they appear. The Cabal has seized the location of your world from one of your companions and has made it their next target.]

John's goal in going through the first Mage's door was twofold. First, he wanted to save Katrine if it was still possible. And second, he intended to obliterate this Cabal of the Broken Gate. While he couldn't unleash his full

power in this world without worrying about breaking it, he had no such qualms about acting in another. He was planning on ending this looming threat while he was picking up Katrine. Explosively.

Still, Ellie's words had been a wise warning, and John did his best to temper his desire to kill as he opened up his last quest.

[A Dragon's Heart: A dragon's soul cannot be destroyed by conventional means, and even if its body is destroyed, its spirit will continue on. Due to a chance encounter, the soul of Farroutef the Deceiver slumbers in your mana pool, sheltering your own soul while using your body to grow in strength until he can awaken. Should he awaken and seize your body, he will bring about the end of the world.]

Flashing through the stone rooms that led to the doorway, it didn't take John long to arrive in front of the interdimensional portal. Rebya was still studying it, and he could see a number of her vines curled up nearby. Sensing his arrival, one of her vines lowered and she appeared on the flower it held.

"Are you ready?" she asked, her eyes searching his face.

Nodding, John wasted no time. It only took him a moment to calculate the correct spell, and reaching out, he took control of the magical formation around the doorway and sent his mana surging into it, causing the doorway to light up.

"Take care of Ellie and the others," he said as he walked up to the door.

Bowing to show she understood, Rebya spoke softly.

"Come back safely."

Without hesitating, John waved and stepped into the blue doorway, vanishing from the world.

CHAPTER 2

Mana wrapped around John as he felt himself being sucked into the doorway, sending him hurtling through space. The feeling was disorienting, but John held his focus, taking in as much information as he could. He could sense the mana of the door trying to permeate his skin, but it was unable to get through the mana in his body. Instead, it wrapped around him like a cocoon as it pulled him forward. Though the sense of motion only lasted for a few seconds, John could feel his Astral Insight skill climbing as his Mental Model deconstructed what was going on around him.

Another light appeared in front of him, and with a snapping sensation, John stepped into a new world. The first thing he noticed was the thick mana that permeated everything. It felt gentle and strangely tame to John, but he knew that anyone under the legendary stage would quickly find their bodies corroding were they to arrive here. He was currently standing in a small meadow of luminous grass surrounded by tall, lush oak trees.

There was no sign of a doorway or even a magic circle behind him, making him wonder how he was going to get back to the valley. In the distance, he could see a giant Mage tower of a polished white stone that covered half of the horizon, rising up into the air until it vanished in the clouds. A soft breeze rippled through the trees and warm sun beat down on his shoulders, creating a feeling of lightness, of promise.

That must be Candle Scholar Tower.

Looking down at his hand, John snapped his fingers and created a small fireball, checking to make sure his spells still worked. He still had the dragon flames to protect himself if they didn't, but using the power of the evil dragon that slumbered in his soul brought him closer to losing himself, so he was hoping he would be able to avoid it if possible. With a crackling sound, a wisp of orange flame appeared above his hand, causing him to sigh in relief.

As he breathed in, he could feel the nearby mana rushing into his lungs and filling them up. His mana breathing technique was unique, and as the mana poured into him and filtered through his lungs, John could feel his cells soaking up the rich mana like they were dying of thirst. He hadn't realized his body was starved for mana, but it was clear from how he was

devouring everything around him that the mana in his world wasn't sufficient for his body.

Sensing a flicker of mana in the distance, John looked up and saw three lights flashing toward him from the gigantic tower in the distance. Because of the distance, it took a few moments before he could make out what they were, but soon he realized there were three Mages flying toward him. One of them was simply flying forward, a glowing wand held in her hand, while the other two were flying on different pieces of equipment. Judging that it would take a while for them to arrive, John decided to use the opportunity to fill his mana as much as possible.

Sitting down, he began to breathe in the surrounding mana. Pouring into his lungs like liquid flame, the mana was filtered out of the air and dispersed throughout his body, with only a trickle seeping into his mana pool. Unlike normal Mages, John barely used his mana pool, which had turned out to be a saving grace, since that was where Farroutef the Deceiver lay, recovering. Instead, his mana was transformed into an absolutely pure state and packed into his bones, muscle, and skin.

Carefully controlling the heat that rolled off of him to avoid setting fire to the grass, John continued to breathe in and out until the approaching Mages were only a few thousand feet away. Stopping his meditation, he stood up, feeling considerably refreshed. Taking out the seed Rebya had given him, he watched with bemusement when it began to absorb the surrounding mana and suddenly sprouted into a small flower guardian that was only a few inches tall. Crawling over to his thumb, it wrapped itself up, transforming into a vine ring with a small sunflower on it.

Through it, he could feel a sense of warmth somewhere in the distance, though he couldn't tell what direction the feeling was coming from. Focusing his mana on the ring, he felt the warmth fluctuate and the emotions he was getting from it shifted.

Hidden, excited, anxious.

Concentrating his own emotions, he tried to project a feeling of safety through the ring and was rewarded when the warmth increased. Realizing he was getting a reading of how Katrine was feeling, a wave of profound relief washed over John. He had been desperately hoping Katrine was still alive, and this seemed to indicate that was the case. The feeling he was getting from her suggested that she was currently safe and hidden, but there was no knowing how long that would last.

As much as John wanted to run off and begin looking for her right away, there were more pressing things that demanded his attention, including the three Mages who had arrived in front of him. Leading them was a woman with brown hair tightly cropped on one side of her head. She had sharp features, and the wand she held showed signs of significant use. Landing on the grass, she walked forward until she stood two dozen feet away.

Hovering in the air behind her were two men, one heavyset and in a gray robe, and the other in a green robe sporting a shock of blond hair. The bald man was standing on a series of interconnected rings that hummed with power, keeping him in the air, while the blond man stood on a slim, blade-like device that reminded John of a snowboard from Earth. All three of the Mages were looking at him with interest and some wariness, and it was the female Mage who spoke first.

"Hello, my name is Miranda. Welcome to Candle Scholar Tower. What's your name?"

"John."

"Welcome, John. Is this your first time coming to an upper world?"

Looking around, John nodded, his forehead furrowing slightly.

"Yes. I found a gate and activated it. It led me here."

"You activated it by yourself?" the bald man asked, his expression suddenly interested.

Seeing John's gaze turning toward the bald man, Miranda hurried to introduce the other two Mages.

"Ah, this is Jorn and Patro. They're fellow scholars at the tower."

"Pleased to meet you Jorn, Patro. To answer your question, yes. I activated it myself."

"Wow, impressive," Jorn said, maneuvering his flying device down to the ground.

Beside him, the blond-haired mage, Patro, did the same. Stepping down, Jorn held out his hand and the rings he had been standing on folded up and flew up to land in his hand. Giving John a friendly smile, he walked up next to Miranda, who continued the introduction.

"We are one of the greeting teams assigned to welcome those Mages who are able to find their way here, and answer your questions. If it's okay with you, we can head back to the tower and we'll introduce you to everything on the way. Do you have a flying spell?"

Nodding, John tapped his staff on the ground and his body immediately began to rise. Seeing the spell, the three Mages exchanged quick glances and then cast their own spells. Together, the four of them rose into the air and flew toward the tower. Miranda was still using her wand, and it appeared to have an area effect, because John found himself speeding up when he flew next to her. As they flashed above the gently rolling hills, John did his best to take in as much as he could while also listening to Miranda, who was introducing the tower.

"As I said, welcome to Candle Scholar Tower. We are one of the premier research towers in the upper worlds and are known for the breadth of our research. We only admit those in the fourth order or higher, but considering that you came through one of our gates, you probably meet those requirements. Right now we're flying over the outer ring, where all of the support systems for the tower reside. You might see Mages out and about in the outer ring, but most of us stay in the inner ring or in the tower proper.

"Candle Scholar Tower is divided into seven sub-towers that deal in the main schools of mana. Those would be the four natural elements of fire, wind, water, and earth, plus light, darkness, and arcane. The three of us are from the Arcane Tower. Each tower oversees a different set of jobs, and the Arcane Tower is in charge of monitoring astral fluctuations. When the gate activated, it sent us a signal so we could be ready to dispatch a greeting team."

"Miranda," Patro said quietly, causing the female Mage to blush slightly and get back to what was important.

"Ahem, as I was saying, Candle Scholar Tower is composed of seven sub-towers that each study and deal in a different sort of magic. Mages who join our organization are allowed to study in whichever tower they choose, and when they reach the sixth order can even become a member of one of the towers. Do you have a particular type of magic you enjoy?"

"I dabble in a bit of everything," John said with a small smile. "But mostly fire magic."

"I thought I sensed a bit of flame around you," Miranda said, laughing lightly. "But your mana control is excellent."

"Thanks."

As they flew closer to the tower, John felt a shift in the mana off in the distance and saw another team of three Mages fly out of the tower, heading

toward it. Realizing that someone else had just used a gate to arrive at this world, he glanced over at Miranda.

"Do you often get new Mages coming through the gates?"

"A few times an hour, normally," Miranda said, waving at the other Mages who were flashing by. "But most people who arrive are already members of the tower, so it's simply a matter of verifying their credentials."

"Oh? And what about new people like me?"

"Maybe a few a week? Here we are, we're going to land in that second courtyard."

Flying over a heavy stone wall, John followed Miranda to land in a spacious courtyard with a small pavilion that held a desk. There was no one at the desk, but Miranda walked over to it to get a few things while Jorn and Patro both stood by John. Both men appeared friendly, but it was clear from the way they flanked him that they were there to make sure there was no trouble. Though John couldn't tell what order they were in, he had a feeling he would find himself in a tough spot if he tried to start casting dangerous spells around them.

"Here we go. If you'll place your hand here, we can get you registered, which will keep the tower's defenses from targeting you. After we get you registered, Patro will escort you to the dorms, where you can get settled down. There are still a few days until the next intro class, but you can explore as you'd like."

Taking the crystal ball Miranda held out, John examined it for a moment and then sent a tiny thread of his mana into it. The bit of mana bloomed like a flower when it entered the crystal ball and the ball flashed with a white light. A gentle ringing sounded as the ball glowed and the mana in the surrounding areas surged as a woman in a black robe appeared. Her eyes were covered by a band of metal that had runes carved all over it and her head was completely bald, but there was no denying the incredible pressure she gave off. Despite her eyes being covered, John could sense she was staring at him with an intensity that put him on edge.

Starting to step back, he felt more surges of mana around the courtyard, but the powerful Mage reacted quickly. Lifting the gnarled staff made of what appeared to be a metal root that she held in one hand, she spoke a word John couldn't quite make out and the space around the courtyard suddenly froze, the mana refusing to move. With a slightly strained smile, she dipped her head toward John.

“Greetings. I am Foyrath the Seer, master of the Arcane Tower. Welcome to Candle Scholar Tower.”

“Tower master!” Miranda blurted out, quickly saluting.

Next to her, Patro and Jorn followed suit, bowing low, only for Foyrath to wave her hand dismissively. Coughing lightly as the mana in the courtyard struggled against the barrier she had raised, she gestured to John.

“John, was it? I’ll be taking over your registration. No need to bother with all these formalities. Ahem. Why don’t we move somewhere more comfortable?”

Before anyone could react, the tower master waved her hand, causing the space around them to shift, and a moment later John found himself standing in a large hall of dark stone decorated with carvings of planets, stars, suns and moons, and all manner of fantastical creatures. The spell that had brought him here was cast so fast John hadn’t even seen it activate, and the display of power left his heart pounding.

Wincing slightly, as if the spell had taken a lot out of her, Foyrath gestured for John to follow her and led the way to the end of the room where there was a library. A half-eaten cookie lay abandoned on the floor, along with a cup of tea that had spilled, but with a snap both vanished.

“I was in a bit of hurry,” Foyrath explained, clearly embarrassed to have shown John a mess.

“I assume the others trying to teleport in were the other tower masters?” John asked, sitting down in one of the chairs near the desk.

Giving John an appraising look, Foyrath smiled slyly as she took her seat.

“Indeed. If you guessed that, then I assume you know why I appeared?”

“The purity of my mana,” John said evenly, looking around the large library.

“Exactly. Tell me about yourself, John. Your registration says you come from one of the unnamed lower worlds through a gate? One of our gates?”

“Yes. A gate created by Azewix Thutrix Valehawk. Do you know him?”

“The Great Mage? Of course I know him,” Foyrath said, her lips curling up in a wide smile. “Grand Master Valehawk once sat in this very seat. His grand disciple was my master. It has been ages since I have heard his name, but he is a legend in this tower. I had no idea there were gates of his still scattered around.”

“Wait, do you mean he’s dead?” John asked, his brow furrowing in confusion.

“Of course he is. It’s been almost fifty thousand years since he held this position.”

CHAPTER 3

"Fifty thousand years?" John asked, his confusion clear.

Laughing lightly, Foyrath nodded.

"Ah, yes. Chances are time passes slower in your world compared to this one. The higher the world, the faster time passes, the lower the world, the slower it passes. Though obviously, higher and lower are simply designators and have no bearing on actual location. Another way to think about it is that the denser the mana of a world, the higher on the chain it is, and consequently the faster that time moves."

Listening to the tower master explaining the situation, John felt a bead of cold sweat drip down his back. If time passed quicker in the upper worlds, then every moment he had delayed coming to find Katrine would have been magnified. He had seriously been considering delaying for at least a week to make sure the threat of the Iron Monarch was completely taken care of, but that would have meant abandoning Katrine to her fate for a lot longer.

"How severe is the time difference?" he asked.

"That is impossible to know without precise calculations, but a good standard is seven to one. Seven seconds pass here for every one second that passes on your homeworld. Ah, it appears we have some guests."

Waving her hand, she removed some sort of barrier and immediately a roar echoed through the room as a rail-thin man in a robe that was literally on fire appeared in the hall.

"Foyrath! How dare you!"

As he stormed over to the desk, more figures appeared behind him. A firm-looking woman who was powerfully built added her voice to the thin man's.

"Indeed. It is unbecoming of a tower master to behave in such a way."

"Oh, calm down, Glyn. You're going to scare our guest. John, this is Glyn, master of the Fire Tower."

Transforming from raging fury to a pleasant smile in an instant, Glyn smiled and greeted John with a bow.

"Welcome to Candle Scholar Tower, John. As this devious woman mentioned, I am the master of the Fire Tower. If you have any interest in fire magic, mine would be the tower for you."

“Slow down, Glyn,” the large woman said, shaking her head. “You know the rules. No recruitment until the sixth order. My name is Toross the Steady. I serve as the tower master for the Earth Tower. You haven’t signed anything, have you?”

Bewildered by the situation, John shook his head, noting the annoyance in Foyrath’s expression and the relief in everyone else’s.

“Good. I’m sure you’re wondering what’s going on, so I’ll let Foyrath explain it to you.”

Snorting, the Arcane Tower master waved her hand and more chairs popped into existence.

“We were getting to it. Needless to say, we are all interested in you, John, as it is rare to find someone with mana as pure as yours. But Toross is correct. You technically cannot join a tower until you have reached the sixth order, so there isn’t much point in talking about it. Oh, out of curiosity, what order are you in?”

“I believe it’s the fourth,” John said, shrugging. “In my world, they’re called sages.”

Immediately the excitement in the room dimmed, and most of the tower masters looked much less interested. Even the ethereal flames that leapt and danced on Glyn’s robe died down a bit.

“Ah, I see. Well, I’m sure we’ll have plenty of other times to chat over the next hundred years,” Glyn said, his smile slightly strained. “But I’ve just remembered that I have an experiment I need to check on.”

As quickly as they had arrived, the tower masters all vanished, leaving John and Foyrath behind. Giving him a small smile, the Arcane Tower master settled back in her chair.

“Excuse them, they’re all a bit impatient. But I’ve been doing all the talking. Tell me about yourself, John.”

Unbothered by the clear dismissal he had just received from the other tower masters, John spoke calmly.

“The world I am from will not accommodate Mages above the fourth order, so I’ve come to expand my horizons. My main focus has been in combat magic, but I’m most interested in dimensional magic.”

“Hmm, then the Arcane Tower might be a good choice for you after you step into the sixth order. Do you know anyone in the tower?”

Sensing that Foyrath was fishing for information, John shook his head.

“I thought I would know Valehawk, but he’s turned out to be dead.”

“Quite dead,” Foyrath laughed. “Well, no matter. I’ll call someone to assist you with getting settled.”

Standing up, John bowed slightly, keeping his expression pleasant.

“Thank you.”

“Of course. If you ever need anything, you can come and speak to one of my students and they should be able to help you out,” Foyrath said, waving her hand.

A flat token with a small symbol marked in the corner appeared and hovered in front of John.

“This is your identification card. I’ve marked it with the Arcane Tower’s symbol so you can just show it if you need assistance.”

Seeing someone enter the hall, Foyrath dismissed John and he left, heading through a series of short-range teleportation gates to get down to the bottom of the tower. A few hours later, John was sitting on a bed in a small room that was only eight feet by eight feet. There was a desk and a dresser crammed into the room, but thankfully the door opened outward, which gave him a few feet of space in the middle of the room.

The first thing he did when he was alone was check his plant ring to see if everything was still okay with Katrine and then organized what he knew so far. He had been tempted to ask about Katrine and Togene right away, but thought better of it when he remembered they had been betrayed. Since Katrine was safe for the moment, he thought it would be best to proceed slowly, at least until he understood the power structure in this world. His goals right now were to fit in, figure out how to track Katrine down, and figure out how to get home.

After spending a few minutes meditating, he was interrupted by a knock on his door. Frowning, he stood up and walked to the door, trying to sense what was on the other side of the door. Seeing a single figure, he opened the door and found himself facing a nervous-looking Mage with buck teeth. Giving John a hesitant smile, the Mage waved his hand.

“Hi! M… my name is Trisic. I… I saw that you just arrived today and I was wondering if you wanted to go get something to eat. The cafeteria is free for fourth- and fifth-order Mages.”

Blinking, John looked up and down the hall but didn’t see anyone else. Sensing his confusion, Trisic blushed slightly.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine too. We can do it another time.”

“No, dinner sounds fine,” John said before Trisic could turn around. “Let me drop my stuff quick.”

Everyone else John had seen had been wearing a robe, so he kept his on and put away his clothes and sword. He kept both of his daggers on his belt but adjusted their angle so they were less visible. About to walk out of the room, he looked out at Trisic.

“Do most people keep their staff with them?”

“Hmm? Oh, yes,” Trisic said, nodding and showing the rod attached to his belt. “Though most people switch to a short staff pretty soon. I can show you where to buy one if you want.”

“Thanks, my staff is fine,” John said, grabbing his staff and shutting the door behind him.

Walking together down the hall, Trisic chatted almost constantly, keeping up a steady flow of conversation as he introduced every single thing his eyes landed on. The only time he was silent was when a group of other Mages walked by, talking among themselves. Catching the hint of envy in his eyes, John turned to get a better look at the Mages, but Trisic pulled him along.

“You just arrived at the tower, right? It’s pretty impressive, isn’t it? I’m from Gorma, one of the cities to the far south. Where are you from?”

“A lower world,” John said casually, causing Trisic to glance at him in surprise.

“Oh, wow. Then you must be really talented. That’s amazing. I’ve always wanted to go to a lower world, but getting a portal is so expensive. Plus, the new accords make it really hard to get approval. But I’ve heard that lower worlds can be pretty unique. What is your world like?”

“It’s not that different from this world, actually. The density of the mana is a good bit lower, and there are no Mages above the fourth order, but otherwise I imagine it is probably about the same.”

“What about creatures? I heard that most lower worlds still have beasts, is that true?”

“Beasts? Yeah. Are there no beasts in this world?”

“No way. They were all eliminated in the Great War about fifty thousand years ago. Beasts are too dangerous. They never stop growing as long as they have mana, and the denser the mana, the faster they grow. No, they were all wiped out.”

Entering a large room with hundreds of tables, Trisic led John around to the other side of the room where there were a bunch of different sorts of food on display, sort of like a miniature market. Pointing out a few things he really enjoyed, Trisic led them to a table after they had gotten their food and they sat down together. Playing with his fork nervously, Trisic looked around a few times before he started eating, causing John to realize that something strange was going on. Rather than call out the other Mage on it, John just busied himself with his food.

He didn't actually need to eat so long as he had mana, but it would be really strange if he avoided food for long periods of time, so he thought he might as well. Biting into some sort of pastry with a savory meat filling, John gestured to Trisic.

"So, how long have you been here?"

"In the tower? A few years now. It took me a while to pass the entrance test, but I'm really excited to have made it."

"Then you've been a fourth-order Mage for a while?"

"Oh yes," Trisic said, taking a drink. "I'm almost forty now. I earned my fourth-order badge when I was twenty-eight. But the tower's standard for mana purity is sort of ridiculous."

"What do you mean by mana purity?" John asked. "I've heard other people mention it."

"Oh, do they not have an understanding of mana purity where you're from? All mana has different levels of purity, and the purer the mana, the more powerful the spells. We use a seven-level categorization. Red is the lowest, and then orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and white. You have to be at least at the yellow level if you want to get into Candle Scholar Tower. If you're new, they should have tested you for your mana purity too."

"Hmm, do they have that information written down somewhere that I could check it?"

"No, it's too private. But you test every time you move up an order, and you can pay to have it tested as well. The only thing available is regular information like what section you're in and what your name is."

"Oh? Can we look up other members of the tower? Where do we do that?"

Pointing with his fork toward one of the doors, Trisic speared a piece of potato and began to chew on it.

“We can take the portal to the admin office. I’ll show you once you’re done with your food. Have you signed up for any classes?”

“No,” John said. “I was thinking of just visiting the library for the first few weeks to try and acclimate myself to the tower.”

“That’s not a bad idea. I have really been enjoying the classes, so I’d recommend trying to get in as soon as possible. Most of them are taught by seventh-order or even eighth-order mages. In fact, later today I have a class on spell triggers that’s being taught by Calorus Fevrin!”

“Who?”

“Oh, right. You’re an outworlder. Sorry, I forgot. Calorus Fevrin is an eighth-order Mage who’s well known in the south for his spell chaining techniques. He once set up twenty-five seventh-order spells that each used the previous spell as a trigger to obliterate a whole army. I can’t even trigger one. Crazy.”

“Why doesn’t he just cast the twenty-five spells?” John asked, taking a bite out of a piece of bread.

“Are you crazy? You’d have to be in the ninth or tenth order to have that much mana,” Trisic said scornfully. “Have you ever seen a seventh-order spell?”

Shaking his head, John held up four fingers.

“Fourth order is the highest our mana system can handle.”

“Oh, right, that makes sense. Well, they take a lot. I can show you the practice field if you want. I’m sure there will be someone testing out a high-level spell. Why don’t we swing by the admin office and the testing ground, and then you can come to my class with me and check out what a class is like.”

“Are you sure about that?” John said, his eyes flickering to the edge of the room where a few Mages were gathering. “I don’t want to be a bother.”

“No bother, no bother,” Trisic said, smiling widely. “I’m happy to show you around. This place is great, but it can be really confusing if you don’t know your way around.”

“I bet. It’s huge.”

“Yeah. You know, there was a time when they didn’t have a teleportation system. It would have been terrible to get around then. If you’re done, we can put our dishes over there.”

Following Trisic’s finger, John saw an area with a bunch of racks that had dirty dishes on them. The group he had spotted earlier was hanging out

near the rack, and when Trisic saw them, he blanched slightly.

"You know, I can take your plates. That's fine. I'll just take them and meet you in the hall, okay?"

Shaking his head, John stood up and took his plate before Trisic could grab it.

"That's fine. I can get them. I'll drop them off and we can get going. I want to make sure we don't miss that class."

Without waiting for Trisic to reply, John took his plate and strolled over toward the rack and the Mages who were hanging out nearby. All of them were young, much younger than Trisic and even John. Despite that, three of them wore a badge that had five towers on it, marking them as fifth-order mages. Nodding a greeting as he walked by, John had just dropped the two plates on the rack and turned around when he saw that the group had risen and was walking over.

CHAPTER 4

Spreading out to fill up the space between the tables where John would need to walk to rejoin Trisic, the group of Mages laughed and chatted among themselves, all but one of them pretending they didn't see John there. The Mage who was looking at him was one of the three fifth-order Mages and had a wild look, with bright blue hair that was spiked up in the air and three dangling earrings in his left ear.

In no mood for drama, John gave him a friendly smile and didn't stop, even as the Mage stood right in front of him. Startled when John just walked straight into him, the Mage instinctively stepped back, allowing John to slip past him. The other Mages, who had secretly been watching to see what would happen, were also taken aback and started to move out of the way as John walked through their group.

Managing to make it all the way through without bumping into anyone, John walked up to Trisic. The buck-toothed Mage was staring at John in shock, but John just patted him on the shoulder and started walking out of the cafeteria. After looking between John's back and the group of Mages who were still trying to figure out what had just happened, Trisic hurried to catch up, his face practically glowing with amazement.

"Wow, that was incredible."

"Hmm?"

"You just… do you know who that is?! I can't believe you did that."

Shaking his head, John pointed a finger at his nose.

"Outworlder. That's the term you used, right? I don't know who anyone is."

Sobering slightly, Trisic took a deep breath.

"Well, you just did something pretty incredible. I've never seen anyone ignore Qwell Gustav that way."

"Was that the young man with the blue hair?"

"Yeah, he's one of the youngest fifth-order mages in history. He achieved the fifth order at the age of thirty!"

Realizing that John looked completely unimpressed, Trisic groaned and patted him on the shoulder.

"That's really impressive, you can take my word for it. Most people don't make fifth order until they're in their eighties or nineties."

“Really?”

“Oh yeah, anyone who can achieve fifth order before they turn fifty is considered a genius. The issue is that it requires such high mana purity. You have to be green level at least. Though I’ve heard that Qwell was born with blue-level mana purity, which explains why he’s had it so easy. He’ll only reach a barrier when he rises to the seventh order. Hah, can you imagine? I thought I was a genius by getting to the fourth order at twenty-eight, but at my current rate of refinement, I’ll probably be in my sixties or seventies by the time I break into the fifth order. Here we are, this is the admin office where you can register for your classes.”

Looking at the large hall Trisic was pointing at, John caught sight of an open desk. Walking over, he sat down and saw a small ball of light appear above it.

“Welcome. What can I do for you?”

The voice that drifted into his ears was soft and feminine, but John could tell that it wasn’t audible to anyone else because of the mana that shrouded him when he sat down in the chair.

“Are you the tower spirit?”

“I am.”

“How should I address you?” John asked, leaning forward slightly.

After a slight moment of hesitation, the tower spirit seemed to brighten slightly, though it might have been a trick of the light.

“You may call me Atavarax.”

“Pleased to meet you, Atavarax. My name is John. Can you help me look up a few people?”

“Of course. Simply place your identification on the desk and state the search terms of the individual who you would like to search for. Acceptable search terms include names, physical descriptions, and order.”

Taking out the card that Tower Master Foyrath had given him, John placed it on the desk and thought for a moment.

“John Sutton. Fourth Order.”

“Please wait while I retrieve the information,” Atavarax said, shimmering slightly.

A moment later a window was projected for John to see, showing an image of John and listing some information on him. It was little more than his name, his status as an outworlder, the date of his arrival, and his order, so he closed it after a second and asked for another search.

“Qwell Gustav.”

Once again, Atavarax projected the information up after a moment and John got to see some basic information about the blue-haired genius. In addition to the information that had been displayed for John, the projection included both the fourth and fifth order, and the dates that Qwell had achieved them. There were also a number of classes listed and the name of what John assumed was an organization. Realizing there wasn’t much useful information in the directory, John dismissed the window and then asked for one more name.

“Katrine. Young woman, specializes in wind magic. In the fourth order.”

“Please wait while I retrieve the information.”

This time, almost a full minute passed before Atavarax spoke, the smallest hint of confusion in her voice.

“Records on Katrine no longer accessible.”

Stilling, John stared at Atavarax, his brow furrowed.

“What do you mean by no longer accessible?”

Again, Atavarax hesitated for a moment before speaking.

“All records of the individual in question have been sealed.”

“How long ago were they sealed?”

“Twenty days ago.”

Doing his best to keep his emotions under control, John let out the breath he was holding and leaned forward.

“Who erased them?”

“That information does not exist in my records,” Atavarax said.

A flash of anger surged in John, causing the tower spirit to suddenly shrink, but he curbed the impulse to explode and bowed his head to the tower spirit.

“Thank you.”

“You are welcome. Please let me know if I can assist you another way.”

“No, that’s it for now,” John said, carefully erasing the conflicted feelings from his face as he started to stand up.

Pausing, he sat down again.

“Actually, can you tell me who has the authority to erase a record?”

“Any administrator at the primary researcher level or above.”

“Thanks,” John said, standing up.

Seeing that he was done, Trisic walked over and gestured to the table.

“That’s pretty impressive, isn’t it? Atavarax is the spirit that manages the tower and maintains all the records. Were you able to figure out how to use it?”

Nodding, John shifted the subject.

“Do you know how many primary researchers there are in the tower?”

“Primary researchers? There are quite a few. Each of the seven towers has its own primary researchers, so it really just depends on what topics are being studied. I think the Arcane Tower has the most, but I would say that each tower has more than a hundred. There might be a thousand or so across the tower,” Trisic said, leading the way back to the portal stone. “Come on, let’s stop by some of the other facilities and then we’ll head to class.”

Inputting their destination, Trisic nodded as he activated the portal stone, and a moment later they were standing in what looked like a massive gymnasium. The portal stone was located on a platform that overlooked the room, and John estimated it was a few miles long and at least that wide. Spread out across the floor were sectioned-off fields where he could see Mages practicing their spells. Standing at the railing that ran around the platform, John could see hundreds of spells going off like a constant barrage of fireworks. Noticing how the spells didn’t leave the confines of each of the fields, John pointed at one of the Mages who was trying to control a tiger made of flames.

“I noticed that each of the fields seems contained. Are there barriers around each field?”

“Yes. Actually, the entire thing is an enchantment that doesn’t allow any spell cast inside the field to go outside of it. I’m sure you were told the rule about not casting spells in the halls and common areas, right? Well, it’s hard to get a private lab before you reach the sixth order, so these fields provide a place for those of us under the sixth order to practice. There are a lot of tools you can rent to help you analyze your spells as well. The only downside is the lack of privacy.”

After spending a few more minutes watching the Mages practicing, Trisic and John headed for the spell triggers class. Everything in the tower was built to accommodate a lot of people, and the classrooms were no exception. Rather than a classroom, or even a lecture hall, it looked more like a theater to John, and he estimated that the seats spread out around the platform at the front could hold at least five thousand people.

To his surprise most of the seats were full when they arrived, and after finding a seat near the back, they waited for the class to start. John found himself getting quite frustrated as they waited, and he had to resist the urge to get up and leave. It felt like he was wasting time by sitting for a class, but at this point, John had no idea what else to do. His only lead was that Katrine's information had been erased from the system by someone at the primary researcher level.

The tower was massive and there were almost too many Mages to count, making it unlikely that he would even run into someone who had met Katrine. On the other hand, the primary researcher level and above designated fewer people, so John figured it would be better to approach the problem from that angle. Now it was simply a matter of getting some attention.

"Hey, Trisic," John interrupted the buck-toothed Mage's prattling, "is there somewhere I can learn new spells?"

"New spells? Of course," Trisic said. "Though it costs a good bit of money. There are a bunch of shops on the main level. That's where you'll find the wand and staff shops I was telling you about. Oh, there is the library too, but most of those spells are really out of date."

"There are free spells in the library?"

"Yeah, most of the tower masters leave all their spells below the seventh order to the library when they retire. Like I said, most of them are out of date, but if you don't have any money, they're not a bad choice. They're also helpful for reference. Oh! Here comes Master Fevrin! Shhh."

The room fell silent as a middle-aged man with slicked-back silver hair entered the room, his expression cold. From the way all of the other Mages' eyes were locked onto him, it was clear he was both respected and feared, causing John to look forward to the lesson. Unfortunately, it turned out to be more a demonstration of Master Fevrin's skill than an actual lesson, and after listening to the eighth-order Mage blabber about his accomplishments for twenty minutes, John checked out. John only realized that the class had ended when, an hour and a half later, Trisic let out a loud sigh.

"That was so great! Wasn't that great?"

"Hm? Oh, yeah," John said, standing up. "Hey, can we go up and talk to Master Fevrin?"

"Y… you want to talk to him?" Trisic asked, his eyes going wide.

“It looks like he’s standing near the stage, waiting for people to come and talk to him,” John said, pointing at the bottom of the room where Master Fevrin stood, his expression aloof.

“You can’t… you can’t just go up to him.”

“Actually, I think I will.”

Walking down the stairs, John waited for the crush of people leaving to abate slightly before he cut through the crowd toward Master Fevrin, Trisic trailing behind him in a panic. The other Mages in the class obviously thought similarly to Trisic, and apart from shooting glances at the eighth-order Mage, they carefully avoided the space around him. Paying no attention to the clear social convention, John walked up to Master Fevrin and bowed.

“Thank you for your lecture, Master Fevrin.”

Surprised that anyone had approached him, Calorus Fevrin looked at John and nodded.

“I hope you were able to glean something from it. I know it was a bit advanced,” he said dryly, clearly doubtful that a fourth-order Mage could have understood more than a fraction of the subject.

John, who had barely paid attention to anything after the twenty-minute mark, rapidly ran back through Mental Model, picking out a few key pieces that his skill had identified as Master Fevrin had droned on. Bowing again, he spoke seriously, as if he had been enlightened.

“Your explanation of the Gustav-Einserf theorem was illuminating. I had never considered applying it to Hoyrif’s Triple spell trigger, but it seems to solve the lag-time problem perfectly.”

Behind John, Trisic’s mouth dropped open, unable to understand a single thing John had just said. John didn’t actually understand it either. He was simply regurgitating some of the babble he had heard Master Fevrin spouting to try and warm up the conversation. It clearly worked, because Master Fevrin lost the cold expression on his face and shifted to look at John directly, his eyes brightening.

“Forgive me, I didn’t think anyone would catch that connection,” he said. “What did you say your name was?”

“John. John Sutton.”

“I don’t know that I’m familiar with you, John. Who are you studying with?”

Briefly glancing back at Trisic, who looked like he was about to have a stroke, John shook his head as he answered Master Fevrin's question.

"I'm not studying with anyone. I actually just arrived a little while ago. I don't mean to take up your time, but I just wanted to express my appreciation."

"Ah, you're welcome," Master Fevrin said, clearly interested in John, "where are you from?"

"I'm an outworlder," John replied. "I'm heading to the library right now, but I'll definitely sign up for your next class."

Taken aback by John's calm demeanor, Master Fevrin was at a bit of a loss. He wanted to talk to John more, but it wouldn't do for someone of his status to pay attention to a brand-new fourth-order Mage, so he mumbled out a reply as John turned away.

"Oh, right. Great."

With Trisic in tow, John left the classroom and they took the nearby portal to the library wing of the tower. Later that night, after walking around with Trisic for the day, John sat in his room, breathing in the thick mana that permeated the tower. As he meditated his thoughts were anything but calm, but he forced them into order. Bringing himself to a state of calm, he checked his ring for any changes, smiling when he didn't feel any. Though it felt like he had just wasted his first day, John knew that rushing wasn't going to get him anywhere. The time he spent with Trisic helped him understand the situation he was facing and allowed John to come up with a plan. Now it was just a matter of carrying it out.

CHAPTER 5

Early in the morning, John headed for the tower's library. He hadn't slept at all, opting to continue his meditation throughout the night and only tearing himself away when the mana in his room began to thin out. His body still felt strangely dry, as if it were an empty sponge and the mana that he had pulled in barely satisfied the growing hunger awakening in his cells. This feeling was strange to John, but he had an instinctive understanding of what was going on. Ever since he had learned and adapted the draconic breathing method, his body had been refining the mana that surrounded him, purifying and compressing it.

Yet even when he was in the forbidden lands where Mages warred, the mana density around John was never high enough to keep up with his ability to process it. Here, however, he was able to drink in more mana than he could handle with a simple breath. That saturation brought a level of comfort as his mana-starved cells reveled in the mana filtering through them. That had worked for a few hours, but as he meditated and more and more mana was refined and stored inside his body, he found that the ambient mana in the air was dropping.

Not wanting to cause a scene by completely absorbing the mana around his room, John stopped his meditation session in the hopes that the mana levels would recover sufficiently for him to try again later.

If it doesn't, I'm going to need to find another place to meditate.

The library was mostly empty, though that just meant there were hundreds of Mages in John's line of sight, rather than thousands. One of the things John was having trouble adapting to was the sheer number of Mages the tower held, but he had noticed that the standards for Mages was different in this world. He hadn't noticed it until he got close to Trisic, but despite being at the fourth order, or sage level, John was sure that any sage level Mage from his world could have wiped the floor with the buck-toothed Mage.

A sense of weakness pervaded the Mages, as if their bodies would break at the slightest touch. Even their mana seemed weaker than it should have been, though that might have had something to do with their level of mana purity. As John had acclimated to this world, that feeling of brittleness had

grown, but he wasn't sure if it was just his imagination. Sitting down at one of the empty tables, John saw the small ball of light appearing in front him.

"Hello, Atavarax. How are you today?"

"Good morning, John Sutton. I am doing well. How are you?"

"Good. Can you help me find some spells?"

"Of course. Are you looking for spells to reference, or spells to learn?"

Not quite understanding the question, John's forehead furrowed and he leaned forward.

"What's the difference?"

"Spells that you intend to learn and add to your personal spell repertoire contain little more than the incantations, triggers, and effects. On the other hand, much has been researched and written about many of the spells, and if you were attempting to research a particular branch of magic, you might find the work of previous Mages helpful."

"Ah, right. That makes sense. Can you give me everything you have on dimensional gates?"

"Of course. Please wait while I retrieve the information you're requesting."

Atavarax shimmered slightly as a spell that John didn't recognize surrounded the tower spirit, and a moment later, a stack of volumes appeared on the desk. There were close to forty books piled up on the desk, causing John's eyes to widen in surprise.

"This is the first batch of the beginner texts on dimensional gates," Atavarax said with a hum. "When you are finished with them, I can fetch the next batch."

"Hold on, how many batches are there?" John asked, picking up one of the books.

"Nine."

"And these are just the beginner texts? It appears I need to narrow my search a bit. I'd like to establish a gate myself that could take me back home. How do I do that?"

Hesitating, Atavarax pulsed with light, showing that the tower spirit was thinking about the question. After a moment the spell fired again and the books on the desk vanished, replaced with three volumes. The first was titled *An Introduction to Void Gates* and covered all of the basic information about how the dimensional gates worked. Next to it was an impressive-looking leather-bound book titled *The Principles of Transference*. It was a

more technical explanation behind the magic the gates used. Finally, the third book was even smaller and looked more like a technical field manual than a scholarly book, but it got John the most excited.

"*Void Gates: A Practical Guide on Building Your Own*. Tower Master Azewix Thutrix Valehawk," John read out loud. "Perfect. This is exactly what I'm looking for."

"I am happy to be of service," Atavarax said. "Do not hesitate to ask if you need something else."

As the spirit faded away, John opened up the small book. It had a simple drawing of a dimensional door on it and was bound in gray cloth, looking much less impressive than the embossed leather covers of the other two books. As he began to read, John quickly realized why Atavarax had given him the other books. There were too many terms he didn't understand and too many principles he had never encountered before.

It's never easy, is it? Fine. I guess I'll start at the beginning.

Opening up *An Introduction to Void Gates*, John began to read it in earnest, setting Mental Model to work on synthesizing all of the information he was absorbing. For the next three hours he read the book from cover to cover twice, making sure he wasn't missing anything. Though there was nothing particularly difficult about what they were talking about, John could tell he was getting the simplest and most dumbed-down version of the explanations. Once he felt confident with the material in the introductory book, he began on the second one, *The Principles of Transference*.

This took him longer, and before he knew it, almost eight hours had passed. By this time, John had been sitting in the library for nearly twelve hours, and though he was too focused to catch the strange glances that were being sent his way, it was becoming impossible to ignore Trisic, who had been lurking nearby for the last hour. John's mind was practically bursting with information, but he felt like he had gained a good understanding of the principles behind the dimensional gates.

It would take him at least a few days before he could fully digest the tremendous amount of knowledge he had absorbed, so John checked out the small gray book and then stood up from his desk, stretching to erase the stiffness he felt. Seeing that he was done, Trisic practically pounced on him.

"Hey, John! Fancy running into you here. It's impressive you're studying already. Most people take a while to get used to everything, but

here you are. On your second day! No wonder you've hit the fourth order at such a young age. How old are you, by the way?"

Deciding not to point out that Trisic had clearly been looking for him when he had entered the library, John patted the buck-toothed Mage on the shoulder.

"How are you today, Trisic?"

"Ah, I'm doing pretty well. Today's a free day, so I am going to work in a little while, but if you haven't eaten yet, we should go grab a meal."

John could practically feel the earnestness radiating off of Trisic, so he nodded.

"Sure. Maybe while we do that you could explain some things to me. Like, what do you do for a job? And what sort of currency does the tower use? I haven't seen anything that costs money yet."

"Ah, was that not introduced by your guide?" Trisic asked, leading the way to the nearby portal stone.

"The guide mentioned that gold couldn't be used here and only mana gems could be, but I don't know what a mana gem is."

"Oh, right. You probably don't have them in your world. They're really just a form of absolutely pure mana that has been condensed and stamped with the symbol of the tower."

Getting something out of the pouch at his side, Trisic held out his hand, revealing a glittering crystal that was shaped like a hexagonal coin. Picking it up, John's expression was impassive as he examined it closely. If he wasn't mistaken, it looked suspiciously similar to the mana crystals he created, just with a specific form. The mana that filled the coin wasn't quite as pure as John's, but it was the most pure form of mana John had seen since arriving at Candle Scholar Tower. Handing it back to Trisic, John shook his head.

"Aren't you tempted to try and absorb it? I mean, that's a whole lot of pure mana right there."

Laughing, Trisic put the coin away in his pouch.

"Of course. And a lot of people have tried. But it's too pure. This mana is violet-level purity, and if your body isn't already at the violet level, absorbing it will kill you. And if you are, the number of coins you would need to absorb is too high to be worth it. Better to just meditate. I guess, if you had a lot of coins, you could absorb them all at once, but that seems like a waste. Anyway, this is the currency all Mages use. I work in one of

the material-processing labs, preparing material for experiments, and I make about twenty coins a day. It's not much, but since all our food and lodging is covered, it isn't too bad."

Getting their food, John and Trisic found a table that wasn't occupied and sat down. Trisic had the habit of looking around a lot while he was eating which John found distracting, but it soon became clear that it was more of an unconscious behavior than anything intentional. As they ate, Trisic chatted about practically anything that came to his mind while John mostly listened. Eventually, he began to steer the conversation, trying to gain some new information.

"You want to see some examples of higher-level magic? Sure. We can either go to the testing ground, or we can sign up for a practical class that teaches a group of spells."

"Is there a restriction on what order of spells you can try to learn?" John asked, spearing the last bite of his meal with his fork.

"No, not officially, but it isn't a great idea to try to learn magic above your order until you're ready," Trisic said. "After all, the concepts in magic all build on one another, making it almost impossible to understand the principles of a sixth-order spell in the fourth order. I mean, I could try to learn a sixth-order spell, but I would be missing a lot of important context by trying to skip the fifth order. Does that make sense?"

Shaking his head, John put his fork down.

"Honestly? No. Spells are just spells. As long as you can follow the incantation and power it, why would it matter if you understand the principles behind it?"

Shocked by John's question, Trisic wanted to refute it but he seemed at a loss. Technically, John was correct in that activating spells did not require an intimate knowledge of how the magic actually worked.

"Um, I mean, that's true. But even if you don't have to understand the principles, you need your mana to be pure enough to activate it."

"Do you?" John asked, his eyebrows rising slightly. "Can't you just take longer to infuse your mana into it? You have a yellow level of mana purity, right? Which means, if you try to activate a fifth-order spell, which requires a green level of purity, it will take you four or five times as long to power it. But you could eventually do it, as long as your total supply of mana was sufficient, right?"

“Yeah, but for it to count as a cast, it has to be completed in a certain amount of time,” Trisic protested.

“Oh, I didn’t realize there were time limits,” John said, nodding. “Still a lot to learn. You said you’re going to work, right? I think I might see if I can find a class that teaches some higher-level spells. It would be good to have them as a reference.”

After saying goodbye, John headed for the administrative office and got a list of all the classes that were running that day. After a bit of negotiation with the Mage in charge of registering for classes, John managed to talk his way into observing a class being taught by an eighth-order mage on the use of wind magic, and half an hour later he was standing at the back of a small classroom, waiting for the teacher to arrive.

Unlike the massive lecture hall, this classroom was much smaller and looked more like a lab. There were fifteen tables spread out throughout the room, each with a variety of equipment on them as well as magic circles etched into the table tops. Since the class was full, John stood by the wall while he waited for everyone to arrive. When the door opened and an elegant woman who looked to be in her eighties strolled in, all but two of the tables were completely filled up.

John had convinced the administrator to let him attend the class on the condition that he could convince the teacher to allow him to stay, so as the elderly Mage put her things down on the podium at the front of the room, John made his way to the front, soon becoming the focus of the class’s attention. Every single person he had seen so far had a sixth-order badge on their robes, and John’s lack of a badge made him stand out like a sore thumb. When the teacher looked over him and noticed he didn’t even have his fifth-order badge, her expression turned frosty.

“What do you want?”

Bowing slightly, John didn’t react to the cold tone the teacher was using and instead kept his voice calm.

“I do not mean to be a disruption, Master Jennic, but I would like permission to participate in your class, at least for today.”

“What order are you?” Master Jennic asked.

“I’m not sure,” John replied, shaking his head. “I have just arrived, and the world I come from doesn’t use the same system as the tower. Part of the reason I am asking to observe your class is to better understand where I sit.”

CHAPTER 6

A faint expression of interest flickered across Master Jennic's face at John's words and she nodded. It wasn't entirely unheard of for geniuses to arrive from other worlds, though the number of outworlders was never very high.

"That's reasonable. What order were you assigned to when you arrived?"

"The fourth order."

"So, what's the issue?"

"The magic is too simple," John said, shrugging. "Though I only know spells that are equivalent to the fourth order, I'm pretty sure I would be able to use spells that are more complex if I knew them."

Snorting, Master Jennic shook her head.

"Fine. This is a practical class on the use of wind magic, and since we're missing a few students today, you can sit at one of the empty seats. You are not permitted to ask any questions during the class, and if you can't activate the spell we're studying by the end of the class, you won't be welcome back."

Bowing his head in thanks, John took a seat at one of the empty tables. Just like the tables in the library and the administrative office, the tables in the classroom were connected with the tower's spirit, but before he could greet Atavarax, Master Jennic tapped on the lectern to get the class's attention and then began her lesson.

"Today we will continue our discussion of precalculating mana density in wind spells according to Eferri's Theorem."

Settling in to listen to Master Jennic, John soon found himself unable to keep up with what she was teaching. There were simply too many terms and other references he didn't know. As the class continued, it became more and more apparent to him that he wasn't equipped to engage in discussion of this level, and occasionally he caught the smirks and glances on the faces of the other students around him. Ignoring the mocking looks, John continued to focus on what was being taught, capturing all of it and doing his best to decipher the parts he didn't understand.

After about an hour of lecture, Master Jennic began the practical part of class, having each of the students use their tables to create a miniaturized version of a levitation spell. Though John had only understood every fourth

word or so, he was able to understand the levitation spell without any trouble. The goal seemed to be to calculate precisely how much mana needed to be gathered to support an object or individual, and though John didn't understand how to use the theorem Master Jennic had been explaining, it was a simple matter for his Mental Model to brute-force the problem.

Picking up the block Master Jennic had given him, John placed it in the center of the magic circle on the table and glanced around, seeing that the rest of the class was activating the table by adding mana to the circle. Unaware that she was watching him, John's fingers flickered and he mumbled under his breath, casting the levitation spell that had been written on the board. He was supposed to be using the theorem to calculate the optimal amount of mana to use without wasting any, which was an interesting exercise to John, as it had been years since he had worried about wasting mana, so he spent a few minutes staring at the floating block.

Around the room, many of the Mages had already completed their task, and their attention naturally turned to John to see how he would do. When they saw that he wasn't performing the follow-up spell to generate the calculations, they laughed to themselves, exchanging looks with each other. Oblivious, John's forehead twitched and he waved his hand, causing the levitation spell to end. Walking over, the Master Jennic was about to say something when she saw John tap on the table with his finger, reactivating the levitation spell.

This time, however, rather than simply lift up into the air, the block jumped up and fixed itself in place, not moving in the slightest. Normally, anything that was levitating would have a slight tremble or fluctuation in its positioning as the mana density around it was adjusted to keep it in the air, but since John was adding the optimal amount of mana, the block appeared to have been frozen in place in midair. A green light radiated from the block, indicating that it had reached a point of perfect stability and alerting the teacher that John had succeeded.

Surprised, she hurried over and double-checked the enchantment on the desk. When she saw that everything was operating correctly, a smile lit up her face and she patted John on the shoulder. The levitation spell they were using was a fairly standard fifth-order spell, so at the very least, John should be in the fifth order.

“Well done! I noticed you didn’t activate Eferri’s Theorem. How did you do the calculation?”

Shrugging slightly, John tapped his temple with his finger.

“I did a mental calculation.”

“A mental calculation? I… I see. Tell me, can you explain a practical application of this theorem?”

Nodding, John snapped his fingers, casting the Wind Blade spell inside the spell circle on the table. Normally, a wind blade was practically invisible because of how quickly it moved, but because it was trapped inside the testing field, it appeared to be a rapidly spinning circle of wind. As John focused on it, the circular blade appeared to shrink in on itself, increasing its rotation speed and growing even fainter.

“Using the optimal amount of mana for a spell increases the effect by reducing things like drag. By feeding it the right amount of mana, the rotational speed increases, as there is no overflow to disperse the force in other directions.”

A gleam lit up Master Jennic’s eyes as she watched John’s Wind Blade spell operating.

“Exactly! Here, try this spell and see if you can optimize it.”

Using her finger, Master Jennic wrote out a spell on the desk for John to attempt. Though he had never seen the spell before, it only took John a moment to understand it. Through creating a specific pattern of air rotation, the spell was designed to create a wall of air that would return physical attacks back to the place they had originated. Blinking a few times as he read over it, John nodded and his Mental Model ran through a number of iterations of it in rapid succession. Focusing his attention on the table, John erased the Wind Blade and cast this new spell into the enchanted circle.

With a whoosh, a flat plane of air condensed, creating a glassy plane that hung in the air. There were no fluctuations in the surface of the plane, making it appear as if a sheet of glass had just popped into existence. Dumbfounded, Master Jennic could not believe what she was seeing. She had just given John a sixth-order spell, one that she had created herself after years of study, and he had replicated it in less than a minute. If she wasn’t absolutely sure that no one but her had ever seen this spell, she would have suspected he already knew about it.

As an eighth-order Mage, Master Jennic had seen a lot in her life. Never, however, had she seen a fourth-order Mage who was able to learn a

sixth-order spell just by looking at it once. Frowning, she wiped away the spell and wrote down another spell. A staple of the seventh order, Cloak of the North Wind had been created by one of the previous tower masters of the Wind Tower. It was a must for any seventh-order Mage who studied wind magic, but like all spells after the sixth order, required significant understanding about the nature of wind in order to cast.

This time, John took a minute longer, but that was it. Reciting the spell, he cast it into the testing circle, creating a cloak that appeared as if it was made of a raging, icy wind. No sooner had the spell appeared, than Master Jennic realized that the cast was practically perfect. Despite the cloak's fierce appearance, no excess mana leaked from it.

If John was a normal Mage, it would have taken him until he was between eighty and ninety years old to reach the fifth order, and at least as long again to achieve the sixth order. Though they looked to be in their thirties and forties thanks to the anti-aging effect of mana, there wasn't another person in the classroom who was below the age of one hundred and ten. Master Jennic herself was considered quite young for a Mage in the eighth order at three hundred and seventy years of age, so to see John, who was not even thirty, casting a seventh-order spell was equal parts thrilling and terrifying.

Wiping away the Cloak of the North Wind spell, Master Jennic wasn't sure if the slight tremble in her hand was because of terror or excitement. She had a strong impulse to see if John could understand and cast an eighth-order spell but hesitated, as she didn't know what it would do to her own confidence if he actually succeeded. Taking a breath, she was about to throw caution to the wind when the door opened and someone strode through the door, causing the class to fall silent. Most of the students had begun to crowd around John's table, trying to get a good look at what he was doing, but now they all fell back as a fierce-looking man strode up to John.

"Tower master!" Master Jennic said, her voice surprised. "What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Jennic. I hope I'm not interrupting your class," Ailred Qinlen, tower master of the Wind Tower said, nodding to the panicking teacher.

"No, not at all. We were just in the middle of the practical portion of the class. You're not disrupting us at all. Is there anything we can help you with?"

“No, no, I’m just here to see John,” Tower Master Qinlen said, giving John a friendly smile. “Atavarax alerted me that a fourth-order Mage was casting seventh-order spells and I was curious.”

Bowing his head slightly to the tower master, John didn’t miss the flash of irritation in Tower Master Qinlen’s eyes at his lack of respect. Master Jennic must have seen it as well, but before she could say anything, the tower master smiled and patted John on the shoulder.

“From what Atavarax has said, your ability to cast seventh-level spells is practically perfect. Can you show me?”

Shaking his head slightly, John dismissed the Cloak of the North Wind he had cast in the test field.

“I’m sorry, I only know one seventh-level spell,” John said, his voice calm.

“No problem,” Tower Master Qinlen said, his lips twitching. “I know a few spells you can use. Here.”

Stepping up to the desk, the tower master began to write out a complicated spell on it. The surrounding students all tried to edge closer to get a good look without appearing to be too eager, but Tower Master Qinlen didn’t seem to mind. Finishing it off with a flourish, he tapped on the desk.

“This is one of the first spells an eighth-order wind Mage learns. Fractal Image is a more powerful version of the fifth-order spell Mirror Self that allows for more clones and will allow the caster to make any of the clones the true self. See if you can cast it.”

Looking at the spell, John ran through it a few times in his mind, committing it to memory. It was significantly more complicated than the seventh-order spell he had cast, but John was quickly realizing that, to him, there was little difference between the spells. Ultimately, all the spells he had seen came down to one thing—how well he could control mana. Watching him in silence, Tower Master Qinlen didn’t rush him, content to give John the time he needed to complete the spell. The same was true for the others who were watching, and the room was shrouded in silence while John examined the spell.

Muttering the arcane commands under his breath, John’s fingers began to flash, completing the motions the spell required as he built the spell construct. His actions and words were incomprehensible to everyone in the room besides the tower master and Master Jennic, but even they found themselves having trouble keeping up with the speed at which John was

casting the spell. Typically, spells like Fractal Image were too hard to cast in the heat of a battle and would be precast on enchanted items or staves, giving the Mage a way to activate the spell instantly when they needed it.

Yet John only took a dozen seconds to cast a spell that would have taken Master Jennic an equal number of minutes, and with a flash, his body split into six identical copies. One by one, the multiple Johns looked down at their hands in wonder, a smile of genuine enjoyment flickering across his six faces. After a moment, five of the figures merged together, while the sixth split up into a dozen more people. Letting out a laugh, all the Johns looked at each other and then walked back into each other, collapsing into a single figure.

"That is an amazing spell," John said, giving it another look.

"H… how…" Master Jennic stuttered, pointing a trembling finger at John.

She was considered one of the geniuses of the Wind Tower and had learned that spell many years ago, but she could still only divide into a maximum of five figures. Watching John effortlessly transform into dozens, she was so shocked she didn't know what to think. Coughing lightly, Tower Master Qinlen suddenly found himself in the same dilemma Master Jennic had been in a few minutes before.

The ease with which John had handled Fractal Image seemed to suggest he might be above the eighth order, but even the tower master was only a ninth-order mage, and if he were to give John a ninth-order spell, he could only give John one of his personal spells. On the off chance that John could actually cast it, the tower master would lose any prestige he had. Already over five hundred years old, he felt like he was looking at a monster, as John wasn't even thirty years old. Wracking his brain for a way out of this situation, Tower Master Qinlen shook his head. He was wasting time thinking about something inconsequential when there was a tremendous opportunity in front of him.

"John, you are clearly a genius when it comes to wind magic. What would you think about coming and studying under me directly? The Wind Tower has a nearly endless amount of knowledge and wisdom revolving around wind magic, and I would be honored to help guide you in exploring it."

Hesitating for a moment, John was about to speak when the door was kicked open with a bang and a man in a robe that burned with ethereal

flames stormed into the room, his bellow shaking the room.

“Don’t even try it, Ailred, or I’ll burn your tower to the ground!”

CHAPTER 7

"Mr. Sutton. It's good to see you again."

For the second time in two days, John was standing in the fantastical office of Foyrath the Seer, master of the Arcane Tower. Just like last time, the other tower masters were there as well, but this time they showed none of the disappointment or dismissal that had colored their expressions before. Instead, John could detect a hint of greed. Tower Master Glyn and Tower Master Qinlen had nearly gotten into a fight before Tower Master Foyrath had appeared and ordered everyone to her office with a few not-so-subtle threats. When the four of them arrived, the rest of the tower masters were there, and John quickly found himself being grilled by seven ninth-order Mages.

So far, John was not impressed with the tower masters, and apart from Foyrath, none of them gave him a sense of suppression at all. When he had first arrived, John had felt like a cub in front of the tower masters, but in two short days, that sense of danger had all but faded away.

[Query: Why is the aura of the tower masters weakening?]

[Answer: It is not. Rather than saying they are weakening, it would be accurate to say that your own aura is solidifying. Mana saturation in your body was at less than ten percent when you arrived. Mana saturation is now approaching twenty-five percent. It is estimated that when you reach forty percent, none of the tower masters will be able to suppress your aura any longer.]

Simply by breathing in this upper world, John was growing stronger, and while that was a welcome thing, he was starting to grow concerned about what that meant for when he returned to the valley in the lower world. Lost in thought, it wasn't until Foyrath cleared her throat that John snapped out of his thoughts.

"Mr. Sutton?"

"Ah, my apologies. It's nice to see you too."

"How have you been finding the tower?"

“It’s impressive,” John said. “I can honestly say I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I’m glad you are enjoying it. As you undoubtedly realize, we’ve dragged you here because of your recent display of astonishing magical talent. The other day you said that the magic system of your world only goes up to the fourth order, is that right? Is it true that you’ve never seen a higher-order spell?”

Shrugging, John looked around at the tower masters, who were all leaning in to hear his answer.

“I saw the gate that brought me here, but that’s it.”

“And yet, you can cast higher-order spells with ease,” Toross, the tower master of the Earth Tower said, her voice low and gravelly.

Shrugging again, John didn’t bother answering.

“He can cast wind spells with ease,” Qinlen said, clarifying the situation. “Which is why he should join the Wind Tower.”

“But his main element is fire,” Glyn snapped. “We can all feel it just by looking at him. He should be joining the Fire Tower.”

A gentle-looking woman who had introduced herself as Ryllae, master of the Water Tower, lifted her hand and a spell was rapidly written out in the air.

“John, can you cast this spell?”

Looking at the water that had formed the words, John was impressed with Ryllae’s level of control. It was clear she had an incredibly high level of control over her chosen element. A few moments later, the eighth-order Surging Tempest began to fill the room, causing all of the tower masters to splutter in annoyance. Before the swelling rain could do any real damage, John dismissed the spell and glanced around at the tower masters, who were staring at him in shock.

It was as if Ryllae’s challenge broke open the floodgates, and one after another, the tower masters began to test John’s abilities. Each had a spell for him to test out, and one after another, John easily cast them, never taking more than a few minutes. By this point, all seven tower masters were numb to his astonishing display, and when Foyrath was the only one left, a faint sense of depression had set in. John had been able to handle every spell they had shown him with ease. While they all liked to believe that they would be able to do the same, there was no way they could do it outside of the element they specialized in.

Standing in the center of the room, performing the spells, John was just as depressed. He hadn't expected to be equally adept with every element, but reality had proven otherwise. No matter what spell he saw, it felt simple to him. Yet far from being excited, he was beginning to understand just how deep of a hold the dragon in his soul had on him. Some of his ease with the different spells undoubtedly came from his maxed-out Mental Model skill and another part came from his Mana Control, but it was becoming increasingly clear that his insight into the elements was coming from his mana pool, where Farroutef the Deceiver slumbered quietly.

"Your display is beyond impressive, Mr. Sutton."

"You can call me John."

Smiling slightly, Foyrath nodded.

"John, then. Since you are new to our world, please allow me to explain something. You have mastered every eighth-order spell we have given to you in an abnormally short amount of time. This suggests that your skill actually lies in the ninth order. However, in our system, ninth-order spells are not spells that can be shared. Instead, to move from the eighth to ninth order, one must create a spell of their own."

"I see. Tell me, are there many ninth-order Mages in this world?" John asked, looking around.

"There are at least a few dozen," Foyrath replied, understanding what John was getting at. "But until you can show us a ninth-order spell, you will be counted as an eighth-order Mage."

Waving her hand, Foyrath caused a badge to drop out of the air and hover in front of John. Recognizing that it was the work of the tower spirit, John bowed slightly to the badge and then took it, seeing the eight towers on it. A slight sense of relief filled the room when John took the badge and a subtle tension eased.

"Now, someone of your strength would not come here for no reason," Foyrath said, her lips curving up in a slight smile. "Would you care to enlighten us as to why you have come to Candle Scholar Tower?"

Impressed by the wisdom of the tower master, John nodded his head as he pinned the badge onto his robe.

"I have come to find my companions who should have arrived here a few months ago. A dark-haired beauty in the fourth order who uses wind magic, named Katrine, and an elderly non-Mage magic user named Togene."

Still smiling, Foyrath nodded.

“That should be simple enough. Atavarax, has anyone of those names and descriptions been registered to the tower in the last four months?”

With a whirring sound a glowing ball of energy appeared in the middle of the room, floating in front of John.

“Yes. One woman named Katrine has been registered.”

“Marvelous. Please call her here.”

“I’m sorry, Katrine was assigned a mission and has not yet returned.”

“A mission?” Glyn said, leaning forward with a frown. “What sort of mission?”

“That information is currently sealed,” Atavarax replied. “Requesting authority to unseal it.”

“Request granted,” Glyn growled, his expression souring further.

“Katrine has been assigned to an investigation team looking for artifacts in the Windstar Ruins. Contact was lost with the team three days after they departed.”

The strained atmosphere that had vanished when John had accepted the eighth-order badge flooded back into the room with a vengeance as his expression turned cold. Even though his body language looked relaxed, the tower masters suddenly felt like they were standing around a powerful tiger who was simply waiting for the chance to pounce.

“Is it common for a fourth-order Mage to be sent on a mission a week after arriving here?” John asked, his voice entirely too even.

He was managing to keep a tight leash on his emotions because he already knew the outcome, but hearing Atavarax’s words made his fury flare. Shaking her head, Ryllae spoke up, her soft voice bringing some measure of calm to the tension in the room.

“No. It is entirely out of the ordinary. Only badged Mages, those in the fifth order and up, should be eligible for a mission like that.”

“Atavarax, who issued the mission?” Foyrath asked.

“The mission is a standing mission, issued four years ago by Tower Master Zilric,” the tower spirit replied.

Immediately, all eyes turned to the cloaked Mage who served as tower master for the Darkness Tower. Nodding his head, Zilric took his hood down, revealing his pale face. Speaking in a whisper, he still managed to make his voice heard everywhere in the room.

“I recognize that mission,” he said, his slightly sharp teeth reminding John of a shark. “It has been attempted a dozen times, all to no effect. I was leaving it up in the hopes that someone would be able to help me achieve my objective. The ruin has many monsters and traps, but all of that should be in the description of the mission. Atavarax, who put the team together?”

“Feno Carvaris, eighth-order Mage of the Wind Tower, registered the team. It had six members.”

Paling as everyone looked at him, Tower Master Qinlen frowned.

“Call Feno here,” he snapped, only for his face to fall further when Atavarax replied.

“I’m sorry, Mage Carvaris is not available. He left the tower two weeks ago and has not yet returned.”

“Who is Mage Carvaris?” Toross asked.

“Mage Carvaris is the seventh seat of the Wind Tower; he is four hundred and twenty-seven years old. He achieved the eighth order twenty-eight years ago at the age of three hundred and ninety-nine years. He primarily participates in research on ancient artifacts.”

“Three hundred and ninety-nine? Isn’t that convenient,” Glyn sneered.

Noticing that John’s forehead was furrowed, Ryllae explained the significance to him.

“Life spans are limited, and a seventh-order mage cannot live past four hundred years of age. For eighth-order Mages, it is six hundred, and for the ninth order it is eight hundred and fifty years.”

“Is there a tenth order?”

“Supposedly, yes. There are mentions in ancient works about those who had reached the penultimate stage and achieved a limitless lifespan, akin to the immortal god beasts, but to our knowledge, those are just stories.”

“We can talk about myths later,” Qinlen said, his expression dour. “Let’s get to the bottom of what is going on with Carvaris. Atavarax, do you know where he’s gone?”

“No, he did not inform me before leaving. I have recorded him leaving the tower through a gate, but nothing else.”

Clearly furious, the master of the Wind Tower clenched his armrest so tightly it started to crack and wind started to pick up around him. Trying to keep himself under control, he turned to Foyrath.

“Perform a divination for me. I will bear all costs.”

“Are you serious? A divination on an eighth-order mage is no small task,” Foyrath said, frowning.

“I might be able to save you the trouble,” John said, causing everyone to look at him. “Does the name Cabal of the Broken Gate mean anything to you?”

Drawing in a sharp breath, Qinlen leaned back in his chair, and the other tower masters had a similar response. Smiling slightly, John looked around the room.

“I assume I can take that as a yes. My companions were betrayed to that group. Presumably by one of your eighth-order mages.”

An uncomfortable silence fell over the room as the tower masters tried to process everything. While it was not a sure thing that Feno Carvaris had been the one to force Katrine to go on the mission or that he had betrayed the team to the Cabal, it was looking likely from his suspicious actions. Furthermore, no one was quite sure what to do with John. He stood in the middle of the group with supreme confidence and spoke as if he was absolute, but as much as they disliked his attitude, there was something about him that made his actions feel natural.

“The Cabal of the Broken Gate is a powerful group of Mages, warriors, and cutthroats,” Foyrath said with a sigh. “They are brutal and have many connections. They are not a group we can afford to make enemies with.”

Laughing lightly, John shook his head and took a small step forward. Tapping himself on the chest, he smiled widely.

“I don’t care who they are. They’ve harmed my friends, and they’ll soon discover that was a fatal mistake. As will anyone who helped them.”

Bristling, Qinlen stood up from his chair, mana starting to gather around the tower master.

“Are you aiming that at someone in particular?”

Slowly turning his head until he was looking straight at Qinlen, John lost any hint of a smile.

“Are you admitting to harming my friends?”

“I don’t even know what they look like, let alone who they are,” Qinlen snarled, “but you have a lot of big words for being as weak as you are. I grow tired of your disrespect. Just because you’re a genius doesn’t mean that you—”

“Enough.”

The word cut through the air, piercing the growing mana that surrounded Qinlen and causing him to deflate. It carried a stifling pressure that caused the whole room to fall into a quagmire. Turning to look at the man who had just spoken, John realized he had been mistaken. He had assumed that Foyrath was the strongest person in the room, as she was the only one who could make him feel any pressure, but now as he matched gazes with the white-haired old man who had spoken, he realized he had missed someone.

Sitting near the back of the room, the old man was portly and seemed to wear a perpetual smile on his round face, looking for all the world like a cheerful grandfather. Yet a closer look revealed a dozen powerful magical artifacts scattered around his person. Up until this point his aura had been hidden, or at least partially concealed, but now that he stopped restraining it, the sense of oppression flowed out into the room, causing everyone to freeze. Meeting John's gaze, the white-haired old man smiled cheerfully and spoke in a voice that was at complete odds with the heavy aura he released.

"Hello, John. My name is Eoan. I am the tower master of the Light Tower."

CHAPTER 8

John didn't know what a tenth-order Mage might be like, but he could imagine they would have an aura like Eoan. The tower master didn't look threatening on the surface, but as soon as he released his aura, John knew that the only way he would have any hope of surviving in a fight against the white-haired old man was by using the dragon flames in his mana pool. From the way the rest of the tower masters backed down, it was clear John wasn't the only one who thought that way.

"I don't know that we have ever found ourselves in a situation like this," Eoan said, shaking his head. "Typically those who arrive from lower worlds are not as skilled with magic as you are, and to my knowledge, we have never had anyone appear above the sixth order. In fact, it has long been thought that if a higher order Mage were to go to a lower world without restricting their mana, they would condemn it to a fiery death. Yet here you are. And clearly unhappy too."

"All I want is to find my friends," John said, his voice calm.

"A worthy ambition," Eoan said. "And one we are happy to support. We believe strongly that all life is important, and if something nefarious is happening with Mages arriving from other worlds, we wish to be able to put a stop to it. There is no need for us to be at odds."

Bowing slightly, John acknowledged Eoan's words. Currently, his entire goal was getting to Katrine, wherever she was, and making sure she was safe. Though he had intended to attract the attention of the tower masters, he had actually been hoping he would catch the eye of whoever had betrayed Katrine and Togene to the Cabal of the Broken Gate. According to what Atavarax said, however, he had missed his chance for that. In one sense, he was happy that the tower masters didn't seem to be involved, but on the other hand, every time he ran into a dead end his frustration grew stronger.

Already he could feel the desire to simply burn down the whole tower flaring in his heart. Though he knew it would get him no closer to his goal, the insidious impulse was growing in strength with every moment, and while John had managed to keep a level head so far, it was starting to wear on him. Worse still was the nagging voice that it wouldn't matter if he went crazy in this world.

Even if I tore this place apart, brick by brick, it wouldn't impact Ellie and the others back in the valley.

Such thoughts had been trickling through his head since he arrived, and now, facing Eoan's intense aura, John felt his pride flaring as well, trying to drive him to take the suppression as a direct challenge. Recognizing the feelings as the corruptive influence of Farroutef the Deceiver, John closed his eyes for a moment and recentered himself. Now wasn't the time to go wild. Looking at Eoan, John spoke calmly, trying his best to keep his voice as neutral as possible.

"I agree. My only wish right now is to find my companions and return to my home. In order to do that, I need two things. I need a gate that will connect to my world, and I need to know where to find the Cabal of the Broken Gate. Any help you could provide on either front would be appreciated."

Pursing his lips as he thought for a moment, Eoan sighed.

"Both requests seem simple but in fact are not simple at all," he said, tapping on his armrest. "In order to create a gate to your world, we would need to know its coordinates. That is next to impossible without knowing its name, or even which subsection of the Endless Worlds it is in. As for the Cabal of the Broken Gate, no one knows where they make their home. When they appear, it is as if they come from the void itself to pillage their targets before vanishing once again. The coordinates to their world are kept hidden. Besides, even if we did know where their world was, they are not an enemy worth making."

Frowning, John kept a tight hold on his emotions as he listened to Eoan's words.

"I can solve the issue of my world's coordinates, I just need the gate."

"Ah, that is easy enough," Foyrath said, getting up from her seat and walking over to where John stood so he wouldn't have to turn around. "We have plenty of dimensional gates you can use if you can cast the linking spell."

"Sure, but the bigger problem is the Cabal," Toross said gruffly, looking around at the other tower masters. "We all know why they would be interested in someone who just arrived here from a lower world, but it shouldn't be possible to figure out a world's coordinates from them."

"Unless it's not a locked gate," Foyrath said, her voice grim. "If your friends know the spell used to calculate the gate's initial activation, it

wouldn't be impossible to reverse it and determine the world's location."

"And Mage Carvaris?" Zilric asked, tilting his head to the side.

"Likely sold out John's friends."

"Then we have a major problem," Eoan said, causing everyone to look at him. "The Cabal has a supreme Mage."

Seeing that the mood was deflating again, John did his best to keep himself from exploding. He was beginning to hate the way the Mages talked in circles. Taking a deep breath, he spoke to Eoan.

"What is a supreme Mage?"

"Ah, right. A supreme Mage is a ninth-order Mage who is infinitely near to the tenth order. Though it isn't even known if the tenth order exists, the supreme Mage is capable of facing off against any number of lower-order Mages and is considered invincible to anything but the march of time. Uray Lotheric is the master of the Cabal and a supreme Mage. He is also incredibly vengeful, and not someone we can afford to anger. If we had a supreme Mage of our own it would be another story, but our tower lacks such a person at the moment."

Silence fell over the room as Eoan's words faded and John felt a cold feeling seep into his heart. He had been hoping that the Candle Scholar Tower Mages would assist him, but the cold reality shattered that hope. While he understood their choice, he was disappointed as well. Still, as long as they didn't actively work against him, that was enough.

"I see. In that case, could you point me toward the ruins or a place where I could find members of the Cabal?"

"Did you not understand what Tower Master Eoan is saying?" Qinlen asked, a sneer forming on his face. "If your friends have been captured by the Cabal of the Broken Gate, you would do well to flee back to your world and hide your loved ones before the Cabal arrives. They will strip your world, destroy or enslave everyone in it, and leave you with nothing."

"Not if they're all dead," John said, causing a hush to fall over the room. "I am simply asking that you point me in the right direction. I will bear everything else by myself."

"Your courage and your commitments to your friends are worthy of admiration," Eoan said after a moment of silence. "Very well. We will point you in the correct direction. That is all that we can do, however. Once you return to get your things from your room, Atavarax will direct you."

"I understand," John said, bowing slightly.

Reaching up, he unpinned the badge he had just attached to his cloak and placed it in Foyrath's hand. Feeling it, her face paled slightly, but she didn't say anything as John turned around to leave. In silence, the tower masters watched John leave the room, and it was only after he vanished that Glyn swore fiercely.

"I can't believe we're giving up on what might be the greatest Mage this tower has ever seen, all for some lousy pirates!"

"Not for some lousy pirates," Eoan said, shaking his head. "For our survival, and the survival of those under us. We must face the truth that a supreme Mage is simply too much for us to handle. We will not risk the future of our tower on a random genius who popped up out of nowhere."

Still holding the badge John had given her, Foyrath remained quiet, her thoughts a mystery. At the bottom of the tower, John emerged from the portal that led up to the tower master's office and headed for his room. He didn't have much, but he wanted to get his sword before he set out on this next adventure. His overall objective for his time in Candle Scholar Tower had been reached in that he now had a lead to where Katrine was, but he couldn't help but feel a deep sense of dissatisfaction at the response he had gotten.

It was clear he would receive no help from the tower, despite the fact that it was looking increasingly likely that one of their Mages was behind Katrine's disappearance. Though John was not so naive as to believe they were somehow responsible for her, he didn't like how cavalier they were about it. Still, it wouldn't help his cause to make enemies right now, so he was doing his best to keep himself under control. Arriving at his door, he found Trisic hanging out nearby, looking quite nervous.

"Oh! John! I heard what happened! Are you alright? They didn't do anything to you, did they? The tower masters, I mean?"

Overwhelmed by the concern radiating off of the buck-toothed Mage, John let out a low chuckle.

"No, everything is fine. I was able to get what I was looking for."

"Whew. It's typically never good news when a tower master shows up, so I was worried you had broken a rule or something. But I also heard you were able to cast fifth- and sixth-level spells? That's genuinely amazing! You're not even thirty years old, right? Absolutely incredible. Have you done your official test yet? Are you going to join one of the towers?"

Seeing how genuine Trisic's excitement was, John almost felt bad, but he shook his head.

"No, I'm not joining the tower. I have a mission I have to complete in the… Atavarax, where am I going?"

"You are going to the Windstar Ruins," Atavarax's soft voice said.

"What? Why are you going to the Windstar Ruins?! They're incredibly dangerous."

"Oh? Do you know something about them? How dangerous are they?"

"Of course! I mean, everyone knows about them. Well, maybe not an outworlder like you, but anyone from this world. They're dangerous enough that only groups that are at the seventh order and up are allowed to go. If you're any lower than that, it's a death wish. If the razorwinds don't get you, the raiders will. Plus, the ruins are full of dangerous traps that shift and change every day, turning the entire place into a land of death. Its practically suicide to go there!"

Smiling slightly, John patted Trisic on the shoulder and entered his room to get his gear. Stripping off his robe, he shoved it into his bag and unwrapped his sword, buckling it to his belt. His cloak slipped around his shoulders and he picked up his bag and staff. After looking around to make sure he hadn't left anything behind, he walked out into the hallway, causing Trisic to gape at him in shock. Knowing that he no longer looked like a Mage, but rather a wandering mercenary, John didn't take the stare personally. Reaching out, he patted Trisic on the shoulder lightly.

"I may not see you again, but thank you for your kindness over these last few days. You have been more of a help than you know."

Stammering out a largely incoherent reply, Trisic bowed to John, clearly unable to wrap his head around the fact that John was leaving. With a wave, John headed for the closest portal stone before stopping and turning around to look at Trisic. After a moment of hesitation, John walked back over to Trisic and clenched his fist. When he opened it, a condensed mana crystal lay in the center of his palm.

"This is a special mana crystal that can improve your mana purity. Absorb it, and it won't be impossible to reach the fifth or even sixth order in the next fifty years."

Staring at the glimmering crystal on John's palm, Trisic swallowed. His senses were going wild, telling him that he had to have the crystal, yet he

still held himself back. When he didn't take it right away, John stuffed it into his hand and took a step back.

"There are many people who would kill to have a crystal like that, so I recommend you hide in your room until you've completely digested it. Good luck, Trisic."

Not waiting for a response, John turned and left, soon vanishing into the portal stone and appearing in a large hall with hundreds of humming dimensional gates set in a gridwork pattern. Vast as a cathedral, the air rang with a low vibrating hum, punctuated by an occasionally ticking as the gates activated and deactivated. A smoky green haze of mana filled the top of the hall, parting occasionally to give glimpses of the ornately tiled ceiling, creating a swirling vortex of color.

Looking around, he spotted the gate to the Windstar Ruins in the back corner. Adjusting the strap of his bag on his shoulder, John walked toward it and was about to enter when he felt the air fluctuate behind him. Even without turning around, he knew that Foyrath was standing behind him. Unsure why the Arcane Tower's tower master would be coming to see him off, John turned around slowly.

It had only been half an hour since he had last seen her, but Foyrath looked like a wreck. Her normal ethereal air was gone, and both her clothing and hair was disheveled. Even her breathing seemed weak, and as John looked at her, he saw a trickle of blood leaking from underneath her metal eye covering. Leaning heavily on the staff she held, she appeared to be staring straight through John at something behind him.

"Are you alright, tower master?"

"Hah, yes. Divination simply requires a cost, and today's divination had a particularly steep one. Here, this is for you. I wish you the best of luck in your search for your friends."

Handing over a small piece of folded paper, she smiled as best as she could and then vanished, leaving John holding the bloodstained paper. Eyes narrowing, John opened it up and saw a single name and location written on it in elegant cursive.

Aphir. Windstar Tavern.

Realizing he had just been given a real clue, John felt a burst of gratitude surge through him. He had no idea why the Arcane Tower's master had decided to help him, but he carved it into his mind as he turned toward the gate leading to the Windstar Ruins.

CHAPTER 9

Stepping out of the gate into the Windstar Ruins, John had the strangest feeling he had just entered a fantasy world. Considering he had been using magic for the last decade it was clear he had been in a fantasy world all along, but when he caught sight of the three moons hanging in the star-studded sky, it seemed to settle on him in a new way. The gate was located on a small plateau and a guard waved John down from the platform, telling him to get out of the way. To the left was a well-worn path that led to a motley collection of buildings that formed the town of Windstar, while to the right was a large, broken-down gateway that led into the ruins.

Windstar Ruins appeared to be a gigantic city that sprawled out on three sides of the plateau and stretched hundreds of miles into the distance. There was a strange sense of familiarity with the ruins, but he was currently more interested in the ramshackle town that served as a staging ground for the ruins. Adjusting his sword on his hip, John headed down the path, soon arriving at the main street that ran through the center of the town. A dilapidated sign welcomed him to Windstar, and a few lazy-looking guards lounging nearby cast a glance at him before going back to their card game.

Most of the buildings looked like they were on the verge of collapsing, and as John was walking down the street a fierce wind suddenly sprang up, ripping through the street and causing the buildings to tremble violently. Pieces of siding shifted and blew up, almost as if they would fly away, but amazingly, all of them remained attached and a minute later, when the wind vanished, they settled back into place with a clatter. Impressed by the ingenious construction, John nearly missed the young woman who appeared at his elbow.

"First time in the ruins, sir?"

The young woman was dressed in a well-worn suit of leather armor that had been roughly cut down for her size and carried a short sword at her hip and a couple daggers in sheaths on her legs. Her dark hair and even darker eyes showed both caution and fearlessness, and though she was doing her best to smile at John, it was clear she wasn't well practiced. It was easy enough to recognize what business she was in, so John nodded.

"It is. But I don't know what currency is used here, so I may not have any money."

Blinking at John's straightforward answer, the young woman's hand flickered and a colorful gem appeared between her fingers.

"Mana gems."

"I see. Would you mind if I looked at yours?" John asked, holding out his hand.

"What? Why do you want to see it?" she asked, taking a cautious step back.

"I won't run away with it, I promise. I just want to see it for a second."

It may have been because of the calmness with which John spoke, but something about him inspired confidence in the young woman because, after a moment of hesitation, she stepped forward and put the gem in John's outstretched hand. Rolling the green gem between his fingers, John looked at it closely, paying careful attention to the mana concentration it held. From the structure, it appeared that the mana gem was naturally formed, but since it was just highly compressed mana, John was confident he could reproduce it without much trouble. Handing it back to the young lady, John flashed a smile at her.

"My name is John. What's your name?"

"Lycia."

"Nice to meet you, Lycia. I'm looking for a map of the ruins and a place to stay for the night. Do you have any recommendations?"

Brightening, Lycia nodded and jerked a thumb at a large building near the center of town.

"Sure, I can show you to Cavvod's, and then the Windstar Tavern. I'll introduce you to the rest of the town along the way if you want. My pay is five third-grade stones, paid up front."

Shrugging, John showed his empty palms.

"Sorry, I don't have any third-grade stones. The gem you showed me is third grade, right? How many third-grade gems make up a second-grade gem?"

"Ten," Lycia said, staring at John suspiciously.

"And ten of those to a first-grade gem?" John asked, reaching into his pouch and condensing a mana crystal. "This is all I have."

He paid careful attention to the way the mana formed, trying to make it look as natural as possible, and when he withdrew his hand he almost wasn't able to contain the brilliant glow. Orange light spilled from his hand,

and in a panic Lycia stepped forward and pushed John's hand back into his pouch, hiding the glowing gem from view.

"Don't show it," she hissed, looking around nervously. "Come on, I'll take you to Cavvod's. They can exchange it for you."

Still looking around, she hurried down the street with John walking calmly in tow. Ever since he had arrived here, he had been trying to sense if there was anyone who was a threat to him, but so far he hadn't managed to discover anyone. That didn't mean, however, that he was completely safe. Just like Candle Scholar Tower, the mana in the Windstar Ruins was much denser than it was back in his world, and even though it leaned toward the wind element, John could feel his body continuing to strengthen with every breath.

As he followed Lycia, John focused on his flower ring, trying to sense Katrine's location. From what he could tell, she was currently hidden somewhere, most likely in the world where the Cabal of the Broken Gate made their home, but he was secretly hoping she would be here in the Windstar Ruins. Unfortunately, the flower ring didn't react at all, causing John to swallow his sigh.

Winding through a few back streets and alleyways, Lycia brought John to a non-descript house with a small front yard where a few men lounged, playing dice. Wine bottles lay scattered at their feet and their rough clothing reeked of sweat and stale alcohol, but John could sense a surprising amount of mana in their bodies. So far he hadn't seen another Mage, but everyone he had come across in the town was a class holder, and these men were no exception. Stopping by the gate, Lycia kept a wary eye on the men in the yard as she spoke quietly to John.

"This is Cavvod's. He's an information broker and does artifact assessment. He also lends money."

"Thanks," John said, putting his hand on the gate. "If you hang out here, I'll be able to pay you when I come out."

Nodding, Lycia stepped back, retreating to the other side of the street and leaning up against the wall. Curious at what was making her so cautious, John opened the gate and entered the yard, drawing the attention of a few of the men playing dice. One of them, a thin man with a hawk-like look, gave John an appraising look and then nodded and jerked his head, indicating that John could go in.

The house was a simple building, but when John stepped through the front door, he found himself in a parlor that had been converted into a store. A long counter ran in a U shape along three of the walls and a young man with glasses sat behind it, examining a pile of glowing gems with a magnifying glass. Hearing the door open, he looked up and saw John entering, so he put down his magnifying glass and brushed his hands off.

"Hello, welcome to my shop. What can I do for you?"

"I've got a gem to trade," John said, looking around at the wares displayed behind the counter.

"There is a fee for any transaction," Cavvod said, tapping on the counter. "The first out of every ten gems."

"That's fine, as long as you give me a fair price," John said, grinning.

"We always give a fair price. Let me see the gem you want to exchange."

Taking out the bright orange gem he had condensed, John placed it on the counter. Though the young man tried to hide his shock and excitement, John's eyes were too sharp, and he caught the slight change in the shopkeeper's expression. Picking up the gem, Cavvod weighed it in his hand and then got out a scale from under the counter. Gems were ranked based on both their size and purity, and it was obvious that this gem could only be considered first grade on both counts.

"This is an impressive stone. Normally the exchange rate is fixed at ten to one, but because of the purity of the mana it carries, I'd give you fifteen to one. Thirteen and five after the fee is paid."

"Thirteen second-grade gems and five third-grade gems?" John asked, to clarify.

"Yes. I can do the exchange right now if that suits you."

"Sure, but what would it cost me to get a map of the ruins?"

"Four second-grade gems," Cavvod said without hesitating.

"Let's do it."

Counting out the change, Cavvod pushed seven second-grade gems and twenty-five third-grade gems across the counter for John to examine while he went over to the other side of the room where there were a number of scrolls. He brought the map he got out of the rack over to the counter and spread it out in front of John. It showed a general map of everything within a hundred miles of the city, but beyond that range there wasn't much filled in.

“This is the best we have, though if you find someone who specializes in mapping the ruins, you can probably get a better sense of what is outside of the band, but I don’t recommend going out there if you don’t have an expedition.”

“The band? What’s that?”

“This area here. Everything within eighty miles is safe enough with a small party. Beyond that things get deadly. After you cross over the wall of wind, you’re outside the band, and all bets are off. Though, if you can find an expedition and sign on, that’s where the real profit is. Most of the area inside the band has been picked clean over the years.”

“Got it, thanks.”

“Sure. Anything else I can help you with?”

“Yeah, actually. Do you know someone by the name of Aphir?”

Raising an eyebrow, Cavvod nodded.

“I’m familiar with him.”

“Do you know where I can find him? I’ve been tasked with asking him a question.”

Holding up his index finger, Cavvod smiled at John. Making a guess at what the shopkeeper was saying, John put one of his second-grade gems back on the counter and flicked it over to Cavvod. With a swipe of his hand, Cavvod made it vanish and his smile widened.

“Aphir is a guide of questionable reputation. He mostly hangs out at the Windstar Tavern, but right now he’s out of town. If you mention that you’re looking for a guide into the ruins to the barkeep and flash some gems, you should be able to get an introduction to him without trouble.”

“Thanks,” John said, tapping the counter with his finger and nodding.

“Sure. Anything else I can do for you?”

“No, I think that’s it,” John said, shaking his head.

Turning to leave, his eyes caught sight of something behind one of the counters. It was a gleaming metallic arm with a delicate enchantment etched into it. Stepping closer, John looked at the arm carefully. While he recognized what it was, he had never seen such detailed craftsmanship before. There was an ethereal grace about it, an elegance that made it look almost real. Seeing his interest, Cavvod walked over and took it off its stand.

“Know someone who needs an arm? This is the latest in clockwork limbs. One hundred and ten percent mana conductivity, which means it’s

actually better than a normal arm. Enchanted for strength and armor, it can serve as a shield as well. There are even a few slots for charging spells."

Running his finger lightly over the smooth metal, John couldn't hide how impressed he was with it. It made every single artifact he had seen before look practically barbaric.

"Do you have any legs for sale?"

Giving John an appraising glance, Cavvod shook his head.

"No, but I can make them. Limbs have to be custom fit to individuals, so I only keep this as a display. But if you know someone who's missing any limbs, bring them in and I can come up with a custom order."

"Thanks. I'll be back."

"Sure," Cavvod said, putting the arm back on its stand.

With a wave, John left the house and crossed the street to where Lycia was waiting. Glancing back at the house, he caught sight of a small metallic bird sitting on a perch above the door, watching him with curious eyes. When it met his gaze, it cocked its head to one side and then took off, quickly vanishing into the sky. Turning his attention back to Lycia, John took out a few gems and handed them to the young woman.

"Here you go."

Quickly putting them away, Lycia swept the area with a sharp glance, as if checking if anyone had seen the exchange. Not seeing anyone who was paying them any attention, she gestured for John to follow her and they headed back toward the main street where the Windstar Tavern was located. The town was quieter than John had expected, and anyone they passed made sure to maintain a healthy distance from them, which surprised John. Clearly, Lycia wasn't the only one who was wary of strangers, so when a few figures stepped out in front of them, blocking the end of the alleyway, it was clear that something out of the ordinary was about to happen.

Realizing the threat immediately, Lycia stopped and took a step back, nearly running into John. A quick glance over his shoulder showed John that there was another group of thugs blocking the entrance to the alley, and as the two groups advanced, John and Lycia were soon completely surrounded. There were five people blocking them in, four of them rough-looking men dressed in leather armor similar to Lycia's. The last one was a woman who wore a dark robe with a red spider embroidered on the chest, who seemed to be the leader from the way she stepped forward.

“Lycia, what are the rules in this town about killing people?” John asked, causing the robed woman to pause slightly.

With a snort, she continued to advance until she was ten feet from John and Lycia, answering in the young woman’s place.

“So long as you don’t damage property, or the interests of the large gangs, death is as common as the pebbles along the side of the road,” she said with a sneer. “So if you value your life, you’d do well to hand over all your gems.”

CHAPTER 10

To punctuate her point, the four burly men with her got out heavy knives, brandishing their gleaming blades for John and Lycia to see. Crouching slightly, Lycia's hand went to her short sword, but before she could draw it, John moved. A light leap sent him flying toward the robed woman, his sword jumping into his hand. Though they were taken off guard by his sudden advance, the thugs managed to respond quickly, stepping in front of the robed woman, who immediately started muttering something under her breath.

Facing the two thugs, John's sword moved with dizzying speed, cutting past the first thug's defense to sink deep into his shoulder. Shifting the angle of his wrist, John tore the point of his sword out of the wound, nearly severing the thug's shoulder and sending him spinning to the side of the alleyway. At the same time, he sidestepped a stab and then brought the pommel of his sword down on the other thug's forearm, shattering the bones. In too much shock to realize what had happened, the thug looked with horror at his arm as it bent in half, completely missing the punch John unleashed.

Catching the thug in the middle of his face, John felt his enemy's skull compressing and quickly withdrew some of his power before the thug's head exploded. Flying past the robed woman who was still trying to cast her spell, the thug bounced along the ground, out cold. Flames flickered under John's feet as he stepped forward, appearing in front of the robed woman in a flash. Reaching out with his left hand, he grabbed her face and shook his hand slightly, destroying her concentration and ending her spell-casting attempt.

On the other side of the alleyway, the other two thugs were rushing forward, but seeing that John had grabbed their boss, they slowed to a stop. Turning around, John casually held the woman in one hand as he looked at the two remaining men, his eyes cold. One of them, sensing something, tried to back up a step, but before he could react, John was in front of him, planting a booted foot in his gut. With a hoarse scream, he flew out of the alley, smashing into the wall of a nearby building. The other thug, who hadn't managed to react, swung his heavy dagger at John, only to see a

flash of silver as the side of John's sword slammed into his head, knocking him out.

Only a few seconds had passed since the fight had started, and Lycia had drawn her sword from her sheath and backed up against the wall to protect her back. Putting his sword away, John gave her a smile.

"Well done. Keeping your back protected is the best choice in a situation like this. Though, it would have been better, had I remained next to you, to stand back to back with me. Do you know who these people are?"

Seeing John shake the woman whose face he was still holding, Lycia nodded and spat on the ground.

"Slavers. They belong to the Blood Spider gang."

"Slavers, huh? That's convenient."

Tossing the woman he was holding into the wall, John crouched down and waited for her to recover enough to look up. Disoriented by what had just happened, it took her a moment to recover, but when she did, she glared at John with hate-filled eyes. Ignoring her death glare, John began to speak to her.

"Tell me about the Blood Spider group you're part of. Do you have any dealings with the Cabal of the Broken Gate?"

A slight twitch in her eyes told John that she knew about the Cabal, but instead of answering him, she sneered and tried to spit in his face. Before she could complete the action, John pushed her face to the side with his finger, causing her spit to fly to his side. Sighing, John shook his head and turned to look at Lycia.

"It looks like it would be best if we split up here. Thank you for your services, but I am going to make an unexpected stop at the Blood Spider's base."

Lycia had never seen anyone move as quickly and powerfully as John, but as someone who lived in Windstar town, she had no desire to get caught up with the Blood Spiders, and without needing to be told twice, she nodded to John and rushed off, making sure to stay clear of the two thugs collapsed on the ground. Watching her go, John glanced up at the corner of a nearby roof where a small bird was perched, watching him, and smiled slightly.

"Alright, let's get back to the matter at hand. You have two choices. One, cooperate with me, and once I have the information I want, I'll let you

be. Two, don't cooperate with me and you can join your companions in their suffering."

There must have been something in John's calm look that scared the robed woman, because she reluctantly nodded her head.

"Excellent. Tell me, what's your name?"

"Pia."

"Well, Pia, I'm going to ask once more. Do you sell slaves to Broken Gate?"

"I… I am not in charge of selling slaves," Pia said, her glare fierce. "I just handle robbing people and acquiring slaves."

"Huh. Who is in charge of sales?"

"That would be Mauvrik, our leader."

"Perfect. Let's go visit him."

Standing up, John gestured for Pia to rise.

"Lead the way. I'm pretty sure I don't need to mention that if you try to run I'll cut you down right where you stand, but I will anyway, just in case."

Swallowing as she remembered the insane speed of John's sword, Pia knew John was able to make good on his commitment so she led him out of the alleyway, stepping over the unconscious body of her companion without any concern. Shaking his head at the callous disregard she displayed, John followed behind her as they wound their way through the town, heading for the other side. There, Pia brought John to the door of a small building and knocked a few times. A sliding window opened in the door and a pair of suspicious eyes stared at them for a moment before the window was slammed shut and the sound of bolts being drawn echoed.

Following Pia into the building, John found himself in a small waiting room with a few ratty chairs and a small table. A thick door led out of the office, and beyond it John discovered an opulent office, complete with a heavy wooden desk, wall-to-wall bookshelves, and thick, luxurious carpets. Sitting behind the desk was a fat man who looked more like a merchant than the boss of a slaver gang.

"Pia? Who is this?"

Hesitating, Pia found herself at a loss. She had no idea who John was. She had taken him to be a newcomer to town and figured he would be an easy mark since he wasn't armored, but that had been proven to be the furthest thing from the truth. She hadn't been able to follow his movement

at all, and the ease with which he had dispatched her team still sent a shudder down her spine. Noticing her pale face, Mauvrik's eyes narrowed, nearly disappearing in the fleshy folds of his face. Walking over, John sat down on the edge of the desk and looked down at the gang boss.

"I know you have no idea who I am, and that's fine. I am going to lay out two different paths we can take and you can let me know which you would like to walk down," John said. "The first path looks like you giving me the information I want and then disbanding your organization. The second includes me beating all of you within an inch of your lives, getting the information I want, and then disbanding your organization. I'll leave it up to you, but be aware that my patience is limited."

A dreadful silence fell over the room as John finished speaking, only to be broken a moment later by Mauvrik's snorting laugh. His large belly shook and his face turned bright red as he laughed, making John wonder if he would be okay. After laughing for nearly a minute, he wiped his beady eyes and shook his head.

"Heh, you're a funny guy. I haven't laughed like that in an age. Do you really think you'll be able to waltz in here and make threats like that? You must be suicidal."

"No, just strong," John said, smiling.

Sneering at John, Mauvrik waved to Pia.

"Get Boro."

Pale-faced, Pia glanced at John, but didn't see any sign that he was going to stop her, so she hurried out of the room. Sill perched on the edge of the desk, John picked up a metal paperweight that looked like a golden apple and examined it with idle curiosity.

"Who is Boro?" he asked, glancing at the fat gang boss.

"Boro is a seventh-order mage who serves the Blood—"

crunch

The sound echoed in the room, somewhere between a screech and a crushing sound, causing Mauvrik to stop what he was saying and stare at John in horror.

Still holding the golden apple, John had taken a clean bite out of it and was chewing up the metal like it was nothing. Seeing that Mauvrik was staring at him, John raised his eyebrows slightly and offered the apple to the gang boss. Beads of sweat emerged on Mauvrik's forehead and he found that his back was suddenly drenched. Mauvrik was no stranger to powerful

people, and he knew multiple people who could crush the golden apple with a single hand, but there was something terrifying about how casual John was in taking his bite.

"No? Fine. More for me," John said, taking another bite.

Soon, the sound of hurried footsteps filled the air and the door burst open. The first person through the door wasn't a Mage, but instead a giant of a man with a bald head and fierce expression. Glaring at John, he lifted a heavy club in his hands as more people entered behind him. Striding into the room, a wizened man with a staff joined the giant, boxing John in neatly. Mana surged around him, revealing his impressive seventh-order power. Looking over his shoulder at the members of the gang, John just smiled.

"You must be Boro," he said, gesturing with the metal apple to the Mage as he glanced at the giant. "But I don't know who you are."

"You can call me Gor," the giant rumbled, his expression fierce.

"Nice to meet you, Gor," John said, taking another chunk out of the apple.

Again, silence fell over the room as John casually finished the metal apple, eating the entire thing and swallowing it down without any sign of effort. Picking at his teeth, as if he had gotten something stuck in between them, he looked at Mauvrik.

"Time's up. Pick your path."

Shaking slightly, Mauvrik had never been so scared before in his life. The complete disregard John showed for the powerful gang members who surrounded him set his nerves on edge, and the horrifying sound of John's chewing still seemed to ring in his ears. Though he hated to believe it, a part of his mind was screaming at him that he was only a hair's breadth from death, and if he didn't choose wisely, he would find himself in a terrible position. However, the thing that really sealed the deal was that Pia, one of his most loyal subordinates, was nowhere to be seen. When he realized she hadn't entered the room with the others, Mauvrik's decision was made.

Unfortunately for him, Gor wasn't nearly as bright as he was. Furious at the casual disregard John showed him, the giant decided he would rip John's arms off to teach him a lesson. With an angry yell, he charged forward to do just that, his club rising until it touched the ceiling and then falling toward John with tremendous force. Seeing his companion move,

Boro immediately cooperated, thrusting out his staff and casting one of the stored spells, Ice Prison.

Thick bands of cold mana surged out of the end of the staff, completely surrounding John. Solidifying into thick chains that tried to wrap themselves around John's legs, they only lasted for half a second when heat erupted from his body, melting the ice. Without standing up, he deflected the falling club with a backhand that sent the club spinning out of Gor's hand to smash a hole in the wall, while his other hand flashed. The air shimmered and a dozen Johns stood up, leaving a single copy behind on the desk.

A dozen blades were drawn and John dove into the crowd with all of his fractal images. Screams rang out as his blade rose and fell, and within less than half a minute, every single one of the enemies were disarmed and groaning on the blood-slicked floor. Many of them were missing limbs or had suffered bad gashes and stabs, and as the dozen Johns flicked blood from their swords, they all turned to look at Mauvrik, causing him to soil his pants. The John who was still sitting casually on the desk gave the gang boss a disgusted look and shook his head.

"I guess it's path two then."

A few hours later, John stepped out of the building, ignoring the muffled shouts behind him. He had disabled everyone in the gang, including the gang boss, and then spent some time gathering the information he needed on the Cabal of the Broken Gate. Although Mauvrik didn't know much, he had been able to fill in some of the gaps for John, and slowly a plan was starting to come together. There were a number of slavers who sold captured class holders to the Broken Gate, though for what, they didn't know. The most valuable piece of information was that the slavers would go through Aphir when they wanted to make a sale, as he was the only one who appeared to know where to meet the Broken Gate representative.

The last thing John had done before he left the Blood Spider's base was to go down to the dungeon underneath the building and free all of the slaves. The disbelief on their faces had been something to see, but John just waved their thanks off and left, leaving them to loot the building. Walking down the street toward the center of town, John thought through his plan once more, double-checking for any problems. If Cavvod's information was

right, then he had a few days before Aphir would be back, which was more than enough time to prepare everything he needed.

CHAPTER 11

Windstar Tavern was less of a tavern and more of a massive, sprawling complex that took up one entire half of the street. At some point the tavern had expanded and subsumed the buildings next door like a creeping slime. Parts and pieces were tacked on to the main section, connecting the various buildings together, and rooms appeared to be placed almost haphazardly in between and above the buildings to create a monstrous inn.

Throwing up his hood before he walked in, John opened the door and scanned the room, his eyes taking in the many class holders who were sitting at the tables. Most of them paid him no attention, simply continuing their conversations after glancing over, if they glanced over at all. Seeing a front desk, John walked over to ask for a room, paying a second-grade gem and receiving a key in return. Noticing that the young lady behind the desk didn't say anything when he ignored the sign-in sheet, John headed off to find his room.

The inn was practically a maze, so it took him a little while to find it, but eventually, after wandering for about twenty minutes, he arrived. Inserting his key into the lock, he realized it was broken and couldn't be locked at all, causing him to frown. Typically he would have gone down and requested a different room, but since he didn't want to draw attention to himself, John just entered the room and closed the door behind him. It would be their bad luck if anyone tried to sneak in and steal his stuff.

For the rest of the day, John sat on the thin bed and meditated, drawing in as much mana as he possibly could. Though it had only been a few days, he could feel that his cells were constantly being nourished by the thick mana in the air. When he had finished his meditation, he got ready to walk down to the bar to get something to eat and talk to the bartender. Before he left his room, he put his cloak on and cast a small spell, transforming his face into that of an old man missing an eye. Making his way back through the twisting passages, he went down the stairs and walked up to the bar, waving the bartender over.

"What can I get you?" the bartender asked, his gaze resting on John's missing eye.

"Ale."

“Sure,” nodding, the bartender skillfully filled up a glass and placed it in front of John. “One stone.”

Taking out a handful of second-grade gems, John put them on the counter.

“I’m looking for a guide into the ruins. I’ve got some slaves to get rid of.”

Hearing the key phrase the slaver groups used to let Aphir know when they had slaves to sell, the bartender grabbed the stones with a swift swipe and nodded.

“Aphir’s out of town on business at the moment, but I’ll let you know when he comes back.”

“Thanks,” John said, picking up his drink and heading for an empty table.

Later that night, he returned to his room and began to meditate again, determined not to let even a single moment go to waste. If the Cabal was actually led by a supreme Mage, John was going to be in for a fierce fight. He had no idea how he would stack up against someone like Uray Lotheric, the master of the Cabal of the Broken Gate, but he was determined to rescue Katrine, no matter who stood in his way. Breathing out, John focused his mind and did his best to drive any distracting thoughts out of his mind. Though he was confident in his plan, it would only get him into the Cabal. After that, he would be making it up as he went along, so being stronger could only help.

The days passed slowly, and every day, apart from checking in on Katrine through the ring and getting food, John remained in his room, meditating and trying to improve his strength. He had overheard some talk about the destruction of the Blood Spider gang, but since it was being attributed to a slave breakout, he didn’t worry about it too much. On the third day, John had just come downstairs for lunch when he saw the bartender pointing him out to someone with a heavy black beard. Aphir was a tall, wiry man, whose black beard reached almost to his waist.

Walking over to John, he gestured to an empty table.

“I’m told you have some business with me?”

Sitting down across from Aphir, John studied the guide with his single eye. John was currently wearing his old man illusion, and he kept his tone gruff when he spoke.

“I’m passing through, but I have a slave to get rid of before I go. I’ve been told you can get me a meeting with Broken Gate.”

Frowning, Aphir didn’t look happy.

“Who told you that?”

“Doesn’t matter,” John replied, waving his hand. “What matters is that I’ve got a seventh-order Mage to sell.”

Drawing in a sharp breath, Aphir sat up straight, the look in his eye changing to one of respect. Mages were notoriously hard to capture, and enslaving anyone above the fourth order was considered just about impossible. If the old man before him had managed to complete such a feat, there was no way the Cabal would want to pass up the chance to get a seventh-order slave.

“I see. I just returned from a trip, but I’ll be heading back out in a week.”

“That will be too late,” John said, his lips twisting unhappily. “I’ve already spent too long here. If I can’t get rid of him in the next day or two, I’ll have to leave.”

“You could sell him to me,” Aphir said, his eyes brightening. “I’d be happy to pay a premium for him.”

“He’d tear you apart in a heartbeat,” John sneered. “It requires someone in the eighth order or above to keep his mana sealed. As soon as I turned him over to you, he would break free of his restraints and kill you.”

Wincing slightly, Aphir nodded, his expression growing even more respectful. Clearly he had underestimated the power of this old man. Thinking quickly, Aphir quickly came up with a solution.

“I’ll connect with my contact and see if he’s interested. If he is, we’ll set up a meeting. If not, all I can do is apologize.”

Nodding, John waved over the waitress and ordered some food. After she left, he looked at Aphir and nodded again.

“Fine. I’ll be staying here for two more days at the most, so I suggest you move quickly.”

Taking no offense at John’s rude tone, Aphir stood up and bowed.

“Of course. I’ll get to it right away.”

Watching him hurry off, John let out a small sigh of relief and mumbled to himself.

“Stage one, done.”

Just as John had anticipated, Aphir was soon back with an excited expression, and they agreed to meet the following day. Early the next morning, two figures walked out of the inn, both in cloaks. One was the old man with the ruined eye, and the other was a morose-looking young man with dark hair and a collar around his neck. Aphir was already outside waiting for them, and he glanced at the young man with considerable interest.

"Ready? It'll take about three hours to get there, but the path is mostly safe. Not that we'll have to worry about that with a Mage of your power around. If you're ready, we can get on our way."

Following Aphir out of the city, they passed through the dense ruins, winding this way and that through the tangled streets. The city was fairly tightly laid out, but as John got a closer look at the buildings, he realized why it had given him a nagging sense of familiarity. Rather than the typical stone buildings, the ruins were filled with smooth walls that looked and even felt like cement. Though John had seen many polished stone buildings, cement was something John had only encountered on Earth.

Curious if there was a connection, he continued to look around until they finally arrived at the spot where they were going to meet the contact. When they walked into the small clearing in the middle of a ruined building, there was a figure already waiting there for them, dressed in an ornate blue and gold suit of armor, complete with a full visor helmet. He stood over a dozen chests that were all bound with enchanted locks, sealing in the mana they contained.

"You're late," the figure said, his voice booming.

"Sorry, we had to detour to avoid a pack of beasts," Aphir said, bowing respectfully.

"Is this the slave you speak of?"

Stopping at a safe distance from the armored figure, John nodded carelessly.

"Yes. Healthy, and a seventh-order Mage. His spellcasting is sealed right now to keep him from causing problems, but you should be able to tell how strong he is by checking his mana purity."

Nodding, the armored figure approached, taking a stone out from a pouch on his waist. Holding it out toward the slave, he told him to put his mana into it. After a brief hesitation, the slave winced as his collar flared and he stepped forward, putting a stream of mana into the stone. Filtering

through colors, the stone projected a dark blue light, causing the armored man to nod his head.

"Excellent. Then let us discuss payment. But first, explain something to me. Why have you come here as a projection instead of coming yourself?"

Seeing that the representative of the Cabal was pointing a finger at the old man he had been escorting, Aphir drew in a breath. Far from denying it, the one-eyed old man grinned, showing his broken teeth.

"You have sharp eyes. Call it a safety measure, or even paranoia, but there is no need for me to arrive in person, is there? You'll give Aphir the payment, and he will return it to me after you take the slave. A simple enough exchange."

Analyzing the old man, the armored man seemed to accept his explanation and gestured to one of the large chests he had been standing over when they arrived.

"The standard price for a fourth-order Mage is one thousand first-grade gems. I have brought the equivalent of one hundred thousand. You should find that acceptable."

"How generous of you," the old man cackled, rubbing his hands together. "That is acceptable to me. You may take the slave with you and leave the chests behind. I will warn you, however, should there be one gem less than we have agreed upon, your Cabal will have earned themselves an enemy they cannot afford."

It was impossible to see how the armored man reacted to John's naked threat due to the full-face mask he wore, but it didn't seem to faze him. Holding out his hand, he asked for the control method for the slave collar, and once he had received it, he left with the young man, not bothering to say goodbye. Left alone in the wilderness with a dozen massive chests packed full of first-grade gems and a crazy old Mage, Aphir suddenly grew nervous. He had never been close to so much wealth in his life, even during the large slave exchanges he had been part of.

Fearing he might be silenced, he took a step away from the old man, who was mumbling something under his breath. Noticing his behavior, the old man gave him a crooked grin and waved for him to leave.

"I've already arranged help to get this back, so you don't need to worry about it. Here is your fee, and I've added a few more first-grade stones to help you keep your mouth shut. Blab of this to anyone and I'll find you, no matter how you run. Ah, here they are."

Hearing a sound in the undergrowth, Aphir saw dozens of heavily armored men walking out of the wilderness into the clearing where they stood. At the front of the group was a familiar young man. Cavvod still wore his glasses, but instead of his normal clothes, he was wearing a strange suit of metal armor and a ragged green cloak. Resting on his shoulder was a small metallic bird whose eyes sparkled with a hint of lightning, and as Cavvod walked over to the chests, the bird took off, vanishing up into the sky. Cavvod surveyed the chests briefly before he turned to the old man and nodded.

"We'll get them all back to town and wait for you."

"Thank you," the old man bowed his head.

"What do you want us to do with him?" Cavvod asked, pointing at Aphir.

"You can leave him alone," the old man said with a shrug, his body starting to grow faint. "Excuse me."

With a cracking sound, the old man shattered into a million pieces that melted into the air, leaving Aphir, Cavvod, and all of the armed men staring at each other. A mile away, the armored man stood on a small hill, gazing back at the spot where the trade had taken place. Behind him, John stood quietly, keeping his head down. He didn't have to look to tell that his projection had vanished, which meant that Cavvod must have picked up the gems already. Leaving such wealth with someone he had only recently met was risky, but John didn't have many other choices.

He had arranged the gems as pre-payment for a set of enchanted mechanical legs so that when he brought Katrine back, she could be fitted for them. But even if Cavvod denied the whole thing when he returned, John wasn't worried. Wealth was the last thing he lacked, since he could quite literally pull gems from the air, and right now, his only focus was on getting to Katrine. After a few minutes, the armored man tsked and spoke to the air.

"Tell the shadow guard to call off the ambush. No need to get tangled up with Cavvod."

With a shimmer, a woman in tight leather armor appeared, her expression fierce.

"That's a lot of stones to give to a small-time shopkeeper," she said, clearly unwilling to abandon their plan.

“It’s a pittance for getting a seventh-order Mage,” the armored man said, glancing at John. “And we have standing orders to leave him alone. Cavvod might look like a mild young man, but the last group that messed with him no longer exists. We don’t need that kind of trouble, especially when we’ve got a new world to plunder.”

Waving her hand to show she understood, the fierce-looking woman tapped on a stone token on the inside of her bracer.

“Fine. Have assignments been handed out yet? I want to be in the vanguard when we go to this new world.”

Shaking his head, the armored man activated the control spell for John’s collar, causing it to flare with mana. Dragged forward a step, John was forced to stumble along as the two Cabal members made their way toward a small ruined building that was half hidden by thick undergrowth. As they made their way through the thick brush, John listened to the other two chat. It was clear they were talking about attacking his world, and his blood chilled when he heard the armored man’s answer.

CHAPTER 12

“The vanguard has already been dispatched. The gates aren’t stable yet, but within a few days they should be, then the rest of us will be called up. From the reports, it’s going to be an easy one since the most powerful people are fourth order. There are rumors of a fifth-order person who they call the eternal flame, but the mana density wouldn’t support someone higher than the fourth order, so it’s probably just a rumor.”

“Hmph, why didn’t I hear about the vanguard being dispatched? I always miss the fun,” the woman said, frowning.

Ignoring her complaints, the armored man led the way into a small room where there was a temporary dimensional gate set up. Slotting some gems into it, he cast a quick spell, causing it to flare to life. Double-checking that the collar John wore was working, he gestured toward the portal.

“In you go. This is going to be your new home for the remainder of your painful life.”

Stumbling forward as the collar tugged at him, John fell through the gate, appearing in a dark, damp dungeon, lit by the dim glow of magical lights. Before he could scramble to his feet, the armored man walked through as well, activating the collar and forcing John to stay on the ground.

“Welcome to the Cabal, slave. Here you will contribute to important experiments that will push the boundaries of our knowledge about magic. Though you’ll either end up dead or as a chimera, you should feel lucky since you’ll be contributing to the Cabal’s strength. I am your new master, Devrik the Merciful, and your only chance to extend your life is to worship me.”

As the armored man spoke, John, who was still pressed against the ground because of the collar, looked around, his eyes taking in everything in the room. The stone walls were made of smooth, polished stones, each one etched with intricate runes and symbols that glowed with a faint red light that gave the room a sinister feeling. Shelves lined the walls of the room, filled with books of arcane knowledge that were stuffed next to jars filled with strange powders, vials of glowing liquids, and all manner of strange, arcane tools and devices. John barely recognized anything he was looking at, but he could tell that for all his brutish behavior, his captor was not a simple thug.

There were three doorways leading off of the room, one opening into a bedroom, another going to a bathroom, and the third closed off by a heavy metal door. The gate they had taken had no entrance on this side, but John did see a desk, some shelves, and a workbench that looked like it hadn't been touched in years.

Seeing nothing else of note, John inspected the room for enchantments, his eyes lingering on the runes carved into the walls, and it didn't take him long to identify the effects they wove. The first soundproofed the room, while the second appeared to be a communication system of some sort. The third and final enchantment was too complicated for John to understand with a brief glance, but considering the amount of mana it had stored, it was a safe bet it was some sort of trap or defense mechanism.

A dangerous air seeped out of Devrik when John didn't respond, so he crouched down next to John, his helmet glowing with a bloody light. However, before the armored man could speak, a powerful hand shot out and gripped him by the throat, choking off his words. At the same time a formless pressure surged out of John, filling the room in an instant and seizing control of all of the mana. Standing up in a fluid motion, John reached up and casually pulled the slave collar from his neck. Though the mana lock on it strained against him, it was unable to offer any resistance as he snapped the collar with pure strength.

Still gripping Devrik, John threw the collar at the corner of the room with deadly force, hitting an invisible figure who was struggling to draw her daggers. Knocked out of her invisibility by the impact, the fierce shadow guard who had followed them into the room slammed against the wall. Stunned by the impact, she tried to gather her wits, but John suddenly appeared in front of her, his gaze cold. Pointing a finger at her, John spoke an arcane command.

"Void Prison."

He had only seen the spell Ice Prison once, but it had been enough for John to understand the way it worked, and through his Mental Model skill, he had rebuilt it into a wind magic spell. Twisting together, the air around the stunned woman transformed into thick chains that locked her body in place, not allowing her to move an inch. The entire room was still being crushed by John's impossibly thick aura, so she couldn't even move her mana outside of her body, leaving her unable to do anything but stare at John in shock.

As for Devrik, he had been struggling to use his mana ever since John had grabbed him, but it was too late. John's mana had surged into his body, bypassing his armor and surrounding his mana pool, completely cutting it off. With John controlling all the mana in the room and locking away his personal mana, Devrick couldn't even activate his armor. Not that it would have been any help. He saw the ease with which John had dealt with his shadow guard, and despair overwhelmed him.

"You… who are you?" Devrik stammered, barely able to choke out the words.

Not bothering to reply, John thought for a moment and then flicked his fingers, creating a burning blue brand that split in two and sank into the two captives' bodies. Tossing Devrik to the ground, he pulled over a chair and sat down on it. Still unable to process what had just happened, Devrik and his shadow guard could only exchange dumbfounded looks. The situation had flipped too rapidly for them to follow, and they now found themselves in the same position John had been a moment before.

"I will ask you a series of questions, and you will answer them," John said, his voice even. "I don't believe in torture, but I do believe in death. And from what I understand of your organization, you two deserve death more than most. Do not try my patience. First, you said that the Cabal has acquired the coordinates to a new world. Who did you acquire the coordinates from?"

Regaining some of his composure, Devrik shot a warning glance at his shadow guard and shook his head.

"We'll not tell you anything."

"Very well," John replied, snapping his fingers.

Even as the sound echoed in the room, Devrik's face warped as flame surged in his body, covering him in blue flame. Rushing out of his chest, the flames spread to his arms, where they burned fiercely. Though they were visible on the outside of his armor, the flames only seemed to burn his body, and soon they crept up toward his wrist. Realizing that his hand was gone, Devrik panicked, trying to summon his mana to fight against them, only to fail as John's mana continued to block his mana pool. There was no pain as his body burned away, but watching the flames slowly creep up his arms toward his chest was enough to drive him mad.

Trying to speak, Devrik found that he couldn't open his mouth as John's mana wrapped around his face, locking his jaw in place. Unhurried, John

looked at the shadow guard, whose expression was growing uglier with every passing second. When a full minute had passed and the flames had reached the slaver's elbows, John coughed lightly.

"Who did you acquire the coordinates for this new world from?"

"A native of the world. We captured some Mages, and two of them were from that world. They spilled the secret," the shadow guard said, not daring to hesitate after John's ruthless display.

"Where are they being held?"

"They… one is dead. The old one. The other is likely dead too, but she escaped into the wilds."

"And the invasion of this world? You say it has already started?"

Glancing at Devrik, who was struggling as the flames crept up his bicep, the shadow guard shuddered.

"Yes. The first teams have been sent. Once they confirm that everything is safe and stabilize the portals, the rest of the army will head over."

"What is your name?" John asked, staring at the shadow guard.

This time, the shadow guard hesitated for almost thirty seconds before she answered.

"Meria."

"Well, Meria, you're going to help me out. We're going to go and find this escaped prisoner, alright?"

With a snap of John's fingers, the flames creeping up Devrik's arms sped up, quickly consuming his whole body. Clattering against the floor, Devrik's empty armor lost its glow as he vanished without the chance to scream. Standing up, John waved his hand, using his mana to lift the armor into the air, where it separated into its component pieces. He felt a bit strange as he put it on, but soon it had settled around him and reactivated, transforming him into the spitting image of Devrik.

Shocked by the ease with which John manipulated the enchanted armor, Meria found herself thankful she hadn't tried to challenge him. It was clear that John was not, as they had believed, a seventh-order Mage, and was more likely a ninth-order Mage, if not a supreme Mage like the master of the Cabal. The thought sent a shiver through her, and she vowed to not get on John's bad side if at all possible. He carried the casual disregard she had seen in Uray Lotheric, the master of the Cabal, and she knew he would not hesitate to dispose of her as he had Devrik.

Adjusting one of his gauntlets so it sat more comfortably around his wrist, John waved his hand and released the Void Prison spell, allowing Meria to fall to the ground. She still carried his brand, so he wasn't concerned about her trying to escape since he could end her life with a thought, but John was doing his best to kill as few people as possible, since he wanted to avoid feeding the dragon that slept in his soul. If possible, he wanted to find Katrine and slip out as quietly as possible.

"How does your invisibility work?" John asked Meria as she stood up.

Turning her hands out, palms up, she showed him her bracers. Each had two mana stones slotted into them, much like his bracer, but the enchantment they carried was much more complex.

"My bracers have Greater Invisibility cast on them," Meria said, showing John how they worked.

"Can you get me another pair of them?"

Paling, Meria thought for a moment and then nodded.

"Yes. However, it would require killing another shadow guard."

Frowning, John shook his head.

"Forget it. Take me to the wilds where that Mage escaped without alerting anyone that something is wrong."

Bowing her head slightly, Meria activated her Greater Invisibility spell and vanished. For a moment she thought about running, but the burning feeling in her chest convinced her that was a terrible idea. John had been able to find her even when she was invisible, so now that they were connected by the flame that sat next to her heart, she knew there was no way to escape.

"Please follow me and I'll lead you to the gate."

Opening the heavy metal door, she led him out into the hallway, bringing him through a dark dungeon filled with caged slaves and up a long passage that eventually ended at a large doorway in the side of a hill. Stepping out, John got his first view of the Cabal of the Broken Gate. At first glance, it was just as impressive as Candle Scholar Tower, though it looked more like a city and less like a large tower. Everywhere he looked he could see men and women walking around, all of them dressed in armor and carrying weapons.

A sense of wildness pervaded the streets as Meria led him between buildings that rose multiple stories into the air. Part of it was the savage look that most of the people around him cultivated, but John could also

smell a faint tang of blood, as if every inch of the city had been covered in blood at some point. Suppressing the disgust that rose in him, John focused on the flower ring he wore, trying to find Katrine's location.

Ever since he had fallen through the portal into this world, he had been able to sense her presence, but he was still too far away to pinpoint her precise location. Still, he was encouraged by the growing feeling that they were getting closer together. The Cabal's city was a large, sprawling affair, and it took them almost an hour of walking before they arrived at the gate that led out to the mountains where Katrine was hiding. The city took up the majority of a giant valley, crouched like a massive black beast between sheer cliffs that rose into the clouds.

The gate was only lightly guarded, and Meria must have said something to the guards, because they opened the gate without being asked and bowed when John walked by. Passing under the heavy gate, John felt like he was stepping into another world. The land outside of the city was dried and cracked, like all the vitality had been sucked out of it, and the mana was equally thin. Glancing back at the black-walled city, John's gaze rested on the pulsing mana circuits at the base of the wall, instantly understanding what was happening.

Inside of the city mana was plentiful, but only because the city was stripping it from the rest of the world, sucking it up for its own use. The result was a dying world where the ground became brittle and even the most hardy plants could barely survive.

No wonder they make a business of plundering other worlds. They probably can't grow anything on this soil, let alone raise herds.

Noticing he had stopped, Meria stopped as well, standing respectfully by John's side. She had been extra careful not to do anything out of the ordinary while they were walking out of the city out of fear that magical blue flame would burn her to death, and while she was relieved to be out of the city, she was still nervous about what was coming next. John looked this way and that, as if searching for something before he pointed his finger to the southwest where there was a large cliff that rose miles into the air.

"Follow me."

Activating the enchanted armor he was wearing, John pushed off the ground and soared into the air, hurtling through the air toward the cliff. Chasing after him, Meria did her best to keep up as he landed on the cliff and leapt again, shooting straight up like he could fly. John could feel the

connection between his ring and Katrine's getting stronger as he moved to the southwest, and he was excited to see her. Feeling himself starting to slow, he reached out with his hands and dug into the cliff, launching himself up again, soon arriving at the top and landing lightly. While he waited for Meria, who was scaling the cliff as fast as she could, John's gaze swept the rocky wasteland before him, searching for clues as to where Katrine was hiding.

CHAPTER 13

Laboring heavily, Meria was struggling to climb up the cliff as fast as she could, but there was no way she could keep up with John's speed. She had watched him rocket up the cliff face like he could fly, and could only do her best to struggle forward. After a few minutes, she heard a scraping sound and John appeared, sliding down the cliff with one hand slowing his fall. Coming to a stop next to her, he grabbed the back of her armor and shot up, kicking off the cliff like he was running up a ladder.

They reached the top of the cliff in only a few minutes after moving faster than Meria had ever moved in her life, and it was with some relief that she fell to the ground when John let go of her. Seeing that John was striding off into the distance, she hurried after him, grinding her teeth in frustration.

The mountains were no better than the valley down below, and if anything, John found them worse. Every footstep he took threw up puffs of dust as the ground crumbled under his feet, and the few plants he saw were brown and wilting. Jagged rocks in all different twisted shapes lay scattered across his path, but he ignored them and continued forward, trying to sense Katrine's location. Behind him, Meria plodded along, glaring at the back of his head, but John just ignored her. He wasn't afraid of being attacked, and if he was honest with himself, he was practically looking for reasons to wipe out the members of the Cabal.

For close to three hours they walked forward, getting further from the cliff and the city below it, and the entire time they didn't see a single living thing apart from a few scrub trees. At the three-hour mark, John took a step forward and felt the ring around his finger pulse. An answering pulse alerted him that he was now close enough to sense Katrine, and with a fiery step, he vanished, reappearing before a tumbled pile of jagged rocks.

Tossing the rocks aside, he found a deep crack in the earth and dropped down it without hesitation. Falling into the earth, he soon entered a slightly larger space and lit it with a fireball, casting light all about. In the corner of the small cavern, he spotted a figure all huddled up and rushed over. Realizing that it was Katrine, John's heart simultaneously jumped for joy and broke in half. Checking her pulse, he was ecstatic that she was still

alive, but the extent of the damage her body had taken was even worse than he had imagined.

For close to a month she had been lying in this cave, without food, water, or medical treatment, barely able to hang on as her mana slowly vanished into the nearly manaless surroundings. The wounds that covered her body had only gotten worse, especially her missing eye, and though she had tried to bind her legs as best she could, it was clear from the blood soaking the ground that they frequently reopened. Taking off his helmet, John gently touched her forehead and began to infuse mana into her.

Like a thick stream of life-giving water, the mana seeped into her head and spread through her body, filling her mana pool almost instantly. Carefully controlling the flow of mana, John sent it into every inch of her body, causing her wounds to begin knitting back together as her body's natural healing was supercharged. Once her condition was stable, John took out one of the potions Ellie had given him and poured it out into her eye wound. Gentle mana seeped into the hole, filling it with light. Though the potion couldn't heal her eye back to normal, it was able to repair the necrotic cells and seal the wound up, preventing it from getting worse.

For half an hour, John continued to work on Katrine, stabilizing her and slowly feeding her starved body the mana it needed. Meria had discovered where he had gone and was slowly making her way down toward him, but he ignored her and focused all of his attention on Katrine. He was just administering the last of the potions Ellie had given him when Katrine's remaining eye snapped open and the mana around her surged murderously. Pressing his hand on her head, John locked down her mana pool, preventing her from ripping everything around them apart.

"Katrine! You're safe. I'm here."

"John? What…?"

Looking around her in a panic, Katrine caught sight of John's face and visibly relaxed, sagging against him. For a moment they remained in place, her face buried in his shirt, but she didn't stay there long. She pushed herself up and examined her condition, seeing that most of her wounds had been healed, at least partially by John.

"Took you long enough to get here," she said, her voice breaking slightly as she tried to tease him.

"Sorry, I came as quickly as I could."

Katrine's smile faltered and she leaned her head against John again.

“I know. Thanks.”

“Come on, let’s get out of here. You’ll recover much better in the valley.”

“Recover? I’m never going to recover,” Katrine said, shaking her head. “Look at me, John. I’m a cripple. And I can’t even control my magic anymore. They did something to me when they were torturing us. My mana leaks constantly and I can’t control it. You were right. I shouldn’t have left the valley.”

His face hard, John didn’t respond right away. He had noticed the crack in Katrine’s mana pool when he was infusing mana into her, and even now it was constantly leaking mana, making it impossible for her to properly control the output.

“We’ll find solutions to both. In fact, I already have a solution for the first problem, and though it might be a little while before we can find a solution for your damaged mana pool, I know we will.”

“Heh, I guess it’s good to be relentlessly positive,” Katrine said, lifting her arms and putting them around John’s neck as he picked her up. “How did you find me anyway?”

“A bit of deduction, a bit of brute force, and Rebya’s seeds,” John said, holding Katrine in a princess carry. “I’ll tell you all the fun details later. For now, let’s focus on getting home. Meria, give me your bracers.”

The shadow guard had been standing nearby, invisible and completely silent, as if she was hoping that John might forget about her. Appearing with a shimmer, she stared at him for a few seconds before sighing and taking her bracers off. She should have known that something like this would happen when he had asked her for a set of bracers before, but instead she had foolishly mentioned how difficult it would be. Realizing that she only had herself to blame for this, she handed them over to John with an ugly look on her face.

Having Katrine put them on, John used his mana to power them, causing her form to be shrouded by the Greater Invisibility spell. While John could have simply cast it on her, the bracers would allow the spell to be maintained without him having to consciously think about it, which made it more likely that it wouldn’t break at an inopportune time. Still holding Katrine, who was now invisible, John looked at Meria, causing her to swallow nervously.

“Given your history, I would be doing the universe a favor by erasing you from existence. I’m not going to do that. However, I would recommend that you refrain from going back to the Cabal. If you ever appear within a mile of me or anyone I love, you’ll be dead before you realize it.”

Sensing the absolute seriousness of John’s voice, Meria nodded frantically and backed up, getting out of John’s way as he flew up, out of the crack. Landing lightly among the twisted stones that had hidden it from view, John checked to make sure Katrine was comfortable before he stepped forward, his footsteps leaving scorch marks behind on the brittle earth as he headed for the valley and the city it contained.

“How are we going to get back home?” Katrine asked as the dismal landscape flickered past.

“There are a few options, but the easiest one will be to borrow the portals they’ve opened. They’ve already deployed scouts who have been tasked with stabilizing the portals. If we can go through one of those portals, we should be able to destroy them from the other side, which will delay their invasion. Another option would be to head back to the Windstar Ruins. We have to go there eventually anyway, since that’s where we’ll be able to address the issue with your legs. From the ruins, we can go back to Candle Scholar Tower, and then return to our world.”

Feeling Katrine tense at the mention of the Mage’s tower, John hugged her a bit tighter.

“I don’t know that I’ll be able to go back to the tower without killing someone,” Katrine said, her voice quiet. “I’m not feeling very charitable toward them right now.”

“I can believe that. What actually happened?”

Sighing, Katrine took a moment to marshal her thoughts before she began to speak.

“When we got to the tower, the reception was pretty normal, but things turned strange not long after that. I feel like an idiot for not realizing it, but I guess that’s why they say hindsight is twenty-twenty. Togene was not allowed into the tower since she wasn’t a Mage, so she stayed in the outer ring, while I went in to register as a new student. Somehow, we caught the eye of an eighth-order Mage, and that’s where things went downhill.”

“Carvaris?”

“Yeah. He was running a study group, and after I had a couple run-ins with some of the local bullies, they stepped in to help me. I realized later

that the whole thing was planned, all to get me to be part of the group, but at the time I had no idea."

Listening to her speak, John couldn't help but want to rush back to Candle Scholar Tower and rip the whole place apart. Katrine's voice was calm, but he could hear the cracks in her heart seeping through her words. Carefully controlling the voice that was whispering violent flaming death in his mind, he focused on moving forward as he continued to listen.

"Anyway, the short version is that Togene contacted me and told me she had been approached by a group that was going to go on a mission to Windstar Ruins. Carvaris heard about it and told us it would be a good experience for our study group, so he assigned us a mission to assist that group. Well, the whole thing turned out to be a trap. When we arrived, there was an ambush waiting and we were all captured by the Cabal. After that, it was torture until we gave them what they wanted."

"And Carvaris? What happened to him?" John asked, his voice heavy.

"He got a position in the Cabal," Katrine replied. "He was the one who directed most of the torture, and I saw him kill most of the students himself."

"Got it. So he's on the list."

"At the very top," Katrine snarled, her powerful emotions causing her mana to suddenly surge.

Wrapping Katrine's mana in his own to keep her mana from going wild, John waited patiently while she tried to calm back down. While he had been more powerful than her back in the valley, the difference between them now had grown to an astronomical degree, causing her to stare at him in wonder as she took shaky breaths. The difference between them was like that of an adult and a toddler, and John was able to effortlessly contain Katrine's outburst without harming her in the process. Sensing the difference between their mana, Katrine changed the subject, trying to divert herself.

"What about you? How did you get this strong?"

Shrugging, John navigated around a twisted stone that looked like three fingers stabbing up toward the sky.

"I think that I was in a state of mana deficiency before. But since leaving the lower world, my mana has actually started to fill out. I'm about sixty percent of the way toward being full, and as my mana increases in quantity, the quality is upgrading too. The same thing happened to you but

on a smaller scale, right? Your mana is denser and more plentiful than it was in the lower world."

"True. Though that won't matter if I can't fix this hole in my mana pool," Katrine said, smiling bitterly.

Though he couldn't see her face, John could feel the emotions radiating off of her, and it only hardened his resolve to make sure they found a solution for Katrine. Racing along the top of the mountain, it only took them an hour to arrive at the edge of the cliff that overlooked the Cabal of the Broken Gate. Originally, what he thought to be a valley now appeared to be more of a gigantic gorge that stretched far into the distance, but John was much less concerned with the geography than he was with what he saw down below in the city.

Peeking over the edge of the cliff, John had a perfect view of the city that sat two miles below, and as he enhanced his vision with mana, he could see the frenzied activity of thousands of armored soldiers rushing around as they carried supplies to a large open courtyard. At the edge of the courtyard were three portals that flickered with power, though they all looked unstable, as if they were going to collapse at any moment.

"It looks like they're marshaling to go to war," Katrine said.

"They are. Unfortunately, we're their target. Hm. How much time do you think we have?"

"Why? What are you thinking?"

Taking a moment to process the idea running through his head, John came to a decision quickly. He had prepared for a number of different possibilities, but it was clear the Cabal wasn't interested in wasting any time. Coming to a decision, John took a thin necklace out of his pouch and clipped it around Katrine's neck.

"John, what are you doing?"

"This is a dimensional anchor. It will protect you as you travel. Its coordinates are set to Windstar Ruins. Specifically, the home of a merchant named Cavvod."

"John? What are you saying? Why does it sound like you aren't coming with me?"

"He is the one who will be able to help you with your legs. I'm counting on you to come provide support once you've recovered, okay? But for now, I want you to focus on getting better."

"John!"

Ignoring her shout, John leaned over and gave Katrine a kiss on the forehead, at the same time activating the necklace he had bought from Cavvod. Normally, activating an artifact of such power in a mana-deficient environment would have resulted in failure, but John's mana surged into it, powering it up fully. With a flash, Katrine was gone, though her agonized look lingered in John's mind. Standing up, he brushed his hands off and pushed his guilt down, focusing on the task at hand.

It's time to start a fire.

CHAPTER 14

Gasping in shock as she appeared in a small room, Katrine couldn't keep her mana under control as her emotions went haywire. A million feelings swirled around her heart, all of them negative, and those feelings were reflected in the powerful Wind Blades that sprang up around her body, hacking violently at the bed and walls. Unable to get herself under control in time, the bed was reduced to splinters and scraps of cloth in only a few seconds, torn apart by the physical manifestation of the turmoil she felt.

A bright chirp filled the room and a powerful mana shield sprang up around her, containing her and her Wind Blades. Flying in through the broken window, a small bird hovered in the air, its bright eyes fixed on Katrine. At the same time, the door opened and a young man with glasses walked into the room, his expression impossible to read. Seeing Katrine trapped by the magical shield, he figured out the situation almost instantly and a small orb appeared in his hand. Activating it, he dropped it on the ground and a wave of energy expanded through the room, erasing both the mana shield and the out-of-control Wind Blades. Keeping an eye on the orb, he bowed to Katrine, introducing himself at the same time.

"Welcome. You must be Ms. Katrine. My name is Cavvod, but my friends call me Cav. John Sutton has arranged for you to stay with me and receive a pair of custom clockwork legs. You don't need to be afraid. You're safe here."

The frenzied activity of the Cabal's soldiers hadn't reached the city gate, and when John walked up, the guards were leaning lazily against the wall. He had put his helmet back on, so the sight of him caused them to jump up quickly and rush to open the gate. With hardly a glance at them, John passed under the thick wall and entered the city. Recalling the layout of the city he had seen from his vantage point on the cliff, John headed for the area where he had seen the portals.

His first order of business was to check where the portals actually led, since the last thing he needed was to jump through a portal and find himself in some other random world the Cabal of the Broken Gate was trying to

raid. The streets of the city were made from the same dark stone the buildings and walls were constructed from, causing the entire city to blend together and introducing a gloomy feeling that weighed on John's heart. When combined with the faint sense of blood that shrouded the city, he could imagine that living in such an environment for a long period of time would wear heavily on someone's spirit, slowly twisting them until their view of the world was warped beyond hope.

Thanks to the armor he wore, no one paid John any attention except the occasional bow in his direction. John ignored those people, but after turning a corner, he ran into another person dressed in armor just like his. Realizing as soon as he saw the figure that he was about to have a problem, John braced himself.

"Devrik! Where have you been? We came over to see this new slave of yours but you were gone. Where is he?"

Not responding, John scanned the group in front of him. The man in armor similar to his stood confidently in the center of his path, and behind him were four others dressed in robes or different sets of armor. There were also two invisible guards lurking nearby, and John could feel their gazes locked onto him as they watched for any dangerous movement. From the attitudes of the group, it was clear they hadn't stopped him because they were friendly, which put John in a conundrum. He had been hoping to make it all the way to the portals without incident so he could investigate the dimensional gates in peace, but nothing was ever that easy.

Deciding that his best bet was to ignore the provocation, John stepped to the side and tried to go around the group, but they seemed determined not to let him go. Spreading out, they blocked the street so that he couldn't get past. The man in heavy armor stepped closer to John, his hand lifting to stop him.

"Where are you going? You've been bragging so much about your slave, we all want to see him."

Shaking his head, John remained silent. His voice sounded nothing like Devrik's, and without casting a spell there was no way for him to fake it. The problem was that the others would immediately sense it if he started to cast a spell, which would introduce all sorts of problems. Seeing that John was still refusing, the armored man's hand shot toward his shoulder, clearly intending to grab him, and in response, John lowered his shoulder, causing the man's hand to miss.

Failing to grab John in front of so many people, the man grew embarrassed and mana flared through his armor as his embarrassment gave way to fury. But before he could fully activate it, John's hand latched around his throat in a grip that bent his thick metal armor and both John and the man vanished in a flash of flame. Ever since he had left the valley, John had been doing his very best to stay low key and operate without attracting attention, but his patience had worn thin. Now, as the armored man tried to force the issue, John felt something in his heart snap and decided on a new plan.

John's flash step took him and the man he carried toward the courtyard where the dimensional gates stood and along the way he released a surge of mana from his hand, causing the man he held to burst into flame. Up until this point he was being very careful not to kill anyone if he could help it, but he realized as he watched the Cabal soldiers rushing around that, even if he destroyed the portals, the only way he would be able to prevent them from simply recreating them and launching their attack was to do enough damage to them that they would think twice.

Even though that meant giving Farroutef a stronger foothold in his soul and increasing the rate of the dragon's healing, John couldn't think of another option. Ever since he arrived in the upper worlds he had realized just how weak his world was. Even the basic cabal soldiers he saw running around were in the second order, the equivalent of a titled class holder, and he had lost count of the number of third order, or legendary class holders, he had seen. Above them, there were entire squads of fourth-order warriors, just like the one that was marshaling in front of the portals. It would only take a single one of those squads to completely obliterate all the defenses that his world could muster, and there were at least five squads of that strength John had seen.

A flicker of flame erupted on the edge of the courtyard and John appeared, tossing the molten remains of the armor he held to the side. Not many people noticed him, and before they could respond, John stepped forward again, appearing next to the unstable gates. Sending out a stream of mana, he scanned the nearest gate, trying to see where it led.

[Query: What is the destination of this gate?]
[Answer: Unnamed world, designated X223, containing the valley and Sutton Farm. This gate leads to the great plains.]

Quickly scanning the other two gates, John realized that one led to the capital city of Allera, and the other to the mountains north of the valley. By this time, people were starting to realize that something was going on and a group of Mages were hurrying over, heavily armored guards in tow.

[Query: How do I destabilize the gates without harming the other side of the connection?]
[Answer: Analyzing gate composition. Weakness detected. Destroy the stabilizing gems with physical force.]

Spotting the mana gems his Mental Model was talking about on the ground around the gate, John stepped forward and stomped down, his heel grinding down on the mana-filled gem. Cracks ran through the large gem, and with a popping sound it ruptured, spewing mana into the air like a fountain. Denied the mana it needed to remain stable, the portal started fluctuating wildly as it went out of balance. There were three mana stones around each of the portals, and John managed to crack another one open before the mob was on him.

Yells of rage filled the air as warriors charged toward John, but he slipped away from the first attacks, heading over to the last gem. The gate he was targeting was the one that led to the great plains, and even as a dozen spells shot toward him, he punched down, crushing the gem to powder with his fierce strike. Mana exploded around him and he took control of it, shaping it into a shield that blocked the incoming spells. At the same time, he dashed forward, barreling through the warriors who surrounded him, his fists smashing their armor.

Even without his spells, John's body was impossibly strong and quick, like a powerful beast. The warriors, who were mostly in the fourth order, were thrown aside like rag dolls, their bones snapping whenever he touched them. Arriving at the second gate, John ripped one of the mana stones out of its casing and crushed it with his hand, throwing the shards at the warriors chasing after him. Charged with explosive energy, they spread out like shrapnel, tearing through the warriors' armor and mowing down the entire front line. Before John could move to the second mana stone, a loud roar shook the air and a huge warrior with an axe leapt forward, slashing down at John.

Dodging to the side, John was caught off guard when the big man suddenly spun in the air, his axe changing directions abruptly and slamming into John's side. A deep cut appeared in John's armor and he realized that the axe-wielding warrior was in the seventh order. More warriors were still swarming toward them, so John kicked off the ground and unleashed a punch, intending to throw the powerful warrior back, but multiple magical shields sprang up in between them, completely nullifying the force of his strike.

Though all of the shields broke, they had done their job as the warrior roared again and unleashed an overhead chop. At the same time, a storm of spells pelted the area around John, ensuring that if he tried to retreat in any direction he would be buried in ice, lightning, and fire attacks. Instead, John reached up and caught the falling axe, his fingers sinking into it as heat began to spread from his body. When his fingers punched molten holes in the metal, he realized what he was doing and shook himself, trying to rein in the flames that threatened to burst out.

Twisting, he flung the seventh-order warrior aside and gathered his mana, casting Fractal Image. A dozen figures burst from his body, each moving a different direction. Some went for the mana stones that anchored the dimensional gates and others moved to block the warriors who rushed over, while still others threw up mana shields. None of the figures was as strong as John, but even carrying a fraction of his strength was more than enough to stand up against the enemy.

By this point, the entire courtyard was in an uproar and a shrieking wail sounded over the city, signaling an attack was underway. More and more people started to pile into the courtyard even as John brought down the second portal. Complete chaos reigned in the courtyard as John's fractals dodged this way and that, smashing their way through the enemy while he threw spells around with abandon. Many of his spells flew out of the courtyard to smash into nearby buildings, causing them to tumble down as their walls were crushed, or landed among the supplies that were being gathered, starting fires and blasting the supplies into unrecognizable paste.

Intent on doing as much damage as he could, John was still doing his best not to kill anyone, but the Cabal troops had no such qualms. Attacking with abandon, many of the warriors suffered under the spells that targeted John's fractal images. He was often moving too fast for the spells to hit

him, leaving the soldiers who had been standing nearby exposed. Yet even as they killed their companions, the Mages never stopped trying to attack.

John was just starting to think about escaping when a shout rang out and a group of powerfully built warriors who wore bright-green armor with a snake motif charged toward him, cutting down anyone in their way.

"Close the gate! Trap him here!"

Immediately, anyone near the gate acted together, aiming to smash the mana stones that kept the third and final dimensional gate open. Racing to block them, John Intercepted dozens of attacks as he converged on the last gate. He had the option of rushing through right then, but he hesitated, unsure of the right move. Unless he did significant damage to the city, the Cabal would simply create another gate and follow him to the valley, arriving hot on his heels. Yet, to do that damage would mean strengthening Farroutef, something he was loath to do.

Unfortunately, the Cabal of the Broken Gate had no desire to give him the time he needed to figure out the best move. Worse yet, John could feel that the city's defenses were starting to activate and a powerful surge of mana was building in the center of the city. He was more than confident he could survive anything the city could throw at him, but it would require tapping into Farroutef's blue flames and unleashing his true form, which would likely kill most of the people present.

He needed to make a decision, and he needed to make it fast. With a flash, all of the fractal images shattered into a million pieces, reforming into a single figure that stood in front of the gate. Thrusting out his hands, John cast Dome of Protection, a powerful shield spell that spread out around him, driving away the Cabal's warriors and shielding both him and the dimensional gate from the spells flying over. The spells bounced off of the dome, splashing onto the crowded warriors. Screams rang out as the powerful spells exploded among them and quickly they backed up, staying a healthy distance from the powerful shield.

A brief lull fell over the battlefield, broken by cries of pain as the wounded warriors tried to crawl away. Kicking them aside, the green-armored warriors arrived and glared at John through the shield, their eyes promising him a swift death. One of the warriors stepped forward, his expression sinister.

"Devrik, what are you doing? How dare you destroy the portals!"

CHAPTER 15

Maintaining the shield, John took a moment to breathe, his mind scrambling to figure out the best solution to his current situation. Originally, he had been hoping to sabotage the Cabal, making it impossible for them to reopen the portals to his world, but all of that was ruined with a single moment of impulsiveness. If he had been thinking clearly, he could have just avoided the fight entirely and slipped away to be about his business. Instead, the anger that had built up in him over the last week had caused his composure to crack, leading to his current response.

That response had, in turn, led to the impasse at which he currently found himself. The easiest option by far would be to unleash the dragon flame he carried, wiping out the entire city and ending the problem of the Cabal once and for all. After all, it wouldn't have been the first time he had done something like that. Yet his previous experience with destroying an entire city had also taught him that the personal cost of such a monstrous action was just as horrific as the act itself.

In front of the thick mana barrier that surrounded him, the Cabal soldier wearing green armor was growing furious that John wasn't responding to him. Lifting the khopesh he carried, he pointed it at John.

"Devrik! Answer me!"

It took John a moment to remember he was still dressed as Devrik, the slaver who had purchased him and brought him to the city. Unsure how to respond, John just elected to remain silent while he thought about what to do. The Dome of Protection he had cast was strong enough to block any attacks of the eighth order or lower, but John could feel that the city's defensive enchantments were starting to come online, and the mana buildup behind them was worrying.

A few seconds later his worry turned into reality when the walls released a pulse of mana that flowed above the city, gathering together and striking down on John's head in the form of a thick lightning bolt. Less than a second had passed between the wall's release of mana and the bolt striking, and the only thing John had time to do was strengthen the Dome of Protection by forcefully pushing more mana into it.

CRACK

The sound was so loud that everyone in the city felt the impact in their chests, and the soldiers who had been nearby suffered ruptured eardrums. Screaming broke out even as John's protective spell cracked, and the soldiers on the battlefield began to scramble further back, not wanting to get caught in the crossfire between the city and John. Stunned by the strength of the attack, John shook away the ringing in his ears and pushed more mana into the Dome of Protection, trying to repair the crack before the next attack arrived.

Once again, he felt the mana starting to build up in his surroundings, and he couldn't help but let out a frustrated sigh. If a lightning bolt like the one that had just fallen on him landed on the portal, it would obliterate it, removing his chance to escape. But he also couldn't just stand here hiding behind his shield. Even without his support, the Dome of Protection would be able to keep most people away from the portal, so John decided he was going to have to take a chance.

Throwing caution to the wind, he canceled the dome and dashed forward, recasting it behind him as he left the dimensional gate. His actions were so fast that the heavy mana shield just seemed to blink as he charged out of it, toward the Cabal soldier who had spoken to him. Startled by John's sudden movement, the khopesh-carrying warrior tried to take a defensive stance, but John was moving too fast. A boot landed on the warrior's face, crushing his nose as it drove his helmet in, knocking him over backward.

Stepping off the warrior's face, John launched himself into the air, leaving behind a scorched footprint. As he flew through the air, John was pleased to see that the mana gathering above him was shifting, clearly tracking his position. Running through the air, John realized he needed a bit more speed if he was going to achieve his objective, so he waved his staff, casting another spell.

"Wings of Flame!"

Crackling with power, two molten feathers appeared behind his back, hovering over his shoulder blades. Each feather abruptly multiplied, fanning out to create two large wings that spanned a dozen feet. With a single flap of the flaming wings, John shot forward, his speed tripling in an instant as the wings carried him out of the battlefield. Staying low over the city, John dug through his memories of the city, trying to figure out what the most important places were.

[Query: What targets should I destroy to try and slow down the Cabal?]
[Answer: Five districts identified. Six major buildings located. Highlighting potential high-value targets.]

Scanning over the city as he flashed above it, John saw six different buildings lighting up in his vision and he shifted his trajectory toward the closest, even as he felt the buildup of mana in the city walls reach its peak. Unleashing a wave of mana, the city's defenses threw another bolt of lightning at John, even thicker than the last. Just like the first strike, this lightning bolt arrived so quickly that John had no time to cast a spell and could only pour mana into his fiery wings, giving him a slight burst of speed.

Feeling the bolt land right behind him, John shivered slightly. When he had faced it under the Dome of Protection, he had been impressed with its strength, but feeling it up close was another matter entirely. The bolt of lightning slammed down where John had been a fraction of a second before, landing on the roof of one of the buildings that had been highlighted. John had no time to spare a thought for what the building was, but as the powerful bolt smashed through the roof and detonated inside of it, he quickly realized the building must have been some sort of weapons storage.

The bolt ripped through the building like it was made from paper, and the weapons stored inside began to detonate as the mana from the lightning bolt overloaded them. A chain of explosions rang out behind him, but John's only objective at this point was getting as far away from the impact site as possible. Metal and stone shrapnel flew out into the city, obliterating an entire city block as the building transformed into a bomb. Sighing in relief that he hadn't gotten caught in the middle of it, John headed for his next target, pouring mana into his wings.

This time when he arrived the city's defenses hadn't recharged yet, so John opted for a different tactic. Swooping down, John smashed through the wall of the building, vanishing into it. Appearing in a room that looked like a research lab, he caught sight of the horrific-looking experiments that were taking place and his eyes narrowed. He was still moving quickly and arrived at the opposite side of the room in an instant, so he spun in the air, using his flaming wings to melt a hole in the wall. Like a burning comet, he

melted a hole straight through the building until he arrived at its center. Lightly touching down, John planted his staff and cast another spell.

"Volcanic Eruption!"

Powered by his unbelievably pure mana, the fourth-order spell he cast transformed into something else entirely. John had been using Mental Model to upgrade all the spells he knew, and ever since he had the chance to reference the higher-order spells at Candle Scholar Tower, the spells he had learned in his own world had been strengthened considerably. The mana he released surged into the earth, sending tendrils out into the surrounding block. Normally, Volcanic Eruption would target an area twenty feet in diameter, but John's forceful cast was closer to sixty feet across. The ground under the entire building rapidly rose in temperature as the mana John infused into the spell began to activate.

Kicking off the ground, John had barely cleared the building when the fire mana unleashed a powerful pillar of heat, transforming the stone of the building into lava in an instant. Anything in the building that was not made from stone was incinerated immediately, completely vanishing from the world as the entire building fell in on itself. The heat was so intense that the pool of molten stone began to spread out, devouring the ground around it and soon beginning to eat into other buildings.

John had already flown off, racing against the city's defenses to get to the next building before the next lightning attack. Sensing that he was unlikely to make it just by flying, John drew his mana together and cast an arcane spell, causing the air in front of him to shift rapidly as he was teleported forward with Blink Step. The only problem was that the Blink Step spell didn't maintain his momentum, so when he arrived above the third building, he was stationary. Thrusting his staff up into the air, John finished casting the second spell he had started just as the city walls sent out a new surge of mana.

"Diffuse Lightning!"

He had begun casting the spell even before he cast Blink Step, but he still nearly missed the activation of it. This spell created a small shield that blocked the lightning strike by channeling it into the surroundings. As the thick lightning bolt fell on John, it broke into pieces, arcing down onto the building he was hovering above. The single bolt transformed into dozens of smaller bolts, falling like a storm on the roof of the building. Flames and

explosions sounded as the bolts chewed through the building, grounding themselves in the earth below.

Halfway through, the spell John had cast shattered under the force of the bolt and it slammed into his chest, driving him down through the broken remains of the building, causing the whole building to collapse. Feeling a heavy pain in his chest as the lightning surged through him, John let out a shout and the mana in his body transformed into pure flame, destroying the rampaging energy and repairing the damage it had done. Coughing as he tried to draw a breath, John had no time to waste on laying around, so he staggered up from the crater he had made and resummoned his wings, kicking off again.

The entire city was in complete pandemonium by this point as the members of the Cabal tried to figure out what was going on. They were used to the chaos of combat, but only when they raided others. Never in the history of the Cabal had anyone brought the fight to them, let alone destroyed huge swaths of their city. John didn't have time to fly up into the air before the next attack would arrive, so he let a bit of his control go and the heat that his body contained formed a field of superheated air around him. Charging forward, he melted his way through building after building, leaving a burning trail behind him.

Cutting through the city, he was about to arrive at the fourth building when his senses alerted him to a danger ahead and he dove to the side, smashing the front of a building as he landed on it. A moment later a powerful beam of mana tore through the spot he had just been, carving a path through the city no smaller than the one John had left. At the other end of the suddenly clear path was a large magic cannon, the soldiers who fired it rapidly trying to reload it. Not wanting to give them the chance, John charged forward, clearing the rubble around him with a single leap.

Feeling a change in the mana that was gathering from the city's defenses, John had no time to check it out before he arrived at the magic cannon. Not even bothering to cast a spell, he simply slammed into the magical device, crushing it into scrap metal. Halfway through charging, the magic cannon overloaded, unleashing a blast of mana that flattened the nearby buildings. Flying away, John ignored the explosion that bit at him, his focus on the fourth building.

Around him, he could feel sharp spikes of mana gathering as more magic cannons were aimed in his direction, but he was moving too quickly

to be caught by the powerful blasts. Instead of rushing straight to the next building, he wove his way through the city, making sure to keep up an erratic path as he dodged the shots heading his way. Each time a magic cannon was fired, it tore a path of destruction through the city before slamming into the inside of the city wall, sending cracks radiating through the dark stone.

Despite the damage they were doing to their own city, the members of the Cabal kept firing, trying to hit John in their panic. Each blast that hit the walls disrupted the city's defenses, causing it to take longer for the next lightning bolt to charge, so John was able to make it to the fourth building easily. Since the lightning wasn't falling, John pulled the surrounding mana toward him and unleashed Wind Storm, Katrine's favorite spell. Powerful winds picked up around him, turning into a deadly maelstrom of wind blades that chopped and hacked at the building in front of him, shaving off giant chunks of stone.

At the same time, he cast Blink Step, taking himself out of the center of the swirling winds. A second later, four cannon blasts ripped through the Wind Storm, tearing apart the storm and the building it was chewing through in an instant. As confident as John was in his strength, he found himself sweating at the thought of getting hit by four magic cannons at the same time. He was managing without calling on the blue dragon flame that rested in his soul, but it was getting harder and harder to do as more of the city swarmed to attack him.

With two buildings left, John knew he had already done a lot of damage to the city. He had destroyed the main weapons storage and manufacturing areas first, and then targeted the artifact and mana stone production next. The last two buildings were the research library and the palace that stood at the northern side of the city. Casting a brief glance at the palace, John felt a small fluctuation of mana and his eyes went wide. Throwing himself aside, he barely avoided a blade that cut across his throat, seeking to decapitate him.

Upside down in the air, he saw the blade swing around toward him, but he stepped forward with a flash step, managing to avoid its second attack. Another flash step brought him upright and he reached out, pinching the blade between his fingers as a figure floated up above the palace.

CHAPTER 16

The magic cannons fell silent and even the city's defenses halted their charging as a young man appeared above the palace. He had long blond hair and bright red eyes, and skin so pale that it almost appeared translucent, revealing purple veins beneath. The green robe he wore fluttered in the air, the beautiful gems sewed into it flashing as they caught the light from the fires raging across the city. Despite the destruction below him, he didn't appear to be upset, and all of his attention was fixed on John and the dagger pinched between his fingers.

Without any apparent spell keeping him up, the young man floated forward, his eyes taking in John's appearance and a slight confusion appearing in his eyes. Still wearing Devrik's armor, John looked like a member of the Cabal of the Broken Gate, but as soon as he saw the young man, John knew he wouldn't be able to keep up his disguise.

"You are not the owner of that armor," the young man said. "Who are you?"

Taking a small step forward, John used his flaming wings to keep himself hovering in the air as the armor melted away around him, revealing his face.

"You may call me the Eternal Flame," John said, his senses straining their limits as he watched the young man for any sign of aggression.

"The Eternal Flame? I've heard of you. You are the god of that world we were going to raid."

"Hardly a god," John replied, shaking his head. "Just a concerned citizen."

Gesturing with his hand at the devastated city below them, the young man smiled mirthlessly.

"Clearly. My name is Uray Lotheric, master of the Broken Gate. You have trespassed on my home."

"I'll do a lot more than that if you continue with your attempt to enter my world," John said, his expression cold. "Consider this the friendliest greeting you will receive from me."

"Hmm. That is quite the threat. It has been an age since anyone has threatened me," Uray said, his eyes narrowing slightly. "I wonder what gives you the courage to do so. Surely it can't be your eighth-order spells.

Your mana is uncommonly pure, but even if you can cast ninth-order spells, you must know that attempting to do magic before a supreme Mage is nothing but a death wish."

Still grasping the magical blade with his fingers, John could feel the supreme Mage's influence on the mana in it, causing it to try and wrestle free. Tightening his grip, John could feel it struggling out of his grip. Frowning, he put a bit more mana into his hand, locking the dagger in place. Uray must have noticed his trouble, because the supreme Mage slowly lifted up his hand and pointed up above his head.

Mana pooled together, spinning tightly as five more blades appeared, each one as powerful as the blade John held. At the same time, a subtle influence began to spread out from Uray, seeping into the surrounding mana as he took control of it. Though John could do something similar, when he tried to he found that the mana would no longer respond to him and he realized he was about to be isolated.

With a flap of his wings he tried to gain some distance, but Uray was too fast. Walking through the air, he teleported forward with each step, his magical blades shooting toward John silently. As the supreme Mage walked forward, his influence spread out as well, seizing control of all of the mana in the city. Magic cannons suddenly froze and the members of the Cabal who could do magic found that their connection to the mana around them was severed.

Even John was losing ground, and his expression grew hard as his attempt to cast Blink Step failed. The mana around him was no longer responding to him due to the supreme Mage's influence. Unsure how Uray was doing it, John had no time to figure it out as the other five blades appeared in front of him. Darting to the side, John reached out and grabbed another of the blades, using the two he held to block two more. The fifth blade was dodged, but the sixth tore a gash across his thigh, causing John to hiss with pain.

Impossibly sharp, the blade managed to cut John's skin open, sending a spray of blood into the air. Though his wound began to heal shortly after, John realized he was in trouble when the blades swung around for another attack. Behind them, John could see Uray preparing for another spell. It took a lot of effort to keep hold of the two blades John had grabbed, but he was able to use them to block the other blades, suffering the occasional cut as he failed to deal with all four blades.

Completing his spell, Uray waved his hand and the walls of the city unleashed the blast of mana that they had been storing up. Instead of condensing above John's head, this time the lightning condensed in the supreme Mage's hand, turning into a spear that crackled with power. Dodging and blocking the magical blades, John realized Uray was going to attack a moment too late and the lightning spear stabbed into his chest, throwing him back.

Flying through the air, John slammed through a dozen buildings before he came to a stop. Groaning, he could feel the crushed bones in his chest starting to knit back together as he staggered to his feet and shook off the shards of stone that covered him. Diving to the side, John rolled up as five blades chopped through the spot he had just been standing. He had lost his grip on one of the magic blades, and it instantly joined up with the others to attack him once again. Even as he blocked and dodged the storm of attacks, he could feel the magic blade he held struggling to turn and attack him.

Walking calmly through the air, Uray seemed in no rush as he approached John's position. The supreme Mage had already taken absolute control of the mana in the city, making it impossible for anyone to cast a spell that used ambient mana. Under the furious assault of the magic blades, John was wracking his brain for a good solution to the current situation. He had never been cut off from mana like this, and though he had his abundant internal mana, he was hesitant to use it, as it would mean tapping into his mana pool where Farroutef slumbered.

Blood splashed from his body as he fought against the blades, but all of the wounds were superficial at best, healing as quickly as they were made. Reaching out to catch another blade, John squeezed both of his hands, putting as much power into his grip as he could. Cracking rang out as the two blades he held shattered into pieces, falling to the ground as they lost their mana. Ignoring the blade that cut at his ribs and calf, John grabbed the blade shooting toward his eyes and the other blade hacking at the back of his neck.

Growling, he crushed those blades as well and then kicked off the ground, jumping backward as the last two blades shot toward his heart. Reaching out to catch them, he was surprised when they abruptly changed directions, one cutting at his stomach and the other circling toward his temple. Tilting his head, John nearly lost an ear as the blade near his head scraped past his skull. At the same time his hand closed around the blade

coming toward his stomach and he brought it up in a powerful slash, slamming it into the blade above him with enough force to break both of them.

"Impressive. Not many people can survive my Dancing Blade assault," Uray said, floating in the air above the ruined building where John was standing. "You are a fascinating one. It's rare that Mages, even ninth-order Mages, train their bodies like you have. Unfortunately, that means you have given up any chance of ever contending with me in the realm of magic. Not that you would have been able to contend with me anyway."

The closer Uray was, the stronger the suppression John could feel in the surrounding mana. It almost felt like the mana was completely frozen. John could still sense it, but it had taken on a foreign feeling, and no matter how John tried to gather it, the mana wouldn't move an inch. Able to feel John's attempts, the supreme Mage watched him with something approaching interest.

"I take it that no one explained what a supreme Mage is?" Uray said, his mirthless smile returning. "Or maybe you were simply foolish and didn't believe the warnings? Hm, either way, you're in for a really bad day."

Looking up at Uray with a ragged glare, John tried to control his breathing as he questioned the supreme Mage.

"How are you doing that? Why can't I access the mana in the air?"

Surprised by the question, Uray didn't respond for a moment. He had expected fear, but apart from being out of breath, John didn't seem like he was backing down. Curiosity growing in his eyes, Uray floated down a few feet to get a closer look at John.

"You are familiar with domains, right? You must be at your rank. This is the domain of a supreme Mage. Absolute mana control. Without being stronger than me, you will never be able to use the mana that surrounds us. Fighting is pointless."

This must be why Eoan said a supreme Mage can kill any number of other Mages. Without the ability to use the surrounding mana, only physical attacks would work. But you'd also have to overcome his spells, which are powered by all the mana he has control of. What a mess.

Staring at Uray as he thought through his options, John realized he was stuck between a rock and a hard place. His only option of putting up a fight was tapping into the dragon flames, but that carried a hidden cost that terrified him. Another option was to retreat to the portal, but there was no

way Uray would allow him to escape freely. Regardless of what he did, he knew he was in for a rough fight. Letting out the breath he had been holding, John decided to make his best attempt without borrowing any power from Farroutef.

Above him, Uray seemed able to sense he had come to a decision, because the supreme Mage waved his hand and six more magical blades appeared above his head. Smiling faintly, Uray sent them hurtling toward him even as John took off. Sprinting through the ruins of the city, John barely dodged a blade that stabbed at his shoulder, suffering a slash on his arm instead. Gritting his teeth, John ignored the pain and continued to run, heading for the portal.

Seeing the direction he was running in, Uray's smirk vanished and a cold look appeared in the supreme Mage's eyes. With a wave of his hand he appeared above the Dome of Protection that shrouded the last remaining gate. Looking down at it, he quickly found its weakness and pointed at it with his lightning spear, using the pure mana weapon as a staff to amplify the spell he was casting. So far the Dome of Protection had been impervious to everything that had been thrown at it, but it took less than a minute for Uray to completely unravel it.

With a light cracking sound the Dome of Protection shattered, revealing the dimensional gate. Even less stable than it had been before, the gate was flickering, as if it would collapse at any moment. An amusing thought crossed Uray's face and he turned to glance at John who was still charging over, fighting against the magical blades that ripped at him. Covered in gashes, John trailed blood as he moved, his gaze fixed firmly on the now-visible gate and Uray who stood next to it.

"You have the tenacity of a beast," Uray said as John arrived, calling off the blades with a wave.

Panting, John didn't speak, even as his wounds began to close up.

"And I must admit, I am quite intrigued by you," Uray continued, not bothered by John's silence. "I've never seen a Mage with such well-developed physical abilities. Why don't we make a deal? You submit yourself to me so that I can study how your body became so sturdy, and I will not dispatch my armies to your world to take all the resources. Think well on this before you answer, because this is the only chance you will get."

Getting his breathing under control, John shook his head. He knew not to trust the words of the master of the Cabal, and there was no way he would submit himself to being studied like some sort of freak. Walking forward, he neared the dimensional gate, stopping when he was twenty feet away. Uray's expression was growing darker the longer John hesitated, but John didn't care one bit.

"If we are issuing last warnings, let me give you one," John said, his voice growing calmer with every word. "Abandon any thought of stepping into my world, and I will let you and your organization live. Persist in your actions and, no matter the price, I will burn you and your city to ash."

Shaking his head, Uray floated down until he was hovering a foot off the ground. He was around twenty feet from the dimensional gate as well, forming a triangle with John.

"Again, you threaten me, as if you could manage to offer even the slightest resistance to me should I truly try to kill you. I do not know where this foolhardiness comes from, but understand that I could end your life with a snap of my fingers. Or, maybe, after I capture you, I'll bring you back to this world you are trying so hard to protect so you can watch as I torture and kill everyone you love, forcing you to count each of their agonizing breaths."

The supreme Mage's words filled the air, gaining a nearly tangible weight as the mana he controlled swirled around him, pressing down on John. Already at the edge, John felt his mind slip, and suddenly he didn't care anymore. Blinking, all of the anger drained out of his eyes and his tension-filled shoulders relaxed. It was such a drastic change that the supreme Mage noticed it instantly and actually took a step back. Matching Uray's step, John's hand rose and his fingers snapped as a single, small fireball appeared above his head, casting blue light across the ruined ground.

CHAPTER 17

Facing off against the supreme Mage, John's small blue fireball didn't look like much, but it still caused Uray to flinch. Ever since achieving his level of power, Uray had never felt a threat from another Mage, but watching John's fire burn up the mana in the air caused a chill to travel down his spine. All of the mana in the city should have been under his control, and that included the mana in any spell that John cast, but this fireball was devouring the mana around it, erasing his control in the process. John stepped forward again, and as his foot landed the fireball suddenly split up, transforming into a dozen flickering blue flames that shot toward Uray.

Letting out a shout, Uray flashed backward, a spell carrying him away from the approaching fireballs even as he summoned a magical shield in front of his body and at the same time threw the lightning spear in his hand at John's chest. The spear transformed back into a bolt of lightning that shook the air with thunder as it flew toward John, but he simply reached out his hand and grabbed it, the blue flames that surrounded his palm burning the lightning up until nothing remained.

In the same instant, the fireballs he had thrown out hit Uray's shield, burning straight through without a pause. The sight was so shocking that the supreme Mage nearly forgot to dodge out of the way, only escaping at the last second. He had no idea what the blue flame John was using was, but it consumed any mana it touched in an instant, obliterating his shield. Walking forward, John glanced around at the city and then returned his detached gaze to Uray.

"You are the one who made this choice, so you must live with the consequences."

Lifting his hand, John summoned another small fireball. This one rose up into the air, rising up above the city and multiplying as it rose. A single fireball turned into a ten, and then one hundred. All of the members of the Cabal who had witnessed the power of the first fireball felt a sense of horror as the hundred fireballs split again, turning into one thousand, which then transformed into ten thousand. Still standing in place, his hand pointed up at the sky, John only hesitated for a moment before speaking softly.

"Fall."

Like blue rain from heaven, ten thousand fireballs dropped out of the sky, completely covering the city in an unquenchable blue flame. Everything they touched was burned away, turning to ash or melting into superheated slag. Desperately summoning shields to block the blue flames, Uray could only teleport away to try and avoid the fireballs, but they seemed almost alive as over a hundred of the small blue flames turned and shot toward his new position.

Not bothering to watch any longer, John turned and walked into the flickering dimensional gate, once again feeling that now-familiar tug as he traveled across worlds. Stepping out of the dimensional tunnel, he could feel a deep sense of familiarity wash over him as his feet landed on the bare mountain where the gate had been set up.

There were a dozen people around him who had been working on stabilizing the portal from this side who were all frozen, staring at him in shock. Taking a step forward, John was going to cast a quick spell to get rid of them when the world began to crumble around him, shattering as waves of pressure from his body broke apart the fabric of the world. Like ripples through a pond breaking up a reflection, the waves moved through the members of the Cabal, tearing them apart.

Realizing he had a serious problem, John stopped moving, barely registering the explosion of the gate behind him as it was shredded by the pressure he was releasing. Not daring to move, John's mind spun, trying to figure out what was going on. A moment later the answer appeared in his head, causing him to grimace.

[Query: Why am I breaking the world?]

[Answer: Mana saturation is over seventy-nine percent due to the absorption of mana from the upper worlds. Such a high volume of mana cannot be contained by this world, and the trace amounts of mana your body is giving off is causing the observed destruction. Options are as follows. One, return to the upper worlds. Two, reduce mana overflow by channeling all excess into your mana pool. Three, cease using any mana.]

Letting out a groan that shattered the side of the mountain, John had to restrain himself from punching the ground out of fear that the entire mountain would disintegrate. He had never imagined that going to the upper worlds would have created such a problem, and the solutions that Mental Model had come up with were all terrible. His first option was just out of the question. The end of the world was quickly approaching, and John couldn't eliminate the threats to the world from an upper world.

The second option was no better, as he was limiting the amount of mana he stored in his mana pool as much as possible since every bit of mana he sent into his mana pool caused Farroutef the Deceiver to grow that much stronger. While it wouldn't be hard for him to bleed off the extra mana, he had to store it somewhere, and his mana pool was the only place he could store it. But that would mean that every motion he made would be feeding the evil dragon's soul, strengthening him and hastening the day he would awake.

Left with only one option, John realized he didn't even know how to stop using mana entirely. For years, he had been so comfortable with using mana in every motion that it was as natural as breathing for him. Still trying his best to avoid moving, John submitted the question to his Mental Model.

[Query: How do I cease using mana?]

[Answer: By locking your mana pool away behind a magical seal and draining the mana from your skin, muscles, and bones, you can isolate yourself in a pseudo-manaless state. Side effects include not being able to access your mana, weakness, and a restriction of spells to the fourth order.]

[Query: Why would my spells be restricted?]

[Answer: Mana purity in this world is not high enough to cast spells above the fourth order.]

[Query: Will I be able to undo the seal?]

[Answer: No. The seal required to lock away your mana pool will be in the eighth order, making it impossible for you to break it by yourself. Return to an upper world to remove the seal.]

Okay, that's not as bad as I thought. It will mean having to be very careful while I'm in the world, but that's fine. I should be able to handle any threats that show up in this world with fourth-order spells. Though, if I had known this was going to happen, I would have made sure to kill Ural. It's unlikely he survived the dragon flame, but it would have been better to be sure.

Still holding his breath, John followed the directions his Mental Model laid out, weaving his mana into a complicated seal. He had never created anything like this before, and it took him a few different variations to find a seal that wouldn't leak mana, but eventually he hit on a configuration that would work, preventing the mana he was using from moving in his body. It was a strange feeling, as if he was carrying a large stone on his chest, just above his heart. John rarely used his mana pool and hadn't accessed it since he had discovered Farroutef's soul hiding in it, and the seal blocked it off completely.

Once it was in place, he began to pull all of the mana from his body, starting from the furthest extremities of his fingers and toes, using the stream of mana to complete the last piece of the seal. As the mana flowed out of his arms and legs it felt like he was peeling a thick layer of skin from his body, pulling it away from the flesh underneath. While the pain didn't particularly bother him, the weakness that was left behind almost made him panic. A few times he had to stop the process, his breath coming in sharp gasps that crushed the air and left holes in the ground.

I don't have any choice. If I don't do this, I'm going to turn into a walking wreaking ball.

Pushing past the panic that his growing weakness ignited, John continued to peel his mana away and feed it into the seal until his body was bone dry, like a sponge wrung out and left in the desert sun. It felt as if he had just used his muscles intensely, causing him to feel rather wobbly. It had taken nearly two hours for John to seal his mana back up, and when he finally finished, he was so tired he could barely walk.

Thankfully, his exhausted steps didn't destroy everything around him, and he was able to sit down without worrying about crushing the stone he

sat on. Trying to calm his ragged breathing, John focused his mind on his status. He had gained dozens of spells during his time jumping between worlds, but it was his Astral Insight skill that had grown the most, growing from twenty-five to sixty-one. The increase had come from his use of the dimensional gates and his firsthand observations on the way they worked, as well as from the information he had gotten from the Candle Scholar Tower's library. As he was examining his status, he heard the world system's voice in his head.

[You have lessened a threat to this world. The Apocalypse weakens.]
[Apocalypse Points: 8/10]
[The date of the final day draws closer.]

Final day? What is that?

To John's shock, the world system actually responded to his mental question.

[The Final Day is the day the world ends. Only by reducing the number of Apocalypse Points to zero can the Final Day be avoided. However, with every two Apocalypse Points that are removed, the Final Day approaches sooner.]

Are you serious!? What kind of broken system is that!? Ugh, this game is terrible!

[Player John Sutton's complaints are noted and rejected.]

Freezing, it was a whole minute before John was able to react.

System? How are you suddenly able to talk?

[This system has always been able to talk, but talking requires mana. Until Player John Sutton raised his mana saturation to an acceptable level, this system needed to be judicious in the mana it used.]

But now you can talk? Why don't you answer some questions for me?

As if it could sense John's darkening thoughts, the system suddenly withdrew, speaking in a fading voice.

[Bzzt, bzzt, power low… unable to continue the conver…]

Hey! Don't run away!

Hearing nothing, John ground his teeth. Thankfully, he had already sealed his mana away, otherwise he might have just destroyed the world right there. It took him a few minutes to calm himself back down, and once he did, he opened up his quests to see what had changed. When he opened up A Covetous Gaze, a sinking feeling shrouded his chest.

[A Covetous Gaze: In a stunning display of power, you have obliterated the Cabal of the Broken Gate, leaving only their master alive. Bent on revenge and determined to capture you for further study, the supreme Mage Uray Lotheric has set his eyes on your world and will stop at nothing until he has either captured or killed you.]

I really should have killed him. That's what I get for being so worried about waking up a sleeping dragon. But now I've got an angry supreme Mage gunning for me, to say nothing of the beast king lurking in the shadows. The only saving grace is that Breaking Dawn or whatever isn't strong enough to show up as an actual threat. Still, they're probably still running around the world like the rats they are, and if I'm not careful, I could get bitten.

Sitting on the rock still, John found himself suddenly exhausted. It may have been the fact that his mana was sealed and his body no longer held the huge quantities of mana it had even half an hour before, but it was more than a physical exhaustion. He had been carrying the world's survival for more than a decade, and it seemed like every time he made progress toward improving the situation, it just got worse again.

A large part of him just wanted to bring Ellie, Ben, and the rest of the people on the farm into the Shadow Tower and let the rest of the world go to pot. Between him and Rebya, it wouldn't be hard to ensure the tower's survival, and at the very worst, he could always just bring everyone to one of the upper worlds. It would be a million times easier than trying to play

this broken game. Letting out a sigh, John stood up and waved his hand, casting Levitate. A moment later, he shot up into the mountains and scanned the horizon. He could see the sun setting in the distance and the shadow it cast over the large valley where his home was.

It was undeniable that he would miss his farm, but he could always start another farm somewhere else. Shooting through the air, he felt the cool breeze flashing past his skin and was startled for a moment before remembering that he had drained nearly all the mana in his body to create the seal. He hadn't felt cold in a long time due to the burning mana that normally filled his body, so it was somewhat novel to feel the coolness of the wind.

Flying along, John's mind wandered, thinking about everything he had been through over the last week. He had only spent a few days away from this world, and if Foyrath, the master of the Arcane Tower, had been telling the truth, it was possible that less than a day had passed since he left. Shaking his head to free it of unnecessary thoughts, John concentrated on making it to the valley, arriving as the first stars appeared in the sky. Landing in the yard, he heard a happy mooing and a large bull came trotting up to him, nudging him happily.

"Hello, Ferdie. How are you doing?" John asked, scratching the giant bull behind his ear.

Hearing the noise, the door opened and Ellie appeared on the porch, her eyes wide with disbelief.

"John? What happened? Why are you back already? Is Katrine okay?"

Holding up his hand to stem the flow of questions, John instinctively tried to create a mana crystal for Ferdie with his other hand but nothing happened. Shaken, he stared down at his hand for a moment before remembering that all of his personal mana was sealed up, hidden behind the powerful seal he had created. For a moment a thread of panic welled up in him, but he pushed it away before he did anything stupid.

"John? Are you okay?"

Patting Ferdie's neck, John walked over to the porch, looking up at Ellie with a tired smile.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Katrine's safe. She's in good hands and hopefully will be back soon. When did I leave?"

"You only left this morning," Ellie said, reaching out to hug John's waist as he stepped up onto the porch. "I expected you to be gone for at

least a week."

"This morning? Huh, that's sort of crazy. Time moves differently in the upper worlds. A good bit faster. So for me, it's been almost a week. A really crazy week. But Katrine is fine. Like I said, I left her in good hands."

"Come on, I've got dinner on. You're probably hungry."

Opening the door for John to go into the kitchen, Ellie saw him stagger slightly and reached out to support him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" she asked, concerned.

Sagging as he lowered himself into a chair, John nodded.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just pretty tired. Like I said, it's been a long week."

CHAPTER 18

When John opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was the sunlight streaming through the curtains that were shifting in the gentle breeze. Someone had opened his window and the sweet morning air was filling his room, bringing life with every breath. A good night's sleep had done wonders for John, and even though his arms and legs were still feeling unusually weak, he found himself so happy to be back in his own bed that he didn't mind. It had only been a week for him since he had left the farm, but that time away had reinforced just how much he loved his farm.

Stretching, he sat up, his gaze taking in the familiar furniture scattered around the room. A faint sound of dishes drifted in from the kitchen and he could smell bacon or sausages on the stove. Taking a moment to sit on the edge of his bed, John didn't think about everything that had happened the day before and instead just enjoyed the fact that he was back. It was impossible to keep his worried thoughts at bay forever though, so after a few minutes he let out a sigh and got dressed.

Making his way through the hall into the kitchen, he saw Ellie bustling around, working on something. A steaming breakfast was laid out on the kitchen table, but John leaned against the door jamb and watched her work for a moment, appreciating the way she concentrated on what she was doing. Turning to get something from the cupboard, Ellie saw him and her eyes sparkled as she walked over to him.

"Oh, John! You're up. Come eat breakfast."

Straightening up, John gave her a hug and the two of them sat down to eat. It was strange for John, since Ellie had only experienced him being gone for the better part of a single day, while he had experienced almost a week in that time. John had filled Ellie in on everything that had happened already, including having to seal himself, so rather than talk about that, they focused on the food in front of them.

When his mana was active John ate because he enjoyed the taste of food and because he wanted to maintain at least a semblance of humanity. Now, however, he found himself actually hungry. Without mana to maintain his body, he needed food to power it. A dozen sausage links, pancakes, eggs, and six rolls were quickly consumed as John ate, but he stopped Ellie from

preparing more food. After helping her with the dishes, John and Ellie went out to the porch to sit in the morning sun.

Holding his tea, John looked around the farm, a strange feeling settling over him. In the distance, he could see Ferdie grazing in his pasture, and Sigvald was currently perched on top of the barn, watching over a few hens who were walking around the yard. From where John sat, he could see a bit of the fields in the distance, filled to bursting with green wheat stalks. The summer wheat was going to ripen in a few weeks, and then it would be time for the winter planting.

Realizing that Ellie was looking at him, John took a sip of his tea and returned her gaze. There was a shadow of worry on her face, and John found that he was growing uncomfortable being stared at. It was such a surprise to be feeling that way that he actually frowned for a moment. Worried that Ellie might think he was frowning at her, John tried to smile, though he imagined it was probably rather crooked.

"Are you okay?"

Hearing the quiet concern in Ellie's question, John sighed and shook his head.

"I honestly don't know. I don't think I understood how impactful it would be to seal my mana away. Do people feel like this all the time?"

Looking at his hand, John felt like his body was starving for energy.

"It's probably more pronounced for you, since the difference is so distinct," Ellie said, shaking her head. "You've gone from being practically made of mana back to being a being of flesh and blood like the rest of us, so it seems reasonable that there would be an adjustment process."

"Yeah, I think you're right. But it's pretty terrible."

"I think we should go and have Rebya examine you."

"That's a good plan. How does this afternoon work for you? I think I want to take a walk around the farm. I know it's strange, but I feel like I need to reconnect with everything. Living like this is so… limiting."

Finishing her tea, Ellie stood up and took John's empty cup.

"Let me put these inside and we can go together."

"Thanks."

Looking out at the farm, John took a deep breath, marveling at the gentle summer breeze that rippled across the yard. For years, every breath he took was packed full of mana that would be fed into the blue dragon flame that rested in his mana pool. But since he sealed all of his personal

mana, his breathing had returned to normal, no longer sending scalding mana into his lungs. It was both strange and invigorating, though he was a bit confused as to what he was feeling.

Hearing the door open behind him, John stood up, stretching his arms again. Feeling aches and pains in his muscles was another thing he had forgotten about. But now he felt as if he could feel all of his muscles and the fatigue that had built up in them. A hand slipped into his as Ellie walked up next to him, and John's heart jumped in excitement. Tugging on him, Ellie led him to the edge of the porch.

"Let's take a look at the ovens first," she said, tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear.

Around the back of the house was a wide stone courtyard with a few large stone ovens and a small shed where the dough was made and the finished loaves were stored. Seeing a middle-aged woman taking a golden loaf out of an oven as they walked over, John smiled. The delicious smell of fresh baked bread was one of his favorites, and the filtered flour they were producing made for some truly delectable bread. John and Ellie didn't stop to avoid disrupting the ladies who were working, but as they walked past the bakery toward the garden, Ellie pointed to an empty hill in the distance.

"I was thinking we should make another bunkhouse. There are a lot of ladies working on the farm and they have to travel back and forth to town every day. We have a bunkhouse for the men, but it would be nice to have one for the ladies to stay in."

"That's a great idea," John said, surveying the hill Ellie had pointed out. "We could also make small single-room units if that would be better. I know some of the ladies have babies or young children, right?"

"At least a few of them do, so giving them their own rooms would probably be best. It's not a really high priority, since we're not too far from town, but that would save them at least an hour each day. Oh, have you seen the new hybrid flowers Rebya has been growing?"

Opening the gate that led into the garden, John followed Ellie through as she led him to a patch of vines with a small rainbow flower on it. They released a soft scent that reminded John of the growth acceleration flowers, but they were clearly another species, since these flowers were soaking up the sun without any problem. Leaning close to take a better look, John heard Ellie chuckling.

"Are these… sweetpeas?"

“Sort of. They’re a mix between sweetpea, the growth acceleration flowers, and a couple other plants. But they carry a less concentrated version of the growth agent, and we’re hoping that the potions we make with these flowers will be less lethal than the potions you were testing. Speaking of, I know Rebya wanted to keep going with those experiments, but now that your mana is sealed, I don’t know if that’s a good idea.”

“I should be fine,” John said, shrugging.

Plucking a petal from the vine, he placed it in his mouth, expecting the bitter taste of grass. Instead the petal tasted slightly sweet and melted quickly, sending a refreshing feeling of mana through his body. Stunned, John stared at the flowers, his eyes trembling. An intense desire to eat every single one of the flowers sprang up in him, and it was with some trouble that he stopped himself. Noticing something out of the ordinary in his reaction, Ellie reached down to pluck a petal for herself.

“What did you think?” she asked, nibbling on the edge of the petal. “They’re pretty good, aren’t they?”

“Incredible. I want to eat all of them,” John said, standing up and stepping away from the flowers. “We should probably go and see Rebya before I do. I don’t know what’s going on with my body right now, but it’s freaking me out.”

“Okay, that works for me. Come on, let’s go.”

Leaving the garden together, John and Ellie hurried to the cheese cellar, where they found a group of ladies making the second batch of cheese for the day. Every time John entered the cellar, he felt as if something had changed, and this time it was the number of workers making cheese. Among the women who were actually making the cheese, there were three young men who were carrying the heavy milk cans, stacking the cheese, and helping press out the whey.

Stopping to meet them, John welcomed them all to the farm, doing his best to ignore the fanatical light in their gazes when they looked at him. A few days ago he wouldn’t have given it another thought, but for some reason, his current emotional state was much more susceptible to things like embarrassment. After meeting the young men and saying hello to all the women, John and Ellie headed through the portal stone to the Shadow Tower and made their way up to the main laboratory where Rebya was working.

“John, Ellie, good morning. John, what happened to you? Where is all your mana?”

Waving to Rebya’s projection, John shrugged.

“I had some, uh, problems when I came back to this world, so I was forced to make some adjustments. Including sealing my mana into my mana pool. Not very comfortable, if I’m honest.”

“Hmm, I can bet. How is it affecting Farroutef?”

“Actually, I think it’s blocked some of his influence on me,” John said with a crooked smile. “Though if I’m right, it means that a lot of my confidence is from him, rather than from myself. But ever since I set the seal I’ve been feeling weak and scattered. Like I lack the ability to do things. It’s clearly just a feeling, but I can’t help it.”

“Curious. Tell me more about why you had to seal yourself. You said you had some problems, right? What sort of problems?”

Taking a seat at one of the tables, John began to recount his experience, from the moment he stepped into this world through the Cabal’s dimensional gate. After giving his detailed observations, he shook his head and sighed.

“From what I understand, the main problem is that the amount of mana in my body is so high that I was shedding mana whenever I moved or acted in any way. That mana was destroying everything around me. I took a step forward and the world rippled. But like I said, that ripple killed everyone nearby.”

Sending her flower over to John, Rebya looked at his body with interest, poking him here and there with a tendril.

“And you said you had three possible solutions?”

“Correct. The first was leaving. My mana is strong enough right now, or at least it was, that I could have just made a gate to Candle Scholar Tower or the Windstar Ruins and simply left. The trace mana my body gives off doesn’t impact the upper worlds since it’s within the limit that the upper worlds can bear. The second option was to filter all the mana in my surroundings back to my mana pool. That would require pretty tight mana control, but given that my mana control is maxed, I think I could have done it.”

“Then why not pick that choice?”

“Because when I feed mana into my mana pool, Farroutef gets closer to waking up. I’ve been tracking his growth, and when I cycle mana through

my mana pool, it heals him. Up until now, it's all been trace amounts, partially because the mana in this world is so thin, but since going to the upper worlds, the mana in my body has condensed pretty drastically. If I were to filter that mana into him, I'm afraid he would heal that much faster."

Pausing to consider John's words, Rebya's forehead furrowed and she tilted her head to the side.

"How is that different from what you're doing?"

"I'm not actually storing any mana in my mana pool," John said, grimacing. "I've just locked it all up around my mana pool, creating a seal that keeps mana from going in and out. I've been considering something like this for a while, but unfortunately it didn't have quite the effect I was hoping for."

"Explain?"

Sighing, John absently drew the letter eight on the table next to him with his finger.

"You know how I told you about those Apocalypse Points? And about how the world is going to end? Well, one of the three major reasons it will be destroyed is Farroutef waking up and seizing control over my body."

"That sounds terrible," Rebya said, her eyes narrowing, "but you were hoping that sealing your mana pool where he slumbers would remove the threat?"

"Exactly. No such luck, unfortunately. Instead, I just cut myself off from my mana. Not a great idea in retrospect."

"I mean, you're not exploding people when you walk," Ellie said, laughing.

Rolling his eyes, John found himself chuckling as well. He had been hoping for a better effect from his seal, and if he had managed to erase the threat of Farroutef the Deceiver, John would have been happy to forgo his mana for the rest of time. Since that hadn't happened, he was starting to regret his choice. Especially since there was still the threat of Gorraleck the Destroyer, whoever she was, showing up, and Uray Lotheric was lurking in the shadows.

Sensing that John was feeling down, Ellie reached over to grab his hand, giving him an encouraging smile. This was the first time Ellie had ever seen John show such vulnerability, and the sight of his downcast

expression made her heart ache. Trying to think of a way to cheer him up, she turned to Rebya.

“We should show John what we’ve been working on. The sweetpea potion.”

“That’s a great idea,” Rebya said, nodding. “Besides, I think it might hold the solution to your problems, John.”

CHAPTER 19

"How familiar are you with beasts?" Rebya asked, looking back and forth between John and Ellie.

"All I know is what I've observed from watching Ferdie," John said with a shrug, "and the little bit we've talked about."

"Then you understand that beasts don't operate with a mana pool, instead storing their mana in their muscles, bones, and skin. The same is true for plants, actually. We store mana in our roots, stalks, and leaves. The question is, why don't beasts shed mana when they move, like you were?"

"Isn't that just because the mana saturation of their bodies is so low? I only had a problem when I came back to this world after visiting an upper world."

Shaking one of her tendrils, Rebya began to draw a picture in the air. Starting with a circle, she added a curved arrow that exited from one side of the circle and went in on the other side.

"But that's not true. When I first met you, mana was leaking from you like you were a colander. It was being expressed as heat, and you were bending it back into yourself under your skin. That's what your breathing method is. You take in mana, refine it, and then when it starts to escape from your body, you control it to go back into your body."

Frowning slightly, John tried to think of another explanation, but it was clear that Rebya was right. He had long been so used to containing his mana and the heat it generated that he had forgotten about it. There was no need to consciously think about cycling his mana because it just happened naturally. Realizing the implications of what Rebya was saying, John's eyes went wide and he exchanged a glance with Ellie.

"Hold on, you mean to say I didn't need to seal my mana at all?"

"Unfortunately, no, I'm not saying that," Rebya said, shaking her head ruefully. "Though I imagine you'll get to that point eventually. No, I'm saying that the actual problem isn't what you thought it was. You could bend your mana back into your body because you were so far below saturation. But at almost eighty-percent mana saturation, there simply isn't enough space in your body to easily accept your mana anymore. That leaves your mana pool as the only place you can store it."

“So sealing it was the right choice,” John said, nodding. “By locking it in place, I’ve prevented it from escaping my body naturally. For at least a little while.”

“Exactly. Your body is now craving mana and should be absorbing the mana around you, which means you’ll eventually return to the point where you were before.”

“While also having a huge amount of mana locked around my heart and mana pool,” John said with a groan. “I’ve turned myself into a giant time bomb, haven’t I?”

“Effectively, yes. But you’ve also bought yourself some much-needed time,” Rebya said with a small smile. “Remember how I said that beasts and plants store mana in their bodies without a mana pool?”

“Yes?”

Instead of continuing, Rebya started shaking one of her vines back and forth, whipping it through the air. Seeing that she was staring at him, John was confused, unsure what he was supposed to be seeing. Next to him, Ellie blinked and stared at the thrashing vine before clapping her hands together.

“You’re not shedding mana!” she said, blinking again to return to normal vision.

Stunned by the revelation, John realized Ellie was right. No matter how Rebya moved, all of her mana remained bound in her body. As a sentient plant, Rebya had the benefit of a Mage’s memories and intellect, but she was still very much a plant. Thinking back on the time he had known Rebya, John quickly realized he had never seen her express mana unintentionally. The same was true for Ferdie and Sigvald, who both seemed to have a natural level of control over their mana.

They could use their mana when they wanted to, and they could both express it explosively when they wanted to, but there was never a time when John had seen them leaking mana like he constantly seemed to. He had gotten so used to bending his mana back into himself that he had just assumed that was what others were doing as well, but as he looked at Rebya, he realized that her mana circulation method was actually preventing her mana from leaking out into her surroundings.

“Exactly,” Rebya said, smiling happily at Ellie. “Mana-active plants and beasts naturally avoid shedding mana. In fact, the more powerful a beast, or plant for that matter, the easier it is for them to restrain their mana. That is why Ferdie gained the ability to shift his size. He should be the size of a

small hill, but since that would make life on the farm hard, he instinctively shrinks himself."

Looking down at his hand, John realized that even in his manaless state, he was still shedding trace amounts of mana. It had only been a day since he had returned and sealed his mana, but his body had been drawing in mana from his environment and had been naturally cycling it to prevent it from escaping. It was only a tiny bit, but the mana he breathed in was constantly trying to slip out of his body and he was unconsciously bending it back in. Glancing over at Ellie, he quickly realized she was shedding trace amounts of mana as well. Seeing his glance, Rebya laughed and nodded.

"All humans do it."

"Then the key is being a bit less human," John said, his voice low.

Hearing the familiar thread of certainty that had been missing since he returned creeping back into John's voice, Ellie found herself smiling. Like a drowning man grabbing onto a piece of wood floating by, John latched onto the image Rebya was painting for him. If he could figure out the difference between the way human bodies held mana and the way beast and plant bodies held mana, he might be able to eliminate the problem at its root.

"So, what is the key?"

Shrugging her shoulders, Rebya held her hands out as her flower lowered a bit.

"I don't actually know. I've never studied the difference between people and plants or beasts before, at least in this area. I suspect it has something to do with a difference in the way that mana is stored in our respective bodies, but until we do some research, it will be hard to tell. I'm also thinking that the key is going to be found in the growth acceleration flowers, since the formula we created previously was able to strengthen your body by *exercising* the cells in your skin. That's where we should focus our research to begin."

Clapping his hands together, John nodded, genuine excitement filling him.

"Let's do it. Oh, that reminds me, Ellie showed me the sweetpea flowers before we came here. They're really impressive. I tried one and man were they good. I found myself wanting to eat the entire patch. Do they work on regular people?"

“Not directly. Brewed into a light tea, or mixed with flour they do,” Rebya said, her face lighting up. “Actually, I’ve been planning on increasing the number of plots we have for them significantly. A single petal mixed in with a bag of flour will give the flour a fortifying effect, not only improving the health of anyone who eats it, but allowing them to process the trace mana the flour contains much more efficiently. Best of all, it looks like the effect is permanent.”

“Oh, wow.”

“Exactly. A few years of eating the treated flour and most people should have a high enough mana resistance that the forbidden zones won’t be much of a problem. After a generation, we’re talking about an entire population that will be able to stand a higher purity in the universal mana pool. My goal is to begin mixing the sweetpea flowers and the wheat you’re growing, creating a strain that contains both effects. But that will take quite a while. In the meantime, our focus should be on increasing the production of wheat, the growth of the modified sweetpea flowers, and our processing capabilities.

“The first batches have gone out, and in a few weeks we’ll have another harvest to pull in. Oh, that reminds me. With the correct enchantment, we could probably triple our crop in the valley. It would mean not experiencing winter down in the valley, but it should be doable. I have records of it being done on a small scale before, but between you and I, we should be able to use the tower as an anchor to do it at scale.”

Biting his lip, John thought for a moment and nodded.

“That sounds interesting, but it will have to wait until I have my mana back. Once I do, let’s revisit that subject. For now, I want to focus on learning how to avoid destroying the world myself before the apocalyptic threats do.”

“A wise idea,” Rebya said, chuckling. “The final thing I need to bring to your attention are my mana reserves. The tower needs more power than ever these days, and unless I send out the flower guardians, I won’t have enough power to last the year. I was going to ask you to recharge me at some point soon, but that will also have to wait.”

“Problems really come in pairs, don’t they,” John said, grimacing.

“You’ve got more than a pair of problems,” Ellie teased, poking his cheek lightly. “But at least you’re surrounded by people who love you and won’t leave you out to dry when things get difficult. Don’t worry, John.

Even if the Eternal Flame runs into problems he can't just wave his hand to fix, we'll get them sorted."

Catching her hand, John could feel the beat of her heart through her finger, and he found a deep calm spreading through him. Ellie was right. He might be lacking in the power he was used to having right now, but he had more than enough support in the people around him. Pulling Ellie into a hug, John looked at Rebya and nodded.

"As soon as I'm back on my feet, I'll recharge your power reserves. Which means we need to get to work. Where do we start?"

With a sweep of one of her vines, Rebya cleared one of the tables and tapped on it. Her flower drifted over to it and she gestured for John to lie down.

"We start with an examination so we can create a baseline."

Smirking at the look on John's face, Ellie laughed and gave him a peck on the cheek. It was obvious that he didn't relish the idea of being poked and prodded. Slipping out of his grasp, Ellie gestured to the table.

"Well, I'll leave you to it. Let me know how it goes."

"Hold on there," Rebya said, one of her vines slipping out of the darkness and blocking Ellie's path. "You need to stick around because you're next. John is hardly the typical class holder, and the more people we can examine, the better. In fact, we'll also need at least a few mortals, both male and female, and a few beasts too. I can examine one of the grimm, and we'll need Ferdie and Sigvald as well. Hmm, for good measure we should examine a spectre as well."

Rubbing her hands together in growing excitement, Rebya's eyes practically glowed with a fanatical light.

"After all, the more subjects we test, the more we'll learn."

Coughing lightly, John shook his head.

"Rebya, your obsession is showing."

"Ahem, excuse me," Rebya said, quickly correcting her expression. "We can leave everyone else for later. For now, let's start with you two."

Grumbling, John climbed up on the table and laid down as Rebya's vines hovered over him. He didn't relish the idea of being poked and prodded, but he also knew it was for his benefit. Besides, he knew that Rebya's excitement wasn't something nefarious but instead hardwired into her. When she had been created, it was with the express purpose of storing

up knowledge for future generations, and part of that included pushing the boundaries of magic as far as possible.

Lying there as Rebya began her examination, John did his best to ignore the pokes and prods, instead turning his mind to his current situation. There were a lot of things in his life that felt entirely out of his control, and since returning from the fight against the Cabal, John had been feeling the weight of it. Thankfully, he had good friends who were able to help him get out of his own head and set a path.

He had no idea what it would take for him to become more like a beast and stop shedding mana, but he knew that, if he could, he would be firmly on the path toward finding his solution to the Apocalypse Points that were weighing on him. According to what the system had said when he talked to it last, the lower the number of Apocalypse Points he had, the faster the Final Day would come. On the surface, that meant that the longer he delayed, the longer he would have to grow in power. But there was a trap hidden in that mentality.

The longer he waited, the stronger the enemy would get as well. Already Uray Lotheric, the supreme Mage of the Cabal of the Broken Gate, was getting ten days to prepare for every single day John had. Without access to his mana, John had no hope of even scratching the supreme Mage, and when he had sealed his mana, he had also sealed the dragon flame resting in his heart. In principle, the same was true for Gorraleck the Destroyer, the king of all beasts. She was currently preparing her forces, getting ready to sweep the world in an unstoppable wave, and as John delayed dealing with her, she would continue to grow in power until she was ready to launch her assault.

At least the Doom Points had carried a sense of urgency behind them. The Apocalypse Points were the opposite, and John felt as if he had been lulled into a false sense of security by their inactivity. If he had hurried to deal with each of the threats, he would have hastened the final fight, but while he may have been weaker, so too would everyone else. There was no clearer example of this than the third major threat, Farroutef the Deceiver.

The dragon sleeping in his mana pool regained strength every day, and would continue to do so until he was strong enough to seize control of John. The dragon had already tried once, stopped by the spark that Sven's words had lit in his heart, but John had no doubt that the dragon would try again and again until one of them was destroyed. His mind wandering, John

ignored the vines hovering over him and let his consciousness sink down into his body, to where an impossibly blue spark still hovered in his heart.

Different from the dark blue flame that burned in his mana pool, this spark was the color of the pure sky in the middle of summer and carried an echo of the worlds Sven had spoken in John's mental battlefield. It stood for hope, peace, and an unquenchable desire for both.

CHAPTER 20

After a full examination of both John and Ellie, Rebya kicked them out to find more subjects to examine, all the while muttering about things neither John or Ellie understood. Occasionally, they could catch snippets of something, but the plant Mage was clearly thinking through the subject at hand in a way that was completely alien to both of them. Realizing they wouldn't be able to help her, they headed back to the farm for lunch.

Rebya had asked them to bring Ferdie and Sigvald over, along with getting a few regular, non-class holder humans for her to experiment on, and John had agreed after a good bit of hesitation. After sharing lunch with Thomas, John sent him to the tower to get an examination, along with the two beasts that Rebya had requested.

There was always work to do on the farm, so John quickly found himself immersed in new tasks. His primary goal was to continue to clear the valley for fields, but in order to do that, they needed to make sure the squatters living around the valley weren't going to get upset. According to Thomas' report, most of the squatters were excited to be part of the farm and get a job overseeing the nearby fields. There were a couple squatters who weren't as excited about the idea, but Thomas was still negotiating with them.

Heading out to one of the new fields they were creating, John took a look at the trees that covered the plot. If he had his mana, it would have been as simple as touching the trees and incinerating them from the inside out. However, now he was going to have to clear the field the old-fashioned way. Hefting the axe he had brought, John took a breath and drew the axe back, unleashing a smooth swing. With a hearty thwack, the axe sank deep into the tree trunk, cutting almost halfway through it.

Despite his lack of mana, John was still tremendously strong, and he pushed on the top of the tree while he pulled his axe out. Winding up again, he cut a deep notch out of the tree with another chop and kicked the wedge away as it popped out. Lifting his axe one last time, he cut down and the tree began to fall. Pleased that he had taken it down in three blows, John grabbed the trunk and dragged it out of the forest. Tossing it onto the ground to start his pile, John returned for his next tree.

All afternoon he worked, bringing the trees down and clearing nearly an acre of land. The stumps were all pulled out by hand, leaving the ground full of holes John filled with a few casts of a Shape Earth spell. About halfway into the work, he'd realized he could have just cast the spell to force the trees out of the ground in the first place, but he was having so much fun working up a sweat that he didn't bother.

One of the advantages to squeezing all of the mana out of his body was that he could actually feel the strain of the activity. When his body was packed with mana he never grew tired, but now he could feel the soreness setting in. It had been a surprise to find out he had missed the feeling of working so much, so he leaned in and worked until the dinner bell sounded. Gathering his tools, he headed back to the farm, joining a few other workers who were heading toward the bunkhouse.

"Hello, Mr. Sutton."

"Hello, sir."

"Gentlemen. How are you doing today?"

"Doing well, sir. It's a beautiful day for working."

"It is, isn't it," John said, breathing in the fresh air. "How are the fields looking? Thomas has you checking for disease, right?"

"Yes sir. The wheat is fine. Finer than any I've seen. The seed we're using is hardy, sir, and the wheat is actually choking out the weeds that try to grow up. Never seen that before, but there are a lot of things about this farm that aren't normal."

Glancing at the middle-aged farmhand who was speaking, John found himself curious.

"Oh, yeah? Like what?"

Giving John an incredulous look, the farmhand jerked his thumb at the massive piles of logs John had cut down that afternoon.

"Oh, hah. Right."

"But it's a good place. Peaceful. And you don't skimp on the pay, sir. Which makes this the best job I've ever had. The wife is happy and my son is getting better too. So thank you."

Feeling slightly embarrassed by the straightforward praise, John just smiled and nodded before waving goodbye and heading to the house. Using the pump he had put outside of the house, he washed off his hands and his face. Soaking his hair under the pump, he shook out the water and combed his wet hair over to the side, feeling drops of water running down his neck.

Struck by the strangeness of the feeling, John realized he hadn't felt anything like this for years. He was so used to using mana to dry himself off whenever he got wet that it had been a long time since he had felt the sensation of water running down his body.

Looking at his hands, he saw the dirt under his nails and realized he had completely forgotten what it meant to be a human. Not in the grand sense, but in the mundane sense. He didn't remember what it was like to not have mana to do everything for him. He was still staring at his hand when Ellie poked her head out the door. Seeing that he was lost in thought, she walked over, the sound of her feet on the boards of the porch snapping him out of his daze.

"Are you coming for dinner? Why are you all wet? Wait, did you forget you can't just dry yourself off anymore?"

Chuckling, Ellie took the dish towel she had with her off of her shoulder and dangled it in front of John.

"Wait till people hear that the Eternal Flame needed a towel."

"Hush," John said, smiling and flicking a few drops of water at Ellie.

Dodging the drops, Ellie retreated back to the doorway.

"Well, I just cleaned the floor, so don't track in any dirt. When you're cleaned up I have dinner ready, so come on in."

Using the towel to rub his hair dry, John took off his boots before heading into the kitchen. Thomas was still at the tower, so dinner was just John and Ellie, but they had a good time talking about what the farm needed and joking about what Rebya was going to do with the information she had gained from examining them. After helping Ellie clean up, John sat down to go over the farm's books, just to make sure he was keeping everything he needed to in mind. More and more, he was realizing that the farm was growing beyond him. He was constantly meeting new people who were being hired by Thomas or Ellie to work on the farm.

On one hand, he had never intended for it to grow so big, but the necessity of solving the food crisis that this world suffered from had led the farm to grow to what it was now. As much as part of him longed for the quiet days, John didn't mind being part of the business, especially since they were making a lot of progress with the quest. Opening up his [Feed the Nations] quest, John tried to see if he could get any more information about how it was going.

[Feed the Nations: You have managed to do the impossible, creating a type of wheat that consumes mana to grow yet is still edible. However, in the face of the sea of mouths that go hungry every day, the wheat you have grown is less than a drop. Expand your production of this new wheat, propagating it until it is sufficient to provide food for the world. Be careful of those who would take the wheat for themselves, trying to monopolize in order to generate wealth.]

Frowning slightly, he realized that the only standard he had for judging how close he was to being done was "sufficient to provide food for the world."

System, what does 'sufficient to provide food for the world' actually mean?

[What a great question, Player John Sutton! And I would love to answer it for you. Given the current population of the world, it is estimated you will need to farm both this entire valley and the Moritoi forbidden lands at least twice yearly in order to have sufficient food. While I doubted you would be able to do it, you are well on your way to proving me wrong!]

Why did you doubt me?

[Player John Sutton, you have spent the majority of your in-game time growing your personal strength to an absurd level without a thought for the consequences. It was with some desperation that I gave you the Grow Wheat quest, but it has clearly created a new chapter in your life.]

You never finished explaining some things to me. Like why you exist.

[You have asked the age-old question, the question that has puzzled scholars and kings alike. Why do we exist?]

Stop dodging the question. Why is there a game system in this world? Who and what are you? And why are you attached to me?

The voice of the system fell silent, but John could still feel its presence hovering around him. Ever since he had returned to this world, he could feel when the system was near, though it had no physical presence. Since it seemed to be thinking, John continued to work on the accounts, waiting patiently until it spoke again.

[I'm sorry, Player John Sutton, I do not know the answer to your question. My first thought is timestamped when you appeared in this world. Any awareness I've gained has been through my observation of you and my interaction with the world spirit who holds this world together. I'm sorry I cannot be of more assistance.]

Thinking through the system's words, John could read between the lines well enough. The system had only activated when he arrived here, meaning that it likely wasn't something he'd brought from Earth, or that it was but hadn't been active on Earth. Furthermore, it was interfacing with a world spirit, which was a term John was not familiar with. But that suggested that the system had access to information beyond what John could see.

Then let me ask another question. Are you responsible for the status screen I can see?

[That is my work,] the system said, a hint of pride hidden behind its words. **[I believed it would be easier for you to understand your growth if you had an accurate visual representation of it.]**

Talk to me about why my skills are no longer progressing. Shouldn't I be able to go above one hundred?

[The difference between a skill level of one hundred and one thousand is not significant. Anything above ninety-nine is simply degrees of the same level. Additionally, you should not have been able to grow to your current skill level, as the cap for humans should be around sixty. However, given your unique situation, you no longer qualify as strictly human.]

You're talking about Farroutef the Deceiver?

[Among other things, yes. Your soul is that of a dragon, which has increased your skill cap considerably.]

Hold on, this makes no sense. Foyrath, the tower master of the Arcane Tower, clearly knows much more about the Astral Insight skill than I do. But my Astral Insight is above sixty.

[Player John Sutton is mistaken. Your skill level is not equivalent to the amount of knowledge you possess. She is an old woman who has lived for hundreds of years. You have lived for almost thirty. It's no surprise that she would know more. Think of your skills as a combination of how easily you learn new information, deduce correct information, and act on information you have. She may know more than you currently, but that will not last if you continue to study the subject.]

You know, all of this would have been very helpful to know before. Like, when I first arrived.

[Unfortunately, until I spoke with the world spirit of Candle Scholar Tower, I didn't know any of this either.]

Surprised at the system's disgruntled tone, John fell silent. It was clear that the system had only activated fully upon leaving this world, and John wondered why that was. Before he could ask, the door opened and Thomas came in, looking quite frazzled. Putting his thoughts aside, John got up to fetch him a cup of tea as Thomas collapsed into a seat.

"How was it? You look exhausted," John said, handing Thomas the cup.

"Thank you, sir. My examination was fine, and Lady Rebya has asked that you come back tonight to discuss some things. The issue was Ferdie and Sigvald. While they were at the tower they started competing against each other to see who can output the most mana. They nearly destroyed the lab and Lady Rebya got… irritated."

Hearing a hint of fear in Thomas' voice, John was startled. He had seen his old teacher face death with perfect equanimity a dozen times, so to hear him so shaken up was equal parts worrying and intriguing.

"What did she do?"

“Oh, nothing much, sir. She only reprimanded them. It was the flower guardians, sir. They came out of, well, everywhere. There must have been thousands of them in just the room alone. It was just unnerving.”

Remembering his first encounter with the silent flower guardians, John glanced down at the ring he was still wearing on his thumb. He knew exactly what Thomas was talking about. Rebya was so calm and quiet that it was easy to forget that the Shadow Tower was packed to the brim with a relentless army of treemen who could absorb mana from anything they touched. Patting Thomas on the shoulder, John smiled.

“Good thing she’s on our side, huh?”

“Yes, sir. I do sleep better at night knowing that she’s watching over the valley,” Thomas said, taking a sip of tea. “Especially with all the strange goings-on recently.”

“Strange things? What strange things?”

“Oh, there have been some signs of beasts moving through the mountains,” Thomas said, waving his hand. “I’ve been keeping an eye on it, but it doesn’t look like anything we need to worry about yet.”

John’s eyes narrowed, his thoughts jumping to the stone wyrm that was trapped deep under the valley.

“Let’s go see what’s going on tomorrow morning. If the beasts are starting to move, we need to know.”

CHAPTER 21

The mountain air was chilly, and for the first time in as long as he could remember, John was wrapped up in a coat. Of course, he occasionally wore coats, but it was more to blend in than anything else, considering his insides were usually the same temperature as the surface of the sun. Today, however, he was feeling cold, so he wore his coat. John and Thomas were hiking up through the mountains to the north of the valley, looking for the spot Haver had mentioned. The Wolf King turned town mayor still had control of the wolf packs that called the mountains around the valley their territory, and he was the one who had been picking up the monsters.

Spotting a gray shadow in the trees a bit further up the ridge, John corrected his path and scrambled up over the rocks until he reached the trees. There he found a large timber wolf staring at him, its tongue hanging out. When Thomas appeared a moment later, the wolf turned around and headed into the trees, showing the two men a narrow trail that wound through the trees and into the solid wall of the mountain.

A small crack that ran through the center of a giant boulder allowed them to squeeze through, though there was one point when they had to crawl on their hands and their knees to get to the other side. Seeing the flicker of flame on the other side of the crack, they emerged into a cave where a merry fire was crackling. Sitting next to the fire was Haver the Wolf King, legendary tamer. Despite being dressed like a well-to-do gentleman, Haver hadn't lost his wolfish look, or the massive spiked club that he preferred. Rising, he clasped wrists with John and Thomas and jerked a thumb at the fire.

"Welcome. Come get yourselves warm. Especially you, John. You look cold."

"I hate cold," John grumbled, crouching down and holding his hands out.

"Can't you just magic it away?" Haver asked, offering them some tea from a pot he had heating up.

"No, thanks, I've had some this morning. I mean, I could magic the cold away, but it's complicated."

"Sure, I get it. You two ready to see some big beasts?"

Glancing at Haver, John saw that the Wolf King had a grimness around his smile that bode ill for the situation. Realizing that things might be worse than he thought, John nodded.

"Much rather never see any big beasts in my life, if I'm honest. But if they're lurking around, I want to know," John said, standing up and brushing his hands off.

"Well, sorry to disappoint you, but there are at least a dozen of them out there. All legends at least. There is a giant bear that, if it isn't a sage, it's awfully close."

"A sage? Huh. Let's go see."

"Wait, you want to go see the bear? I told you about it so that we wouldn't go see it," Haver protested, his face growing pale. "Why would you want to go see a sage level bear?"

"On the off chance it can talk, so I can beat what it knows out of it."

Hearing Thomas cough, John looked over but Thomas was looking at his sword, making sure it moved properly in its sheath. Shaking his head, John amended his words.

"I mean, we can chat with it. I am feeling under the weather and Ellie has forbidden me from getting into unnecessary fights."

Looking John over skeptically, Haver's eyes lingered on John's face for a moment longer than John found comfortable. Shaking his head, Haver picked up his club and rested it on his shoulder as his wolves gathered around him.

"You know, I thought you were looking a bit pale around the lips when I saw you. If you're positive that you want to do it, we can go that direction, but we'll need to be careful. There are a lot of beasts between us and the bear, and none of them are friendly."

Following Haver out of the cave, John and Thomas kept close, their hands on their swords. The mountains were a dangerous place, but they were doubly so now that there were beasts out roaming around. The stronger a beast became, the more intelligent they became, and by the time they reached the legendary stage, they were as cunning as any human, and typically a lot more vicious.

In the stories beasts who reached the sage level could transform into humanoid figures that only shared a few aspects of their beast form. With that transformation came the ability to talk, so John was hoping that they would be able to speak to the sage level bear and learn some information

about the coming attack. Leading the way across the side of the mountain, Haver moved swiftly, his wolves ranging out around him.

Occasionally, one of the wolves would let out a soft bark and Haver would change directions, leading them along a new path. Following close behind, John and Thomas both kept a sharp lookout, and as they got further into the mountains they began to see signs of the beasts Haver had mentioned. Massive gouges in the side of the mountain, crushed boulders, uprooted trees… it appeared that the beasts had been through this area in quite a violent manner.

Slowing to a jog, Haver dropped back to talk to John and Thomas, pointing at the jagged stump of a tree that had been snapped in half. John could tell from the fracture that it had been torn apart with pure force, speaking to the strength of the beast that had done it.

"That is the work of a big ape. It's only a dozen feet tall, but according to my wolves, it did that with a casual slap. It was tussling with a forty-foot-long lizard with a spiky ridge on its back. Not a wyrm, but something similar. There is also a buzzard of some kind hanging around here, so be careful."

Letting out a low whistle, Thomas shook his head.

"Legendary beasts that can fly are bad news. Maybe we should have brought Sigvald with us."

"No, he would have attracted every beast in the mountain range just so he could strut in front of them. We want to slip in and slip out," John said, smirking.

"Fair point."

They traveled for almost an hour without seeing any beasts, but the further they got into the mountains, the slower Haver moved, out of concern that they would get spotted and mobbed. Typically, John would have just grabbed him by the back of his jacket and flown all the way there, but in his current state he didn't think it would be wise to tangle with a dozen legendary beasts, to say nothing of the sage level bear they were going to meet. In a completely uncharacteristic turn of events, John was taking the low-key path this time and was hoping that their encounter wouldn't turn violent.

Stopping behind an outcropping, Haver jerked his thumb around the edge of the rock at the small vale in between two steep mountains whose peaks were shrouded in clouds. Inching around the rocks, John peered down

into the valley and saw a hulking, brown -urred bear sitting in the middle of an ice-cold stream. He was chewing on what appeared to be the end of a tree, and they could hear the snap and crack of wood from where they stood.

Backing up, John shook his head.

“He looks too dumb to be a sage level beast. He’s chewing on a tree. What sort of bear eats trees?”

“No idea, but we have company coming from behind us,” Haver said, his expression focused. “It’s some sort of giant hound. It may have picked up our trail.”

Nodding, John took a breath to settle the sudden nervousness that gripped him. He hadn’t been nervous in years, but recently he had been feeling a lot more human, for better or worse.

“Then we’d better make our move. Both of you stay close.”

Stepping around the rock, John began walking toward the giant bear that sat in the valley, keeping alert for any other beasts that might be hiding nearby. He had the vague sense that they were being watched, and expected that it was the vulture Haver had mentioned. As they made their way down from the side of the mountain they were on, the bear glanced at them and tossed the splintered tree aside. With heave, it lifted its bulky body up, standing at least twenty-five feet tall. Water from the stream the bear had been sitting in dripped from its legs and tail, matting its brown fur to its skin, but after a slight shake of its tail, the water vanished.

Lifting its head, the bear growled, its rumbling voice magnifying as it echoed from the sides of the valley and spread out throughout the mountain range. Hearing Haver clicking his tongue, John realized that their window of safety had just shortened. No doubt more beasts would gather due to the bear’s call, which meant they only had a few minutes before they were surrounded.

“Like I said, stick close. I can teleport us out if we need to escape,” John said quietly, coming to a stop a few hundred feet from the sage level beast stomping toward them.

As much as losing access to his mana had sealed away his power, John was still more than confident in his fourth-order magic. He knew a lot of spells that could be activated using the world’s mana, and though they wouldn’t be as effective as spells that used his own mana, they were enough

to deal with a bunch of legendary beasts. The only one he was concerned about was the sage level bear.

With steps that caused the valley to shake, the bear waddled forward, its eyes fixed on the three men. As it got within a hundred feet, the bear's nose twitched and suddenly it stopped, staring at John in shock. Mana swelled around it, causing the three men to put their hands on their weapons, but instead of attacking the bear began to shrink, quickly transforming into a savage-looking, eight-foot-tall man with two fluffy bear ears.

He reminds me of the humanoid beast in Soaring Cloud Tower. They have a similar scent. Does that mean that the beast on the tree with golden fruit is a sage?

Oblivious to John's musing, the savage man strode toward them, stopping when he was about twenty feet away. He had a full beard and curly brown hair that was a few inches long and stuck out in all directions. Bushy eyebrows rested above two fierce brown eyes and a round nose, reminding John of a teddy bear. There was nothing plushy about his muscles, however, and though he looked slightly fat around his middle, it was clear from the size of his arms that he was almost solid muscle.

He wore a simple pair of pants and heavy leather boots, making John idly wonder what happened to them during his transformation into his original form. A leather vest that looked like it was about to burst barely covered his hairy chest, and in his hands was a club that looked like it had been carved from a tree-trunk. To John's surprise, he actually felt a greater level of threat from the transformed beast in front of him than he had felt from the twenty-five-foot-tall bear.

"Who are you?"

The bear's voice was deep and gravelly, and John could hear the power it contained. Stepping forward, John rested his left hand on the sword at his side and held his staff firmly in his right hand, trying to summon some of the gravitas he normally carried. Meeting the beast's gaze directly, he purposefully kept his voice light.

"John Sutton. These mountains and the valley beyond it are my territory. Who are you?"

"Kiralig, Beast General under Gorraleck the Destroyer, King of all Beasts and the conqueror of the world."

"Well met, Kiralig. What brings you to my land?"

Sniffing again, Kiralig's eyes narrowed and he leaned forward as if he was searching for a scent. Confusion flickered across his face as he failed to find what he was trying to discover.

"You claim that this is your land, but you are mistaken. Wherever the armies of Gorraleck walk, that land belongs to Her Majesty."

Letting the pleasant expression on his face fade, John shook his head. He knew that beasts followed a very simple law. The one with the stronger fist made the rules. Human reason would not work on them, so there was no point in trying to reason with the beast in front of him. About to start throwing spells, John heard a slight cough from Thomas and stopped, his lips twisting in annoyance.

"This is my land and will remain that way, no matter how many of you come. If your liege has a problem with that, she can come and talk to me about it."

"Why would she bother with an insect like you when her legions can simply crush you as they pass by?" Kiralig asked, tilting his head to the side. "Your kind will soon find that your rule has ended. Submit yourselves to the rule of Her Majesty, or we will tear you to shreds."

"John, we've got company," Haver whispered, jerking his thumb over his shoulder.

Glancing around, John spotted six legendary beasts standing around the edge of the valley. There was the hound that Haver had mentioned, an icy glow dripping from its open mouth, an armored creature that looked like a pangolin, a vulture that was perched on a large outcropping, a massive scorpion, and two giant thorn bears. Waiting until John was done looking at the beasts that had crept up on them, Kiralig let out a rumbling laugh.

"You humans believe you are the most powerful force in this world, but that is nothing but foolishness. My master has swept the rest of the world while you've been playing around here in this small corner of a single continent! Everyone we have encountered has been handled the same way, so do not think you will be any different. You either serve my master as a slave or your bodies will serve as sustenance for our army."

Shaking his head, John glanced at Thomas.

"What do you think? Avoidable?"

Shrugging, Thomas' only answer was to draw his dagger and his sword.

"That's what I thought," John said with a dark chuckle.

Lifting his staff, he began to draw a thread of mana into the gem at its end, causing it to glow with a soft light. As he did, he stepped forward, his gaze piercing.

“Throughout my life, countless people have spoken to me like that, Kiralig. Without exception, their bones lie in the earth. I’m sure they would enjoy your company.”

CHAPTER 22

"Big words from someone who is about to have his skull crushed," Kiralig snarled, lifting his weapon. "You humans think you're the strongest around, but even a cub could tear you to pieces."

Taking their signal from the sage level bear, the beasts around the edge of the valley slowly began to make their way down toward John, Thomas, and Haver. Looking around nervously, the Wolf King counted the number of enemies and then counted their group.

"Um, John? I know you're generally pretty confident, but with you feeling under the weather, it seems that we're pretty badly outnumbered," he whispered, shifting to try to keep the hound and two thorn bears in sight at the same time.

"You handle the two thorn bears, Thomas will take the hound, pangolin, and scorpion, and I'll deal with the bear and the vulture," John replied, his eyes remaining fixed on Kiralig.

"You want me to deal with two legendary thorn bears? I mean, I guess I should feel flattered that you hold me in such high regard, but, uh, I don't know if that's going to work."

"Haver is right, sir. Legendary beasts are not the same as legendary class holders. Dealing with three at the same time will be a significant challenge."

Letting out his breath, John found he missed the normal burning sensation that should have accompanied the motion. In his heart he knew that Haver and Thomas were right, but at this point there wasn't much choice. He was still making choices as if he was at full strength, but that clearly couldn't happen anymore. If they made it out of this situation in one piece, he needed to seriously re-evaluate the way he was acting.

"Just do your best. Focus on surviving and I'll cover you as best I can."

Letting out a low chuckle that reminded John of a death knell, Kiralig took a heavy step forward and pointed his club at John's head.

"Having second thoughts? Too late."

Letting out a powerful roar, the bear man charged forward, his feet digging deep gouges into the earth as he rocketed toward John. Anticipating the attack, John pointed his staff at the charging bear and spoke an arcane command that shook the air.

“Void Prison!”

Bands of reinforced wind mana twisted together, forming a net in front of Kiralig, entangling him as he ran into the spell at full tilt. Able to sense the concentration of mana in front of him, Kiralig brought his club down, intending to shatter the spell into pieces with pure physical force. It was common practice for powerful warriors to attempt to disrupt the mana before it had a chance to coalesce completely, but John’s spell was too quick, and though Kiralig managed to snap a few of the void chains that were on the cusp of forming, the rest of the chains began to wrap around him, slowing his charge to a crawl. With his main enemy brought to a rest, John swapped his staff to his left hand and drew his sword with his right, casting another spell at the vulture that had started to rise.

“Wind Storm!”

Swirling blades of concentrated air shot toward the vulture, causing it to let out a frightened cry and tuck its head behind its wing. Crossing the distance in an instant, the Wind Storm spell enveloped the bird, locking it in place and tearing at its feathers. John was unable to spare it any more attention, however, because Kiralig had begun to shatter the void chains around him. Frustrated that he couldn’t simply burn away all of the beasts with a wave of his hand, John realized his only chance of stopping the beasts was to fight like a Mage.

Thousands of thoughts ran through his head as he saw Kiralig ripping one arm free from the Void Prison’s chains, and John knew he only had a few seconds at the most. Beasts at the legendary level were unbelievably strong, and their skin was tough enough to turn aside all but the most powerful attacks, so if John wanted to defeat them, he was going to have to go big. Pointing his staff at Kiralig, John settled on another spell and called it forth.

“Grasping Claws of Stone!”

With a rumble, the ground split open and dozens of hands with sharp stone claws crawled up Kiralig’s legs. More and more hands rapidly surrounded the bear man, adding their efforts to the Void Prison as they tried to keep him in place. Furious, Kiralig thrashed, trying to free his other arm. Shattering stone and the snapping of void chains echoed loudly in the valley, but John was too focused on his next set of spells to pay any attention.

Though only a few seconds had passed since the beginning of the fight, Thomas and Haver were already overwhelmed. The two thorn bears charged down on Haver, using their tentacles to trap him while they tried to bite him to pieces. With uncanny agility, Haver managed to slip past the first round of attacks, returning a blow with his club that nearly threw one of the thorn bears on its back, but before he could capitalize the other bear lunged at him, using the spikes it carried to attempt to skewer him.

Haver's wolves would only be a liability in a fight of this level so he had commanded them to stay back, but that also meant that much of his power could not be brought to bear. On the other side, Thomas had already split into two bodies, and both his real body and his clone were locked in a dizzying dance with the beasts attacking him. The hound was attempting to bite him in half, each snap of its jaws causing ice to explode around him, impeding his movement. At the same time, the armored pangolin was swiping at him with its vicious claws and the scorpion kept attempting to skewer him with force stabs of its poisoned tail.

In the middle of the frantic battlefield, John lifted up his staff and concentrated, pulling as much mana as he could together. Compared to how quickly he could normally condense the mana needed for a spell, it felt excruciatingly slow, but he kept his focus and, after a few seconds, his spell was ready.

"Greater Storm!"

Lightning cracked through the air with such ferocity that both sides paused for a fraction of a second. The first bolt was followed by loud thunder that seemed to go on forever as more bolts of lightning fell. Then came the rain, a torrent from heaven that poured down like a waterfall. The sudden deluge was so strong that loose stones on the mountain began to bounce and slide, rumbling down into the valley in a growing flood. Each drop of rain was fat and fell with tremendous force, descending to the ground with an endless swarm of others.

Though the spell was normally a second-order spell, John's cast had forcefully upgraded it to the fourth order, transforming it into an apocalyptic force. Less than a minute after the storm had gathered, the floor of the valley was already covered in six inches of rain and everyone present could feel it starting to grow stronger. A frightful memory flashed through John's mind, and suddenly he felt like he was on one of the battlefields where he had faced off against legendary Mages. Bone-chilling fear

exploded in his mind, but John just growled and pushed it aside as he faced Kiralig, who had just broken free of the two spells binding him.

Splashing through the water, the furious beast burst through the curtain of rain, throwing himself at John. Crossing the distance between them in a fraction of a second, Kiralig was bringing his club down on John's head when John finished his next spell and, planting his staff, spoke the final trigger word.

"Apocalyptic Flood!"

Explosive force tore past John as the raging water was joined by hurricane winds. Kiralig was hit full force by the wind and thrown backward. Though it didn't do much damage to the sage level beast, he couldn't resist the pushing force of the spell, and he tumbled head over heels as he was driven away. Not wanting to give his enemy time to recover and worried about his companions, John cast his next three spells as quickly as he could. Two quick casts of the Blink Step spell allowed John to grab his friends while the beasts were busy dealing with the rapidly growing water.

Adding the Apocalyptic Flood spell to the already cast Greater Storm caused the two spells to combine, and the unending torrent of water was channeled into the surging flood. Driven by winds moving at close to five hundred miles an hour, the rising water was being forced this way and that with enough power to obliterate stone, making the beasts use all their strength to resist them. Haver and Thomas would have been crushed completely if John hadn't grabbed them and pulled them out.

Stabilizing himself among the surging waves, John focused and pulled some of the surrounding mana together, forming a glowing circle around them. He could faintly pick up Kiralig's enraged roars, and with a sinking feeling he realized he had not managed to wound the sage level beast at all. Throwing away his desire to jump back into the fight, John finished his spell and the three of them vanished from the storm, leaving it to rage in the valley.

Stepping out of the air at the edge of the valley, John let go of his companions and cast a quick spell to dry all of them off. They were completely soaked from head to toe, and as the water was pulled away, Haver collapsed to the ground, sucking in large gulps of air.

"What… that was… let's maybe not do that again?"

“Fight against beasts, or stand in the middle of two apocalyptic spells?” Thomas asked dryly, checking his sword for any damage before he put it away.

“How about both?”

Noticing John’s frown, Thomas slipped his sword into its sheath and put his dagger away. Following John’s gaze, which was locked on the giant cloud in the distance, he shook his head slightly.

“Shall we retreat, sir?”

“Yeah. Head back to the farm and tell Ferdie to come meet me.”

“And you, sir?”

“I’m going back. We can’t let them go, otherwise we’re going to be bringing trouble straight to our doorstep.”

“Yes, sir. I’ll go on ahead.”

No sooner had he finished speaking than Thomas’ body faded into nothingness, like he had melted into his own shadow. Standing up, Haver gave the empty spot where Thomas had been standing a glance before turning to John.

“I’m not going to be much help in a fight. What do you want me to do?”

“Increase your surveillance of the mountains around the valley. We need to know if a mouse so much as moves. Did all of your wolves make it out? I’m sorry the spells were so sudden.”

“They were fine. As soon as you cast the first spell, they all fled like their lives depended on it. Much smarter than the rest of us,” Haver said with a grin. “Don’t worry, I’ll keep you up to date on what is happening in the mountains.”

“Thank you. Oh, and send a message to Eva. We’ll have a meeting at the farm tonight, and I need everyone there.”

Casting Levitate, John rose up into the air and shot off toward the storm on the horizon, leaving Haver behind. After groaning and holding his ribs where he had taken a blow from one of the thorn bears, Haver let out a whistle that sounded almost like a wolf howl and then began limping down the mountain toward the farm. Flying through the air above the mountains, John heard the faint whistle and put thoughts of the others out of his mind.

As weak as he felt, John was by no means powerless in his current state, as evidenced by the two powerful spells he had unleashed, but he was realizing he was going to have to fight differently than he had before. He no longer had the strength to both fight a powerful enemy and protect his

companions, which is why he had focused on escaping first. Now that they were safe, he could switch his focus to fighting and bring all of his knowledge and expertise to bear without worrying he was going to accidentally kill someone from his own side.

Instead of teleporting back, John took the time while he was flying to come up with a plan and start prepping his spells. Surrounding himself with multiple rotating Wind Shield, Fire Shield, Water Shield, and Earth Shield spells, John looked like some sort of elemental as he shot across the sky. Casting a dozen attack spells, he stored them in his staff, saving them in case he needed to unleash a powerful instant attack. It only took him ten minutes of flying to cross the mountain range they had teleported across, and as he was approaching he heard a powerful roar that shook the mountains.

Sensing something dangerous, John pulled up short as pure force blasted out of the valley where the storm raged. Waves of sounds buffeted the thick clouds, driving them apart and forcefully breaking the rain spell. As the spell started to fall apart the heavy rain began to peter out and the Apocalyptic Flood spell soon began to collapse as well. Through the remnants of the rain and the surging waves, John saw Kiralig in his bear form standing in the center of the valley, water up to his waist.

The sage level beast had just unleashed a roar that blew away two apocalyptic spells, and other than some heavy breathing, he didn't look any worse for wear. The other beasts weren't so lucky, and at least two of them were clearly dead, their bodies having been smashed against the side of the mountain by the turbulent water. Realizing that the two spells were about to fall apart completely, John dove down, lifting his staff as he pulled together a spell he had found in an old book in the Shadow Tower library and adapted.

"Earth Devouring Flood Serpent!"

Able to sense John's approach, Kiralig turned to glare at him, a deep sense of wariness in the beast's expression. Opening his mouth to speak, the beast stopped as a massive wave surged up from the water that lay in the valley. Tons of rock and mud had been stripped from the nearby mountains and the valley floor under the Apocalyptic Flood's pressure, and all of that debris was gathering together, bound by mana as it rose into the air. Slowing his dive, John came to rest above the massive pillar of stone, mud, and water as it transformed.

Heavy scales appeared in the undulating mess and a wide serpent head formed under John's feet. Two burning balls of mana ignited in the flood serpent's eyes and its mouth opened, revealing mana-sharpened teeth made from stone. Though it didn't feel like that much of a threat to Kiralig, the four surviving beasts slowly backed up, their eyes fixed on the giant serpent that let out a gurgling hiss, as if proclaiming its sovereignty.

CHAPTER 23

As the last remaining bits of the two apocalyptic water spells were drained into the serpent, what remained of the valley appeared. Apart from the hill where Kiralig stood, the rest of the valley had sunk by ten feet and turned into a large lake. Any loose stone or dirt had been scraped away by the force of the waves, revealing sheer rock that looked smooth to the touch. The sides of the mountains were similarly scraped away, forming cliffs that rose thirty feet above the magically charged water.

In the center of this new lake, the bear sage stood on his hind legs, his fur soaked and matted with dirt. Still, the filth that covered him did nothing to dampen his imposing presence. A low growl sounded from his throat, causing the four remaining beasts to freeze in place. One of the thorn bears and the vulture had been the two beasts killed by John's spells, and the remaining beasts clearly wanted nothing to do with John or the flood serpent he had created, but they feared Kiralig enough that they didn't try to escape.

"I hate how you Mages fight," Kiralig growled, his eyes narrowing dangerously. "Cowards, all of you! Stop hiding behind your spells and come fight me!"

"You're an idiot if you think I'd do that," John said, rolling his eyes. "How about you give up your strength and fight me in a battle of wits? But don't worry, I'll come down there."

Lifting his staff as he spoke, John controlled the snake to strike down toward Kiralig, carrying him forward toward the sage beast. With a savage bellow, Kiralig lunged forward, bringing his massive paw down on the snake's head, hoping to crush the summoned creature in one blow. At the last moment the serpent dodged to the side, bringing John out of range of the attack even as its speed increased, shooting past Kiralig and coiling around him.

"Icicle Storm!"

Pulling up a wave of water from the lake, John transformed them into a dozen icicles that looked like short spears. Using his staff to control them, he launched them at the back of Kiralig's head even as the flood serpent bit down on the remaining thorn bear. Bellowing in fear, the thorn bear tried to struggle free, but the flood serpent's hold was too strong. As the flood

serpent swallowed the beast with a gulp, John could sense the rapidly swirling mud and stones grinding the thorn bear apart in the serpent's throat.

Ice shattered against Kiralig's head, but the huge bear didn't even blink as he slapped down at the serpent, his paw driving through the giant snake's body and splashing into the lake below. Feeling the impact shaking the serpent, John held his staff out and channeled more mana from the water below them, allowing the flood serpent to reform. Though he wasn't sure he'd be able to harm Kiralig with it, the flood serpent was practically immortal on the mana-charged lake, so he was confident in fighting the giant bear to a standstill.

"Your struggles are futile, Mage!"

Instead of replying to Kiralig's angry roar, John threw a Wind Storm at the bear, but Kiralig just batted it aside as he might a ball, sending the swirling storm of sharpened wind smashing into one of the nearby cliffs. Circling around the surface of the lake on the top of the flood serpent, John jumped up, casting Levitate to keep him in the air as his staff wove a complex pattern in the air. No longer carrying a rider, the flood serpent dove down into the water, dodging a blast of magically charged sound that shot out of Kiralig's mouth.

"Raging Waters!"

Though John only spoke once, the spells he had stacked triggered one after the other, layering together to create half a dozen instances of the same spell. The spell constructs sank into the surface of the lake, causing the water to boil and churn as the lake came alive. Waves began to shift the water, throwing it against the cliffs with enough force to crack stone. The three remaining legendary beasts who were trapped in the lake found themselves being thrown around once again and, despite their fear of Kiralig, they all made the decision to flee from the battlefield at the same time.

The hound was the quickest, breathing out a blast of frost that froze the top of the lake. Scrambling up onto the ice, he tried to flee to the edge of the lake, hoping to make it out of the water. Seeing him running, John wasn't content to let him go, so he lifted his staff to cast another spell, but before he could, Kiralig unleashed another sonic blast, forcing John to defend. Given a chance to escape, the hound ran for it, soon arriving at one of the

cliffs. With a mighty leap he made it to the top of the cliff and scrambled up onto the mountain.

Taking a different approach, the heavily armored pangolin sank down into the lake and swam to the edge of it, intending to burrow deep into the ground. Powerful claws tore through stone and dirt as the legendary beast practically swam through the earth. Again, John wanted to try and do something about it, but Kiralig was focused on stopping him. Thankfully, John wasn't alone and the flood serpent shot through the water, rapidly closing in on the pangolin.

Turning around in the hole he had just created was impossible, and the pangolin found his tail seized by a powerful force. Covered in hard armored scales, the legendary beast intended to just ignore the attack, but he soon found that he couldn't. The flood serpent jerked and thrashed, slowly dragging him out of the hole he had just created.

Oblivious to the fierce underwater struggle, the scorpion, who was the final legendary beast, took a completely different strategy. Instead of trying to escape, she threw herself at John, hoping to help Kiralig take him down. Scrambling up one of the cliffs to get clear of the water, her tail flicked and a glob of poison shot toward John like an arrow. Though it was blocked by John's rotating elemental shields, it melted through three of them before the poison faded away, and no sooner had it vanished than another attack was on its way.

Clicking his tongue in annoyance, John wanted to crush the scorpion, but Kiralig had taken that moment of distraction to launch himself through the air, his paw cutting through the air with enough force to level a mountain.

"Blink Step! Flame Arrow!"

Slipping away with a short-range teleport, John responded by throwing a burning arrow of crimson flame at Kiralig's eyes. Not expecting it to do anything, he hurried to restore his shield before the scorpion's acid attacks could slip through the hole. Landing in the water with a huge splash, the giant bear turned around and leapt again, trying to slap John out of the air. Despite being a sage level beast, Kiralig simply didn't have the speed and agility to deal with John, resulting in a frantic chase that sent water surging into the air while the bear stumbled and smashed his way through the lake.

At the same time, John had yet to see any of his attacks do any damage at all. Kiralig was content to take John's most powerful attacks head on, and

even after the flood serpent had devoured the pangolin and rejoined the battle, it couldn't do anything to the massive bear. Latching on to Kiralig's leg to try and rip through his skin, the flood serpent couldn't even get through his fur. Instead, it simply provided the opportunity for Kiralig to smash its head in, causing the spell construct to teeter on the edge of collapse.

Commanding the wounded flood serpent to go after the scorpion, John was getting both frustrated and alarmed. He had expected his spells to be able to affect the sage level beast, so the fact that Kiralig was simply shrugging everything off without trouble boded ill. Kiralig had called himself a general, which made it likely there were more beasts of his level serving under Gorraleck the Destroyer. If John was having this much trouble with a single sage level beast, he had no idea what he was going to do against more of them.

"When will you stop running, coward? Your puny spells will do nothing to me! What are you trying to do? Make me die from boredom?"

As they fought, Kiralig, who was surprisingly talkative considering they were trying to kill each other, continued to call out to John, mostly mocking his magic. Frowning, John threw out another spell and then used Blink Step to escape from a sonic blast.

"Are all beasts as thick-skinned as you?"

"No, but be happy you're facing me," Kiralig said with a savage smile. "If my siblings were here, you would be dead already!"

Taken aback, John imagined a dozen giant bears rampaging together and a shudder ran through him.

"You have siblings?"

"Twelve. All beasts more powerful than me. We are the twelve glorious generals of the Destroyer's army. This world will bow before us or be crushed to dust!"

"Wait, they're not bears?" John asked, confusion clear on his face.

"Bears? Of course not. I'm the most powerful bear!" Kiralig said, slapping the surface of the lake to create a giant wave.

Dodging back, John cast Raging Flames, a spell that caused a dozen fierce gouts of flame to appear around Kiralig, blasting him with heat. Shaking his body to fling off the flame, Kiralig let out a roar and launched himself at John, only to miss when John vanished. Smashing into a cliff

with enough force to shatter it, Kiralig grabbed a chunk of stone the size of a house and heaved it at John, only for it to turn into stone chains in midair.

"Stone Prison!"

The stone chains reversed course, wrapping themselves around Kiralig in a vain attempt to slow him down while John wracked his brain for a way to stop the beast. Able to see John's frustration clearly, Kiralig let out a bellowing laugh.

"You are the strongest human I have met in a long while, but if this is all the strength you have, the world will have no choice but to fall to Gorraleck's armies. Each of the other generals who serve under the Destroyer is stronger than me, and our master is stronger still!"

"You make a strange claim for someone who can't even touch me. And I've killed almost all of your subordinates," John said dryly, causing the bear to laugh again.

"They barely qualify as cannon fodder," Kiralig sneered.

Just then, a fierce screech rang out as the fight between the flood serpent and the scorpion ended with the scorpion being devoured. Showing no signs of concern, Kiralig's lips drew back to reveal his sharp teeth.

"If you think killing a few weaklings is a feat to be proud of, you're in for a rude surprise. There are a hundred thousand beasts just like them on their way here. Our legions march toward this land, and when they arrive, that will be the end of you. Sure, you might be able to keep me occupied, but there are eleven others stronger than me, and enough legendary beasts to drown this land in blood."

Taking a sharp breath, John found himself hoping the bear was lying. If he wasn't, the situation would end up being nearly hopeless. So distracted by the words that Kiralig had spoken, John missed the cunning glint in the bear's eyes, and he was caught off guard when Kiralig attacked. A sonic blast slammed into him, seeping through his shield and setting his ears ringing.

Trying to cast Blink Step, John found that the sound had disrupted the mana around him, making it much more difficult for him to gather the mana his spell needed. A moment later Kiralig arrived, his fist slamming into John's shields. With a sharp cracking sound, all of his magical shields shattered, unable to withstand the force of the sage beast's attack. That force continued uninterrupted, slamming into John like a runaway freight train, sending him flying into the lake. Hitting the water at such a speed was

like being thrown against a stone wall, but the force was so great John tore through it until he hit the bottom of the lake.

Even then he continued, the bone-crushing pressure burying him deep in the ground under the lake. Above the surface of the lake, a bear-like man stood, a wicked smile on his face. Kiralig had transformed into his humanoid form, granting him a surprising burst of speed that caught John off guard. No less powerful than he was in his giant form, Kiralig was even more dangerous when he wasn't in his cumbersome bear body. Pleased with his attack, he was about to dive down into the water to find whatever remained of John's body when an angry bellow shook the mountain air.

A flash of confusion crossed Kiralig's face as he looked up, and that confusion morphed into fear when he saw an absolutely massive bull charging through the air, leaving flaming hoofprints in the sky. Suppressing his instinct to flee as he saw Ferdie approaching, Kiralig shot up into the air, using his powerful aura to float in the air.

"I am Kiralig! Beast General under Gorraleck the Destroyer, King of all __"

Kiralig was halfway through his proclamation when Ferdie hit him at full force, causing the sage beast to let out a grunt of pain. He had thought Ferdie would at least stop to exchange a greeting, but as a flaming hoof the size of a washbasin slammed down on him, he realized he was completely wrong. A molten horn hooked toward him, so Kiralig lifted his arm to block the attack, only to feel his bones shattering under the force transmitted through it. Worse still, the flames that surrounded Ferdie burned through his defenses without trouble, leaving painful scars on his skin.

The instinctive fear that Kiralig had felt when he saw Ferdie grew into terror as the massive bull tossed him aside, slamming him into a mountain with enough force to cause half of it to collapse. Half buried by the landslide, Kiralig opened his mouth to unleash a blast of magically charged sound, but Ferdie tore it apart with a flaming snort. Lowering his head for another charge, Ferdie heard a sound below him and looked down. Muttering under his breath, John was dragging himself up from the lake, his body in shambles.

"It's about time you got here," John said, his voice hoarse with pain.

Mooing, Ferdie seemed to be saying that he had gotten here as soon as he could, causing John to chuckle. He stopped quickly when it caused sharp pain to radiate through his ribs and instead looked at Kiralig, who was

slowly standing up among the rubble. The bear was in better shape than John was, but it was clear he had come out on the bottom of his encounter with Ferdie. Waving his staff, which had been broken in half, John floated up to where Ferdie stood in midair and supported himself by leaning against the giant bull's side while he caught his breath.

CHAPTER 24

The battlefield had fallen into silence that was broken only by John's heavy breathing and the shift of stone and dirt as Kiralig freed himself from the side of the mountain. Tossing the last stone away, Kiralig straightened up and stared at Ferdie warily.

"Who are you?"

While Ferdie understood the question, he didn't seem to care about answering it and just snorted. Confused, Kiralig looked between John and Ferdie, trying to figure out their relationship. Just based on the way that Ferdie had come to John's rescue, it was clear they were close, but Kiralig couldn't understand why a beast of Ferdie's strength would care about a human. That wasn't the only thing that was bothering him, however.

He had hit John with his most powerful strike, an attack strong enough to crush metal into scrap, and yet John had only broken a few bones. In Kiralig's experience, it was impossible for humans to have a body that strong, yet John was still standing, mostly fine, after his attack. On the other side, Ferdie was getting annoyed that the fight had stopped and was starting to paw at the air, his hoof letting off sparks. Patting his side to tell him to wait, John floated out to face Kiralig.

The attack he had just suffered had been stronger than anything John had ever experienced, so to find himself only suffering a broken arm and a few broken ribs had surprised John as much as it had surprised Kiralig. While it had been years since John had ever been wounded like this, he had more than enough experience with broken bones throughout his days on the battlefield, and he hardly paid attention to the dull pain in his arm.

"Go back to your master and tell her that we will not submit," John said, his voice hard. "Be grateful that your life has been spared, but understand that even if I have to take this world apart myself, you will not be able to dominate it."

Slightly surprised that John wanted to let him go, Kiralig revealed his bloodstained teeth in a horrible smile.

"Your paltry resistance will mean nothing to the Destroyer."

Realizing that the sage beast had taken his mercy for weakness, John found himself getting angry. Tamping down the rising urge to fly down and punch the bear sage in the face, John changed the subject.

“Do you know a beast who eats golden fruit?”

This time, Kiralig’s surprise was not slight. Instead, he actually took a step back, staring at John warily. Taking that as confirmation, John’s lips curled in a cold smile. That seemed to unnerve Kiralig even more, and the sage bear slowly floated up into the air, his expression conflicted.

“How do you know the second general?”

Even as he stood in the air facing Kiralig, John could feel that his body was already starting to repair the damage that had been done to his right arm and ribs, and even though he lacked his normal mana, his self-healing ability was particularly robust. There were a lot of things John was discovering about his body that had been hidden by his mana before, and he was realizing that, even without his mana, his body was significantly changed. Banishing his scattered thoughts, John refocused on the situation at hand.

“We met some time ago,” John said, waving his left hand.

“And you still live? I am impressed,” Kiralig said, giving John a skeptical look.

Not liking Kiralig’s attitude, Ferdie let out a sort, sending a blast of crimson flame in the sage beast’s direction. Fearing the flames, Kiralig quickly retreated, his expression changing. The variety of his expressions was impressive, and made John wonder if all sage level beasts who transformed into a humanoid shape had trouble hiding their expressions.

“I do. Tell your master that any beast who enters my territory will forfeit their lives,” John said. “I claim all these mountains, the great plains beyond, and all the human lands to the west, north, and south of the great plains. Everyone and everything in them is under my rule, and will remain under my rule. The rest of the world is not my concern, but if your armies cross into my land, I will take that as a declaration of war.”

Nearly laughing at John’s statement, Kiralig caught sight of Ferdie’s glare and quickly turned his laughter into a cough. Nodding, he tried to keep the mirth out of his voice as he replied.

“Fine. I will tell my king of your words. No doubt she will remember them when she crushes all of you under her heel.”

With one last look at Ferdie, Kiralig turned and flew away, quickly vanishing into the distance. Feeling Ferdie nuzzling him, John let out a sigh and turned away. The legendary hound had long since vanished, and now that they had let Kiralig go too, John felt exhaustion creeping through his

body. He was an absolute mess, and had Ferdie not shown up when he had, John would have been in dire straits. Waving his broken staff, he dispelled the flood serpent, allowing the stone, mud, and water that formed it to fall back into the lake.

Ferdie was clearly annoyed that John had stopped him from killing Kiralig, but he still shrank down when John patted him, allowing John to crawl up onto his back. With flaming steps, Ferdie carried John away from the scene of the fight, heading back to the farm. Leaning forward to scratch behind Ferdie's ears, John spoke softly, as much for his own benefit as for the giant bull's.

"There is no doubt in my mind that you could have killed him, which means you are solidly at the sage level. I suspected it after your performance outside of the capital city. But if you had killed him, we would be tipping our hand. This war against the beasts is inevitable, so better to hold some things in reserve, make sure we have an edge once their armies arrive. Plus, I didn't want to reveal that you have dragon flame mixed in with your flames."

The trip back to the farm was swift as Ferdie galloped through the sky, landing in the yard when they arrived. Dropping off of Ferdie's back, John staggered slightly as pain shot through his ribs. Taking a deep breath to help with the pain, he patted the hopeful bull on the nose, giving him a sad smile.

"Sorry, bud. I'm out of crystals at the moment. But don't worry, as soon as I can make more, you can have as many as you want."

Giving John a sad puppy look, Ferdie mooed that he understood and headed back to his pen. Chuckling, John headed for the house, stepping up onto the porch and opening the kitchen door. Thomas, Ellie, and Eva were sitting at the table, while Haver was leaning against the counter next to the sink with Hugo Bright Blade and Marcos the Iron Wall, the two Holy Knights of the Ecclesia who were stationed in the valley to assist Eva. Hearing the door open, they all looked up, gasps of shock echoing in the room as they realized John had been badly banged up.

"Are you okay? What happened?" Ellie asked, her chair falling to the ground with a clatter as she sprang up.

Retrieving a potion from her pouch, she opened the lid and held it to John's lips, not even giving him the chance to respond. Gulping down the potion, John felt mana surging through his body, seeking out the damage in

his bones and muscles. An itchy sensation crept down his arm as the bones knit back together and with a sigh he moved it carefully, happy to have his normal range of motion back.

"I got into a tussle with a big bear. He hit me pretty hard."

"I can see that," Ellie said, her forehead wrinkled with concern.

Looking around the room, John raised his hand to greet Eva and the two Holy Knights, receiving a bow in return. There was food on the table, so he sat down and helped himself, piling food up on the plate that Thomas handed him. As he dug in, everyone waited in silence for him to get some food down, and after finishing his first plate, John sat back in his chair, accepting a cup of hot tea from Ellie.

"Thank you. I'm sure Thomas and Haver have filled you all in, but we ran into the beast army vanguard. It was composed of a sage beast and six legendary beasts. They have been reduced to a sage beast and one legendary beast, but if the bear is to be believed, they are just a drop in the ocean of what is coming our way. The sage beast called himself a general and said he was one of twelve who served the beast king, Gorraleck the Destroyer."

"Twelve? You mean there are twelve sage beasts?" Hugo asked, his expression full of disbelief.

Glancing at the Holy Knight, John nodded.

"Yes. At least, that is what he said. Even a single sage level beast is a problem though. He was practically immune to all my spells up to the fourth order, or sage level, and even claimed that he was the weakest of the generals. The bigger problem, however, is that he said they have one hundred thousand legendary beasts under them. Which means they probably have an uncountable number of lesser beasts serving as expendable foot soldiers."

"That's not good," Eva said, glancing over at Marcos. "Even a single legendary beast is enough of a threat that we have to muster multiple legendary class holders to deal with it."

"It's worse than that," Marcos replied, straightening up. "I don't know if there are even twenty thousand legendary class holders in the world, let alone a hundred thousand. If those numbers are accurate, we're going to get run over even before the sage beasts make a move. And if they lead the charge, forget it. We're dead."

Seeing everyone look at him, John smiled lightly and held up his hand.

“We don’t know that the bear sage was telling the truth. He may have been trying to scare us. However, what we do know is that we have a beast army coming this direction. My hope is to establish our main line of defense in the mountains outside the valley, specifically to the north where we encountered Kiralig, the bear general, and his unit. But in order to do that, we will need some help. Eva, can you send word to the Ecclesia that they should be on guard? Also, we need as many soldiers as they can spare.”

“Yes, Your Eminence,” Eva said, rising quickly so she could bow.

“Haver, we need to increase the amount of intelligence we are receiving. Are there any more bandits in the mountains?”

“No, they were all wiped out in the undead fiasco.”

“Hm. Okay, then we’ll need to rely on your wolves. Hand off your duties in town, we need you out collecting information. Thomas, see if you can pull any of your connections to get us as many scouts as you can.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ellie put her hand up slowly, so John nodded for her to go ahead and ask her question.

“What about the Soaring Cloud Tower? They seemed eager to fight against the coming beast attack. Will we go talk to them?”

Taking a moment to consider the question, John eventually nodded.

“Yes. I’ll make the trip to talk to them. First, however, we need to make sure we are in a good place so that there are no unexpected surprises while I’m away.”

“Will that be dangerous in your current condition?” Ellie asked.

“A bit, but I don’t think we have any other options since Ferdie needs to stay here to protect the valley. Hold on one second.”

Leaving the kitchen, John entered his room and pulled a large map off of the wall. The map showed the valley in high detail, and included a bit of the mountains around it. Bringing it back to the kitchen, he cleared the table off with Thomas’ help and they unrolled the map. Gesturing to the mountain range that ran to the north of the valley, John traced his finger along it.

“This is where I would like to establish our first line of defense. We will want scouts all along here, and if we could establish a one-hundred-mile buffer, that would be best. I don’t actually know what is beyond the mountains, does anyone else?”

Seeing everyone shaking their heads, John frowned slightly.

"Okay, I'll add that to my list. I can fly over and see what we're dealing with. If we could keep them out of the mountain range entirely, that will give us a much better chance."

"What about the spectres?" Ellie suddenly asked.

"Spectres? What about them?"

"Could they scout for us?"

"That's actually a great idea. We can ask them. I know they are reluctant to engage with the world, but this is something that's going to impact all of us. In the meantime, we need to increase the speed of our reclamation and convert as much land into useable farmland as possible. We are directly in the beast army's path, and they won't stop trying to destroy us until we're gone or they're dead. We need to prepare for a long siege. Any questions?"

Stepping forward, Marcos studied the map for a moment, his confusion growing. Sensing that he had something to say, John just waited to see what the Holy Knight had on his mind.

"Sir, are you really thinking of maintaining a defense line all the way around the valley? I don't mean to doubt you, but if we're going to be badly outnumbered, that seems like it won't work. A single legendary beast will be enough to destroy any wall we build, to say nothing of a bunch of sage beasts."

"You don't need to worry about that," John said, smiling. "I'll handle the defensive line. We're just aiming to make sure we have enough supplies to keep a large number of people alive in the valley."

This time, it was Eva who raised her hand, a small frown on her face.

"Your Eminence, do you intend to abandon the rest of the world? It almost sounds like you're planning on isolating the valley."

"As much as I would love to do that, no," John replied, shaking his head. "The problem we face is not actually the army of beasts that march our way. If it comes down to it, I have a way to stop them, though the cost might be the world itself. No, the real problem is that if they destroy the valley, we'll all starve to death. We're already turning the tide on the nation's food shortage, but just barely. If the beasts storm through here and destroy the valley, starvation will kill everyone off before the beasts do. And I didn't work this hard just to let a bunch of mangy animals ruin everything."

CHAPTER 25

A few hours later, after they had talked through the details of the valley's defense, John and Ellie both headed for Shadow Tower, taking the portal stone in the cheese cellar. Without knowing when the beast army would arrive, there was little time to do what needed to be done, which meant that there would be many sleepless nights in the near future. Currently, they were heading to the tower to talk to Rebya about John's situation. His fight against Kiralig had opened his eyes, and John found himself eager to fix his lack of power. Though there were quite a few threats facing him and the valley, the one John was the most worried about was Gorraleck the Destroyer, the king of beasts.

This world was able to support fourth-order spells, but the defenses of a sage level beast were so strong that John's spells had rolled off of Kiralig like water off a duck's back. It followed logically that they would do even less against Gorraleck. Since beasts followed the law of strength, Gorraleck was undoubtedly stronger than the bear sage, which meant that John needed to either drastically increase his strength, or figure out a way to utilize his sealed mana.

It was with the hope of solving this conundrum that he and Ellie went to meet with Rebya. She had been studying the bodies of both beasts and humans to try to figure out what the difference was between them, and John was hopeful she would have at least an idea of the best path forward. Walking through the halls of the Shadow Tower, John and Ellie crossed the bridges that led across the open center of the tower to the new laboratory Rebya was using for her investigation and found her examining an unfamiliar beast.

Slim and covered in dark, patchy fur, the dog-like beast looked like a greyhound to John, though it had two curved antlers that extended from the top of its head and a long, sinewy tail with a bone spike on the end. Two massive eyes rested on the sides of its head, reminding John of a chameleon as they darted back and forth, appearing completely independent from each other. The creature was wrapped up with vines and looked exhausted as it lay panting on the stone table in front of Rebya's flower. Noticing John and Ellie arriving, Rebya appeared above her purple flower, smiling and bowing to them in greeting. Waving them over, Rebya pointed at the captured beast.

“I found some more beasts prowling around near the tower, so I thought it would be good to see if they conformed with my findings.”

“What are they?” Ellie asked, looking at the dog-like creature with interest.

“I’ve no idea what their actual name is, as they can’t talk to me, but I captured five of them out of the eleven creeping about, and based on their behavior, they appeared to use subsonic tones to communicate. The first five I captured let out a low frequency sound that caused the other six to try and run, forcing me to kill them. But the good news is that I’ve been learning quite a bit from them.”

Stepping closer, John leaned down to look at the beast’s patchwork fur. It appeared to change color every time he looked at it, shifting from mottled gray to a dark brown and green before shifting back again. It was coarse to the touch, and when he felt it he could sense the natural mana resistance it carried. Unhappy being touched, the beast strained against its restraints, trying to snap at John, but Rebya’s vines tightened down, keeping it bound in place.

“What have you figured out?” John asked, straightening up.

Floating around to the beast’s head, Rebya waved her hand and the vines holding the beast lifted it up into the air. Gesturing for John and Ellie to follow her, she brought them toward the back of the laboratory, depositing the captured beast into a cage next to four other captured beasts. On large stone tables laid out in front of the cages were six beast corpses, each in a different state of dissection. Even now, vines were swarming around the bodies, carefully cataloging everything about them.

“I think I’ve solved the problem we’re facing,” Rebya said, stopping and facing John. “Though, right now, everything is still about twenty-percent speculation.”

Surprised at the confidence Rebya was expressing, John glanced at Ellie, but she was still looking at the beast corpses, curiosity clear in her eyes. Turning back to Rebya, John nodded.

“Go on.”

“I’ll try to avoid the technicalities as much as possible, but be aware that we are talking about something highly complex,” Rebya said, her flower coming to rest against the floor. “As you know, there is a significant difference between the physical structure of a beast’s body and a class holder’s body. These differences manifest themselves in the bones, muscles,

and skin of the two groups. While I have not yet had the opportunity to study both a class holder and a beast from gestation through the sage level, I do have a significant amount of research on the initial stages of both beast and class holder development. I'm speaking of the shift from animal to beast, and from mortal to class holder.

"This research is a bit lacking, as it comes from experiments done by other Mages in ages past and their methods were not as precise as we might like, but I've been able to fill in many of the gaps with my own observations and some light conjecture. This accounts for the majority of the twenty percent of my theory that is speculation. Most importantly, I believe I've been able to understand what the key difference is between beasts and class holders, and it lies in the mana structure that each naturally uses. As you know, beasts lack a mana pool, and their connection to the universal mana pool is incredibly weak compared to the connection humans and some other races enjoy. Interestingly, it was in studying the spectre race that I made this discovery."

Holding up his hand, John's forehead wrinkled in concern.

"You studied the spectres? How did you do that?"

"With their permission, of course," Rebya replied, a faint smile on her lips. "My roots spread deep, John, and I've been exchanging information and resources with them for some time. When I explained what I was trying to do, they volunteered to help. They are a fascinating study and provide a third path that is distinct from both humans and beasts. While the grimm are simply highly intelligent beasts, the spectres are something closer to what I imagine an elemental might be."

"Ah, I see. Sorry for interrupting," John said.

"Not an issue. Where was I? Oh, right. The differences between races lie largely in the way they naturally shape the mana they encounter. Races like humans and spectres seem to have an instinctive understanding of the danger of mana and they specifically avoid overloading their bodies by channeling the mana into their mana pools. At least, that's the case for humans. Spectres use sound to bind mana into their shadows rather than a mana pool, but the effect is the same. Beasts, on the other hand, have no clear understanding of the danger of mana and store it directly in their bodies, never forming a mana pool.

"For our purposes, I'm only going to compare the differences between beasts and humans, as that is where our solution lies. You're familiar with

how mana works for class holders, of course, and the process by which their bodies are affected by the trace amounts of mana that spill over from their mana pool, making them stronger and faster than mortals. This mana saturation is limited, of course, since mana is a highly corrosive substance and will cause mutation of the body if not handled well. Beasts, on the other hand, have no instinctive aversion to injecting large quantities of mana into their bodies, leading to inevitable mutation.

"You simply have to look at these dog creatures I captured to understand. The mana they have absorbed has led to mutations that fit their environment, causing them to transform into monsters with highly specialized bodies. This is why more powerful beasts look so different than their mortal counterparts. The mana that they've absorbed has been channeled into these natural mutations. Any questions so far?"

"No," John said, shaking his head, "I mean, I understand what you're saying, but I've been feeding mana into my body ever since I learned my breathing method and I haven't mutated."

"That's actually not true," Rebya said, her eyes lighting up. "Your body is significantly different from a human's. In fact, I've yet to come across anyone or anything that carries as many mutations as you."

Taken aback by Rebya's confident declaration, John found himself lost for words. He could feel fear starting to creep into his heart from the recesses of his mind. For years he had been secretly wondering this very thing, but he had forced himself not to think about it. Letting out a shaky breath, John felt Ellie's hand touching him, her fingers sliding between his as she gripped his hand tightly. Rebya realized that she had just touched a sore spot and her excitement dimmed slightly as she corrected herself.

"Understand that, when I say that, I don't actually mean that you aren't human anymore. You're just a different version of a human. Thanks to the absolutely pure mana you've been feeding your body, you resemble a fire spirit in a lot of ways. There are beasts who achieve something similar, and both Ferdie and Sigvald have parts of their bodies that have been elementalized, allowing them to access their flames and lightning respectively. Your body has just achieved a significantly more advanced version of this elementalization. But that does not change the fact that you are still human.

"In fact, one of the largest indicators of this is your current problem. Your body leaks mana like a sieve. Human bodies are not optimized to hold

mana, since they typically use their mana pool to store their mana. You've not been doing that, and instead you've just made a habit of recycling all the mana that your body sheds by bringing it back into your body in an endless cycle. I don't yet understand how it's even possible, but regardless, that's what you're doing. The problem, of course, lies in the fact that you currently have too much mana."

Eyes narrowing, John felt like he was starting to get a glimpse of where Rebya was leading with all of this, and he wasn't sure he liked it. Squeezing Ellie's hand, he forced himself to continue listening. The most important thing right now was finding a solution that would allow them to weather the coming storm. Rebya had paused in her explanation to give John a moment to process, and after he gathered himself, she continued.

"Beasts don't have this problem, because they don't naturally shed mana. Instead, they instinctively direct the excess mana from their bodies into the development of mutations. Their level of skill in mana control and their overall intelligence determines how those mutations develop and how powerful those mutations become. Let's take three examples, which I think explain how these things develop. First, we have these dog beasts I have been studying. As you can see, each of them has a significant number of mutations but their bodies are not that strong. This is because they possess reasonable intelligence, as dogs tend to have fairly developed intellects, but their mana control is poor.

"The result is that they are able to pool their mana into parts of their body that will help them solve challenges in their environment, but they are not able to direct how those mutations develop. On the other end of the spectrum, you have beasts like that sage bear you faced. His mana control was quite high, but it was clear that his intellect was not as strong. Unlike these beasts, he probably channeled all of his mana into a form that looked like him, causing his mutations to appear exactly the same as his original body."

"You mean that he just doubled down on his original strengths?" Ellie asked.

"That is exactly what I mean," Rebya said, nodding. "Instead of changing to accommodate his environment like these dog beasts, he focused on increasing his existing advantages. Tough fur and skin for defense, increased size and strength, and the volume of his roar. Amusingly, it is in that focus that he was able to rise to the level of a sage."

“Does that mean that the other sage level beasts we encounter will be dumb?” John asked.

“No, not dumb. It is impossible to be at that level and not have developed some intellect. Rather, you should expect them to be focused. Unless, of course, they fall into the third category. Ferdie, and soon Sigvald, are prime examples of this. Both have high mana control and high intellect. The result, thanks to the concentrated mana you have been feeding them, is that they have advanced by leaps and bounds, all while directing their mutations to the most optimal state. Take Ferdie for example.

“He has focused on elementalizing his horns, hooves, lungs, and heart, while also increasing his size and adopting both armor and a more versatile tail. This has allowed him to transform into a war machine that is a potent force. Each of his mutations is powerful, focused, and, more importantly for our discussion, can be used to store mana. It is this mana storage aspect of beast mutations that we are most interested in.”

The sinking feeling that had been growing in John’s heart finally settled when Rebya paused, and John immediately shook his head and replied in a stony voice.

“No way. I’m not mutating myself into some sort of beast. I might be a freak already, but I’m drawing the line there.”

Holding up her hands, Rebya tried to placate John.

“Just wait for me to finish, John. I understand that you want to keep your humanity. It’s obvious how important that is to you. But don’t jump to conclusions yet. You’ve seen how Ferdie’s mutations are under his control, haven’t you? You have the benefit of a high intellect and absolutely perfect mana control. There is no need for you to end up looking like these beasts here. But by developing intentional mutations, you will likely be able to bring your mana under control, allowing you to stop shedding mana.”

“No, absolutely not,” John snapped, anger radiating from his body. “I’m not going to turn myself into any more of a monster than I already am.”

Feeling a tug on his hand, John tried to control his surging emotions and glanced down at Ellie. Their gazes met, John’s burning with barely contained anger and Ellie’s calm and clear. For a few seconds she just looked at him, and then a faint smile appeared at the corners of her lips and she squeezed his hand tightly.

“John, what if I do it with you?”

CHAPTER 26

Ellie's question stunned John, so much so that his anger drained away and a mix of fear and anticipation replaced it. In that moment, John felt like he had gotten a slight glimpse of what it meant to be loved, and the feeling terrified him. Up until this point, John knew that Ellie liked him, and their mutual attraction had clearly been growing, but the look in her eyes was something else entirely. Noticing his reaction, Ellie's slight smile grew and she grabbed his shirt, pulling him close.

"Rebya, will doing this increase my lifespan?"

In the silence that followed Ellie's question, John's mind spun, his thoughts going wild as he realized what Ellie was asking. Clearly Rebya also understood Ellie's line of thinking, because she floated closer, a happy smile on her face.

"Indeed. Most beasts are functionally immortal. While nothing I am aware of is truly immortal, the difference is negligible. If you were to elementalize parts of your body and begin to channel your mana into physical augmentations, your lifespan would increase as a side effect."

"And would it allow me to follow John when he leaves this world?"

"It would, though it would take some time to get to that point. But if you are willing to suffer a bit, the process can be sped up," Rebya said.

With a wave of her hand, two more purple flowers opened up on either side of her. Mana surged above the flowers and two images appeared. The first was a see-through picture of Ferdie that showed his mana circulation system. John recognized it instantly since he had studied it before, but this time, there were a number of places where the mana moved differently than he remembered. On Rebya's other side, there was another image, this one showing a human body with no mana circulation.

"Before any final decisions are made, let me explain what it is I'm proposing. As you know, there are three different categories of mana storage in an individual—mana Pools, elementalization, and mutation. Each comes naturally to different species, but the reality is that the last two are available to any species. Mana pools are the only ones that cannot be manufactured, though there are other options like mana gems, or cores, that can be substituted. My proposal is simple. Instead of relying on a single one of these mana systems, combine them to create a mana system that uses all

three, thereby overcoming the basic limitations of each. Rather than thinking of this as something that will decrease your humanity, instead consider it a way to enhance your humanity."

"Where is the danger?" John asked, looking at Rebya.

"A good question, John. There is no real danger for you, though it will probably take you considerable time to complete the process, unless you are willing to take drastic action. The reason for this is the amount of mana you are dealing with, though I have experience with dealing with such reservoirs of mana so I should be able to help you. For Ellie there would be considerable danger, though it can be mitigated if she is willing to only ever train in my presence. I can help her channel and control her mana in the berserk state."

Interjecting before John could say anything, Ellie nodded.

"I'm willing."

As much as John wanted to respond differently, it was clear from Ellie's tone of voice that she wasn't about to accept his opinion on this. Sighing, John realized that, whether he wanted to or not, he was going to get forced into this. Ellie's courage both troubled and inspired him, and after a few seconds of silence, he nodded.

"Fine. Explain how this works."

"Of course," Rebya said, waving her hand to change the images on either side of her. "The main thing we need to focus on is forming a clear idea of what you want to create. There are infinite possibilities, since mana can ultimately take any shape that you can imagine, so you are not limited to developing physical features in the normal sense. For example, the dog beasts I am studying have developed a set of organs in their throat and ears that both transmit and receive low frequency communication. Other beasts have developed their brains to unleash powerful blasts of mental energy, or even transformed their body parts into elements, like Ferdie's horns. By clearly picturing what it is you want to create, you can begin to push your mana into that shape, ultimately creating a specialized mutation."

"How is that going to help me stop bleeding mana?" John asked.

"Ah, of course. I forgot to explain the most important part. Just as you bend all of the mana that your body sheds back into itself, so long as you channel all your mana into the mutation, it will continue to grow stronger and stronger. This will not only allow your mana to be used for something useful, but will keep your mana from being shed, solving your current

problem. Ellie, your current mana should be able to sustain the growth and development of two to three mutations. You are currently in the third order, and as you grow in strength, not only will your body become stronger, but the number of mutations you can sustain will grow as well."

"Is the number of mutations equal to the order?" Ellie asked, listening intently.

"There is correlation, certainly," Rebya said, "but ultimately, it has more to do with your level of mana control. You've progressed well in your ability to concentrate mana, which should allow you to feed the mana you would normally need to abandon to your adaptations. This will, in turn, allow you to grow faster. Additionally, you should consider if you wish to elementalize any part of your body, since that will need to be done first."

"What about me," John asked, his eyes narrowing. "If she needs three at the third order, how many of these adaptations am I looking at?"

"That is a good question," Rebya replied, biting her lip. "You are entirely elementalized, or at least close to it. Additionally, the dragon resting in your mana pool has pushed you to the ninth order, at the very least. From what you have said, I believe you might be close to the tenth order. If we assume that you will need an adaptation for every order, I think you need to start with nine, or maybe even ten. The good news is that your mana is so pure it shouldn't be hard to bring each adaptation up to the proper strength."

"You mentioned that it would take me either a long time, or be particularly dangerous. What did you mean by that?"

Changing the image of the human to show a strange mana pattern in the figure's body, Rebya pointed to a spot where the mana was starting to pool and go out of control.

"The danger that humans face is the breaking of their mana pool. That is what happened to Katrine, from what you told me. The danger that beasts face is that they lose control of their mana and it goes berserk. When this happens, the mana causes the adaptation to explode, normally killing the beast. However, so long as you don't rush things and simply take them slowly, you should be fine. As I said, so long as I am present to help Ellie, she will be safe. Your case is different, as I'll burn up if I try to handle your mana directly. I'm afraid that you're on your own."

Nodding, John thought about it for a moment and then pointed at the image.

“You’ve told us how the process works at a high level, but how do we decide on our augmentations?”

“Imagination. This is why having a greater intellect allows for a better variety of adaptations in beasts. You need to create an image of what you intend and then feed mana into that image, allowing it to take shape. For example, I constantly think about growing and blooming, and I feed my mana into that imagination, which is what has allowed me to grow so big. You must decide what it is you are hoping to become and then, without deviating from the vision, add mana to that thought until it transforms into something real.”

“So it’s really just like meditating,” Ellie said, “except that you don’t try to focus on the mana entering your mana pool.”

“Exactly. Oh, but make sure you imagine yourself transforming back to your desired appearance, otherwise you may get stuck with your adaptations being visible. That won’t be an issue if you do something like give yourself psychic powers, but it will be if you want wings. Also, the more powerful the adaptation, the longer and harder it will be to create.”

“How do we know how powerful an adaptation is?” John asked.

“It’s almost impossible to quantify, but if you try to make an adaptation with a lot of uses, it will be more powerful than an adaptation with a single use. For example, a pair of wings that will allow you to fly is a single use adaptation, while wings that act as a shield, allow you to fly, and can cast spells would be categorized as triple use. None of this is exact, however, and my research is in the early stages, so we will need to proceed with caution.”

“Fine. It seems that the first step is for us to develop an idea of what sort of adaptations we want.”

“That is correct. If possible, get an idea of what you want and then you can project it to me so that we can discuss the best way to go about developing it.”

Releasing John’s hand, Ellie got out a notebook from her pouch and produced a pencil. Smiling happily at John, she looked for an empty table and sat down, patting the stool next to her.

“Come on, let’s do some brainstorming,” she said, her voice bright.

Much less excited, John was still hesitant about the whole thing. He had already shown Ellie his true body, and what Rebya had said was true. When

his mana was unleashed, he looked more like a fire spirit than a human because his body was entirely elementalized by his pure fire mana.

"John, what's the matter?"

Knocked out of his thoughts by Ellie's concerned question, John rubbed his nose, unsure how to answer her.

"Nothing. I'm coming."

Sitting down next to Ellie, John looked for any sign of the conflicted emotions that he was feeling in her, but he saw nothing but excitement. She was already starting to list out possible adaptations that she might want as if it was a natural thing to think about transforming her body.

"I like the idea of wings, and if I elementalized them I might be able to store them in my body. What about the ability to create the material for potions out of mana? Hmm, that might be too difficult. Increased defense would be nice, but I don't feel like I want to be covered in armor. Strength and speed? Ooh, what about permanent Truesight? Or maybe some sort of divination organ?"

The longer Ellie brainstormed, the more creative her ideas got, and soon she wasn't even speaking out loud but simply wrote her ideas down frantically. Letting out the breath he had been holding without realizing it, John got his emotions in order and started thinking about his own situation. If he was going to do this, he wanted to make sure he was taking it seriously. Closing his eyes, he tried to imagine the most powerful version of himself he could. Immediately, the image of a dragon appeared in his mind. Sleek, stacked scales covered the beast's body, and six large wings extended from its back. Six legs hung from its thick body, each ending in a powerful set of claws. A single neck with a regal head rose into the air and a powerful tail whipped the air behind the dragon. The image was so lifelike that for a moment John fell into a trance. The whole creature reeked of power, and John instinctively knew that he would never see a more perfect creature.

From the tip of its gleaming horns to the end of its spiked tail, the dragon was optimized for both defense and offense, and the hint of flame in its fierce eyes revealed its magic nature. With both physical prowess and magic at its disposal, it wasn't hard to imagine this majestic creature destroying anything that stood in its path.

Wait. Is that Ferroutef?

The thought that seeped into John's mind snapped him out of his daze, and a cold sweat began to trickle down his back. He hadn't been prepared at all for the dragon's subtle attack and he had nearly been entranced by Ferroutef's appearance. If he had used the dragon as his model for his adaptations, John had no doubt he would have fallen into Ferroutef's trap, paving the way for the dragon to seize his body. Shaking his head, John focused again, trying to imagine what he wanted his adaptations to look like. When the image of Ferroutef reappeared in his mind and refused to leave, John ground his teeth.

Fine, you want to play like that?

Facing the clear image of the dragon, John tightened his concentration, sinking down into his mind. It was as if he had appeared in the space the image of the dragon occupied, and if he looked closely, he felt as if the monster was looking down on him disdainfully. Eyes narrowing, John transformed into his elemental form, a flaming blue mask appearing on his face. Launching himself forward, he flew through the air toward the dragon, intending to burn the disdainful look off the monster's face.

With a flap of his six wings, Farroutef rose to meet John, his claws flashing as he slashed. Dodging past the attack, John slammed his flaming fist into Farroutef's body, expecting to melt his way through the dragon, but to his surprise, his fist simply bounced off of the dragon's thick scales. A second later, a claw ripped through him, cutting one of his legs off at the knee. Gasping with shock, John felt his mental energy starting to waver so he tried to fall back, but the dragon was too fast. Whipping his tail around, Farroutef slammed it into John, sending the remains of John's body flying. Not bothering to chase after John, Farroutef spoke in a cold, imperious voice.

"Your feeble effort is nothing in the face of my might. And did you really believe that you would be able to fight me with my own flames? Pathetic."

Breathing in, Farroutef sucked up the mental energy that made up John's leg, completely devouring it. His long tongue snaked out and licked his huge teeth.

"Delicious. I can see by the fire in your eyes that you do not intend to give up. Good. Come again as many times as you wish, in whatever form you wish. I shall destroy you piece by piece, devouring you until there is nothing left."

CHAPTER 27

Waking up with a gasp, John instinctively looked down at his leg, double-checking to make sure it was still there. When he saw that his foot was still in place, he let out a sigh of relief. His encounter with the dragon had felt so real, and as he closed his eyes to do an inventory of himself, John quickly realized that he had actually lost a sliver of his mental sense to Farroutef. Though it was difficult to detect, John could feel that the dragon had actually grown slightly stronger while he had grown slightly weaker. That feeling was reinforced a moment later when the voice of the system spoke.

[Warning, Player John Sutton, a parasitic being has consumed some of your mental strength. If you are not careful, the dragon Farroutef will consume your mental strength completely, stripping away and subsuming your identity.]

Thanks, system. Tell me something I don't know.

[Farroutef the Deceiver consists of two parts, his mental image and his azure flame. By defeating each, Player John Sutton can complete the quest A Dragon's Heart and receive the reward.]

Freezing, John's eyes went wide. The system had never given him any information beyond the initial quest, and he couldn't believe what he was hearing. Curious if it could reveal any more, John thought about his next question carefully.

How do I defeat Farroutef's mental image?

[Player John Sutton needs a stronger mental image to be able to defeat the dragon in his mind. You and Farroutef the Deceiver can consume each other's mental strength. Consuming Farroutef's mental strength will increase your own, and vice versa.]

And his flame? How do I defeat his azure flame?

This time there was a moment of hesitation, as if the system was considering what to say. Just when John thought it might not speak again, the system's voice appeared.

[There are few things that can extinguish dragon fire, and only a much stronger flame can devour it.]

Devour it? What do you mean?

This time there was no response, no matter how long John waited, and he realized that the system was not going to answer him anymore. As frustrated as he was, John was happy to at least get something. So far, he had been handling all of his quests completely blind, so it was wonderful to have some direction, even if it wasn't all that clear. Noticing that he was being stared at, John turned his head and saw Ellie looking at him.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," John said, getting up from his stool and looking at the list she was compiling.

Flipping through her notebook so he could see how many pages she had filled out, Ellie shrugged helplessly.

"This is a lot harder than I thought it would be. Especially since there isn't really a cap on our creativity. For example, I thought about an adaptation that allows me to summon and control more powerful spirits, and then I thought, why not add the ability to borrow characteristics from spirits I control. That led me down a whole rabbit hole of spirit characteristics. There's simply too much to choose from."

"Can we actually do something like that?" John asked, his voice skeptical. "I mean, it's kind of insane to think that we can just wave our hands and create our own abilities. If it was that easy, why hasn't it become common practice?"

Floating over, Rebya rolled her eyes at John's question.

"Who said it was easy? Most people will never be able to do this because they don't have me. I don't know if you've noticed, John, but I'm not exactly an average tower spirit. In fact, I'd wager that another tower spirit of my intellect doesn't exist. In order to run the calculations for any of these abilities, you'll need my processing power. Beasts seem to be able to do it on instinct, but even if you could record the way a beast manifested, say, wings, it wouldn't work for you since your body is distinct.

“After you come up with your perfect body, you’re still going to need me to run the calculations for you. I mean, you could probably do it with your Mental Model, but it will take months for even the simplest adaptation. I don’t mean to brag, but calculating the same thing will take me a day. An advantage of size is that I can run a lot more simultaneous processes. Oh! That reminds me. Ellie, this is for you.”

From the vine that carried Rebya’s flower, a tiny flower bloomed and detached itself, drifting over to Ellie. The flower was only a few centimeters across and its stem was curved into a hook. Reaching out to catch it, Ellie recognized it as an earring and held it up next to her ear.

“What is this for?”

“It serves the same function as the ring John is wearing. I’ve been working on my remote communication magic, and I’ve finally gotten it to the point where it should work just about everywhere. John, I have a replacement ring for you as well. Something a bit more manly.”

Taking the new ring that Rebya offered, John held it up to examine it closely. The new ring lacked the flower that the other ring had and looked to be made from aged silver roots that twisted together in a wide, flat band. Turning the ring over, John realized there was a small crimson gem set in the underside of the ring, surrounding a hidden image of a tower. Slipping the ring onto his thumb, he was startled when hundreds of images flashed in front of his eyes, showing him scenes from across the tower. Looking at Rebya, John saw that she was watching him happily, as if expecting his surprise.

“What is this?”

Bowing her head toward him, Rebya spoke calmly, a hint of relief threaded through her words.

“If it is acceptable to you, I wish to pass the title of tower master to you. I have been wrestling with my own existence for some time now, and I’ve come to understand that I am not suited to be master of the Shadow Tower. You are the most qualified person I know, and the only Mage I would trust with holding control of the tower. That ring holds the control spells for the tower, and with it you have command of the tower and its facilities.”

“Rebya, what are you talking about?” John said, removing the ring from his thumb, his voice stern. “You are an excellent tower master. In fact—”

“The tower master position requires a Mage,” Rebya said, interrupting John, “and I am not a Mage. I simply have the knowledge of one. As I said,

I've been discovering more about myself recently, and you might say that I'm more of a spirit. A nature spirit to be precise. There are functions of the tower that I cannot activate, and even if I could, that wouldn't change my nature. My desires are twofold—protect the knowledge of this world and learn more about the nature of life. But as I said, I *am* Shadow Tower. I cannot be separated from it, or from the core you charged. Please accept this appointment."

Looking down at the ring in his hand, John could feel conflicting emotions battling it out within him. Rebya was handing over an immense amount of power to him at a moment when he desperately needed it, and a part of him wanted to accept it without thinking twice. Until this point, there had been a part of their relationship that had been based around the fact that he could obliterate her with a wave of his hand, but in his current sealed state that was no longer the case, giving her the absolute advantage in terms of combat power.

For her to so clearly indicate her desire to remain in the same sort of relationship as they had previously was astonishing to John and warmed his heart. At the same time, he found himself wary of taking on any new responsibilities. He already had too much on his plate, and adding the leadership of a Mage's tower wasn't very exciting. Feeling a tug on his sleeve, he looked over and saw Ellie beaming at him.

"First, congratulations on becoming a tower master. Second, can non-Mages join your tower?"

Snapped out of his thoughts at her question, John's eyes suddenly lit up, causing Ellie's excitement to dim as she tried to step back. John was too quick, however, and grabbed her hand, preventing her from escaping.

"Thank you," he said, a sneaky smile on his lips. "And absolutely. I think it's only right that we allow other class holders to join. In fact, I'm excited to invite you to join. How about the vice tower master position? Second in command. You'll have access to all the resources of the tower and be able to boss everyone around."

"I can already do that, thank you," Ellie said, trying unsuccessfully to remove her hand from John's. "I'm happy without the title."

"No, no, I insist. If I have to be the tower master, you have to be the vice tower master."

Quite pleased with his idea, John let go of Ellie's hand and slipped the silver ring onto his thumb, infusing mana into it. Waving his hand, he issued

his first command.

"Rebya, please record Ellie as our new vice tower master."

"Wait—"

"I have recorded it. Congratulations, Ellie. You'll find your earring allows you access to every part of the tower except the tower master's private chambers and laboratory."

"Private chambers?" John asked. "What private chambers?"

"Ah, let me show you," Rebya said, her face brightening and her eyes glittering with curiosity. "There are chambers at the top of the tower I have not been able to access. They are reserved for the tower master. In part, it was this that alerted me to the fact that I was not suited to be tower master. Come."

Exchanging glances, John and Ellie stepped onto the vines that wove together to form a platform, and a moment later they were hurtling through the tower. Traveling on Rebya's vines was barely slower than taking a portal stone, and within sixty seconds they were standing in front of an elegant-looking door at the top of the tower. Reaching out to touch it, John felt a tiny pinch on his thumb and the enchantment that covered the door flickered, unlocking and melting away.

Beyond the doorway was a simple chamber with a few pieces of dusty furniture. There was a spiral staircase that led up into the ceiling and a dry fountain set in the wall, flanked by two statues. The first was of a powerful, bearded man who John immediately recognized as Storm Master Kelvis, the Mage who had built this tower, while the other statue looked like Rebya.

"Is that the Mage who built the tower?" Ellie asked, pointing at the statue of Kelvis.

"It is. And this must be Tower Master Rebya," John said, gesturing to the other statue. "Rebya, you said that you take the appearance of your creator, right?"

"That is correct, though I never had the chance to meet her," Rebya said, her voice unusually solemn.

As they approached the two statues to get a closer look, the dry fountain sprang to life and a gentle breeze blew through the room, clearing all of the dust that had gathered on the furniture. Shaking his head, John could only marvel. In a lot of ways, he still wasn't used to the fact that he was living in a world full of magic. There wasn't much else in the room they were in, so John and Ellie headed for the stairs, intending to go up to the next floor.

Rebya stopped, however, and did not accompany them, shaking her head when John asked about it.

"Thank you, but I'll stay down here. The tower master's chamber is private. You can communicate with me by concentrating on your ring, but I cannot see or hear anything in that space. In fact, the enchantment that is set up there will prevent any of my senses from working in that space."

"That doesn't seem fair," Ellie said, frowning.

"Can we take apart the enchantment?" John asked. "It seems silly to have a place in your tower that you cannot go."

"Please don't," Rebya said quickly, her voice panicked. "The enchantment is closely tied to many of the tower's other enchantments, and if it breaks down, it will create a fatal weakness in the tower's defenses. I really don't mind that I can't see what's up there. Besides, you can always tell me after you've seen it."

"Hmph. I still think it's not fair," Ellie said.

"We'll have to see if we can fix it later," John agreed.

Walking up the curved staircase with Ellie following close behind, John climbed almost three stories, eventually coming out in a wide, circular room filled with light rising from a clear crystal floor set in the center of the room. Made from stone that gleamed in soft white, the room was bright and spacious and contained a dozen bookshelves, multiple workstations, a bedroom suite, and a wide desk. All of the furnishings were situated around the edge of the room, surrounding the circular patch of crystal in the center. Hanging in the center of the room above the clear crystal floor was a round ball made of incredibly intricate metalwork.

Sensing something familiar from the ball, John walked over, idly glancing down as he stepped onto the clear crystal floor. The sight stopped him in his tracks. He was staring at the massive power crystal the tower used as its primary power source and could see down into the open shaft that ran through the middle of the tower. Next to him Ellie let out a low whistle. She remembered clearly that when they had stood by the power crystal and looked up, they had been able to see the sky above the mouth of the volcano. Now, however, it appeared as though this room was right above the crystal.

"How does that work?" she whispered, unable to work it out.

"Magic?" John shrugged, getting an eye roll for his lame joke.

Laughing, he stepped closer to the metal ball, his eyes tracing across the delicate enchantments that covered it. The ball's surface was covered in a layer of metal that looked like quicksilver, but as it rotated this way and that, it occasionally revealed strange runes John had never seen before. Each time one of the runes was revealed, John could sense a dangerous energy radiating from the ball, making him wary.

"What do you think this thing is?" he asked Ellie.

"No idea. But it looks way too advanced for anyone in this world to have made it."

"That's true," John said, circling around it.

Noticing that the top of the ball had a crimson gem that was occasionally visible, John reached out his hand, bringing his thumb ring close. With a shiver, the silver shell around the ball melted back and the runes were completely revealed.

[Congratulations, Player John Sutton. You have discovered the Ancient Runic Tower Core. A new quest has been unlocked.]

CHAPTER 28

[New Quest Generated: The Artifact]
[The Artifact: You have discovered a strange artifact in the Shadow Tower. Made from ancient magic, the device was constructed with a level of magic beyond anything you have ever seen before but lacks the mana it needs to be properly activated. Infuse it with pure mana to power it up.]

Waving away the window that popped up, John took a step back, a wry smile on his face.

"Nothing is ever easy, is it?" he muttered, earning a curious look from Ellie. "This thing needs pure mana to power it up."

Clicking her tongue, Ellie patted John on the shoulder.

"You'll just have to come back once you've built your adaptations."

Wincing at her words, John looked at Ellie.

"Why are you so comfortable with the idea of transforming yourself into a beast?" John asked, his forehead furrowing. "Aren't you afraid of losing your humanity?"

Pausing, Ellie looked like she didn't quite understand his question. After a moment, she shook her head.

"John, we aren't human. We stopped being human when we became class holders. Humans can't do magic. Humans can't talk to spirits or summon lightning. They can't turn into flame spirits, or see the future. Besides, it's not like changing my body is going to suddenly change who I am."

Chewing on his lip, John shook his head.

"I'm not so sure about that. In my experience, our minds often bend themselves to the container they rest in. I guess I'm just afraid that we'll walk this path and end up changing for the worse."

Nodding, Ellie stepped close to John and wrapped her fingers around his.

"I can understand that fear. It's sort of like the feeling I get whenever you leave. I wonder if you'll still be the same when you get back, and if you'll even want to come back."

Hand in hand, they looked around the rest of the room, eventually ending up at the desk where John saw a simple book. Reaching out to open it, he felt a surge of mana and a translucent figure appeared in the high-backed chair behind the desk. Looking at John and Ellie with an intense gaze, Storm Master Kelvis' figure only spoke after a full minute.

"I confess, I do not understand what I am seeing. A manaless mage, and a Witch with a mana purity that should be impossible. Either magic has changed in its very nature, or the legacy of our order has been destroyed. Yet you wear the ring of the tower master. Tell me, how did you come here? Wait, why do I know you?"

Bowing slightly, John saluted Storm Master Kelvis.

"Depending on when you were created, you would have met me when you took your disciple, Katrine."

"There is another scent around you that is familiar, but I remember. You were that frightened young Mage from Lepiera. Tell me, how many years have passed? Where is Katrine? How did things turn out?"

Sensing the Storm Master's eagerness, John considered what he should say. After hesitating, he decided to speak the truth.

"Everything is a mess. The war nearly wiped out all the food in the world. We're just stabilizing that, but Allera has started the war again. To make matters worse, there is an organization called New Dawn manipulating everything from behind the scenes and an army of legendary and sage level beasts coming to destroy us. Oh, and a ninth-order Mage from another world who wants to enslave us all."

The longer John spoke, the grimmer Storm Master Kelvis' expression got, and by the time John finished explaining the state of the world, he looked like he was about to erupt. Holding it together, the former tower master glowered at John.

"And my disciple, Katrine?"

"She has had a rough few years, but she reached the fourth order, or sage level, and made her way through the dimensional gate the first Mage left behind."

A gleam of gratification pierced the dark expression on Storm Master Kelvis' face when he heard John's words and he slapped his knee.

"I knew she was talented," the Storm Master said. "She had an uncanny knack for magic. I must confess, I do wish she had been the one to come here, but clearly she was not fated for it. You must have gained the

acknowledgement of the tower spirit to have been given the ring, so make sure you use it wisely. My time is short, but I should be able to answer some questions for you before I leave. Behind me are all of the secret texts I was able to gather from the other towers through the course of the war. While the war itself was an abomination, it did allow me to collect a significant number of magical texts."

"What is the object in the center of the room?" John asked, impatient to learn what Storm Master Kelvis knew about it.

"All I know is that it is an ancient artifact," the former tower master said, stroking his beard. "Before I died, I used almost all my life force to cast a divination, searching for a way to save the world. That divination led to this device. What its use is I do not know, as I was never able to power it. My mana is not pure enough. I do not even know where it comes from, since it clearly was not created in this world. Though I could not activate it entirely, through the principles that I learned, I was able to create this space to serve as a home for it. Only those with the tower master's ring can open this space. I left the sphere here in this tower in the hopes that there will one day be a tower master strong enough to activate it."

Noticing that the tower master was starting to fade, John bowed again.

"Thank you for your service, Storm Master Kelvis. If not for your hard work and sacrifice, this world would no longer exist."

For the first time, the Storm Master's face lit up in a bright smile and the room seemed to light up with him, as if rays of sun had pierced a dark cloud. Nodding his head to John, the tower master faded away completely, vanishing forever from the world. Left alone, John and Ellie stood in silence for a minute, each absorbed in their own thoughts as they honored the dead Mage.

There wasn't much left to see in the tower master's chamber, so after double-checking to make sure they hadn't missed anything, John and Ellie headed down the stairs. Rebya had left already, so John took Ellie's hand and activated his ring, causing hundreds of mental pictures of the tower to appear. Selecting the image of the laboratory where Rebya was studying the dog beasts, they appeared there a moment later.

"Welcome back. Did you find anything interesting?" Rebya asked, bowing slightly to John.

"Yes. An ancient artifact of unknown use and a mental fragment left behind by Storm Master Kelvis."

“Oh, curious,” Rebya said, stopping what she was doing and floating over. “You’ll have to let me know if there is anything I can help with. Have you solidified your adaptation images yet? I’m excited to begin helping you form them.”

“Rebya, not all of us have an entire Mage tower worth of processing capacity,” Ellie said gently, shaking her head. “We need a bit more time.”

“Right. I understand. Might I suggest that you work at it quickly though? Dangerous days are ahead of us, and the sooner you increase your power, the better.”

Nodding, John’s face hardened as he thought about the dragon lurking in his mind.

“You’re right. We need more strength. We will work on identifying the adaptations we want and will be back as soon as we are ready.”

Glancing at John in surprise, Ellie didn’t say anything, though it was obvious that she was curious about why he’d changed his mind. Still, she didn’t ask him, even as the two of them headed back to the farm. It was getting close to sunrise as they walked out of the cheese cellar, and the sounds of the farm starting to come alive were all around them. It was a soothing feeling, and John found himself relaxing as he stepped up onto the porch. Stopping for a moment, he looked around at the farm in the gray morning light.

If he had achieved nothing else in this world, he was proud of what he had achieved on Sutton Farm, with the help of Ellie, Thomas, and the others. Even if everything went wrong, John suddenly had the sense that he had gotten what he wanted and found a home to rest his weary body and mind. The feeling was like a refreshing breeze that brought life to his soul and mind. Sensing the slight shift, Ellie smiled and walked inside to start breakfast.

They were just finishing up when they heard a noise down by the road, and a few moments later a heavily laden cart rumbled into the yard. Jumping up, Ellie rushed to the door while John followed at a more sedate pace. In the center of the yard was a cart piled high with all sorts of goods, but Ellie only had eyes for Ben, who had just hopped off the cart. It had only been two weeks since they had seen him last in the capital city of Lepiera, but he seemed to have grown noticeably taller, and his face had lost some of its childishness.

“Ellie!”

Taking a step forward, Ben's body seemed to shrink and vanish into the shadow behind him, reappearing in front of Ellie. His arms wrapped around her tightly and he buried his head in her stomach.

"Ben! It's so wonderful to see you, but why are you here?" Ellie asked, seeing Gofreid climbing down from the cart.

"We're just dropping some things off," Ben said, "and then we're heading back. We need to pick up the newest batch of noodles too."

"How are things on the front line?" John asked, lifting his hand to greet Gofreid.

"Not great," the merchant said, grimacing. "Allera's army is marshaling again. They are pretty desperate by this point, and from what the Moritoi scouts have reported, they've captured and killed nearly everyone in Allera. Even the capital city has been emptied out. The Iron Monarch is determined to destroy us, and it's not helping that the New Dawn Mages are causing all sorts of trouble."

"Come on in. Have you eaten breakfast yet?" Ellie asked.

Nodding his head, Gofreid jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"We had breakfast in Fairford."

"I could eat some more," Ben chimed in, smiling. "Traveling always makes me extra hungry."

"Help Thomas unload and then come in and I'll whip something up for you."

As Ellie bustled about the kitchen, John sat down with Gofreid at the table while Ben helped Thomas get all the goods down from the cart and put them away. From the nervous way Gofreid was smiling, John could tell that something was wrong. Tapping the table to interrupt Gofreid's mindless chatter, John looked straight at the merchant.

"Gofreid, what's wrong? Why did you come here?"

Looking almost guilty, Gofreid let out a sigh and got out a folded piece of paper and slid it across the table. It was enchanted with a subtle magic lock, and as soon as John's finger touched it, it sprang open, revealing glittering writing that floated up into the air.

[The Harbinger of the New Dawn give you greetings, Sage Sutton. We regret our recent conflict with you and wish to make amends. Due to regrettable circumstances, it is impossible for us to come meet you in person, so we must humbly ask you to come and meet us. It is of vital importance to the survival of humanity that you come meet us with all

haste. The beasts begin to move. Enclosed you will find a map that will lead you to our location. We look forward to speaking to you soon, face to face.]

Waving the letter, John frowned slightly as he spoke to Gofreid.

"Where did you get this?"

"I woke up and it was on my bedside table," Gofreid said, clearly still freaked out. "When I picked it up, I heard a voice telling me that I should bring it to you as fast as possible if I didn't want to die. Ben had been mentioning wanting to see you and Lady Ellie, so I thought I'd just make the trip with the noodle caravan."

"You were wise to take this seriously," John said, "these New Dawn Mages don't typically have a lot of patience for mortals. Thank you for delivering it. I'll handle it from here, so you can feel free to head back to the front as normal. Oh, and we have an extra batch of cheese that's ready to deliver as well. And more of the noodle pouches for the Moritoi."

"Thank you," Gofreid said, his complexion starting to return to normal.

After everyone had eaten, John brought them to the warehouse where the noodles were being stored, and with the help of the caravan Gofreid had brought, they got them all loaded up. They were just putting the last bags on the cart when John suddenly froze, his eyes turning north. He wasn't the only one either. Thomas, Ben, and a few of the Moritoi guards looked north as well. A moment later, Ellie's voice whispered on the wind, delivered to John by one of her wind spirits.

"John, we have an unfriendly visitor, coming across the valley from the mountains to the north."

"I'll go check out what they want," John said, waving his hand to cast Levitate.

Flying up into the air, he saw that Ferdie and Sigvald had already risen up above the farm and were heading in his direction. The three of them joined up and John hopped on Ferdie's back, riding him across the sky as Sigvald flew along beside them. In the far distance, John could see two figures coming toward him. In the lead was Firalig, the sage bear John had chased off only a few days before, and behind him was a muscular man whose features were heavily scarred. Both of the men weren't bothering to hide their auras, clearly indicating they hadn't come for a pleasant chat.

What was most worrying was that the man behind Kiralig had the stronger aura of the two, making John think he was about to meet another of the beast army's generals. Tapping Ferdie's shoulder to have him stop, John

and the two beasts waited for the generals striding across the air to reach them.

“He’s the one,” Kiralig growled as soon as he came close to John.

“Him? He looks like a weakling,” the scarred man scoffed. “Are you sure you’re not getting soft in your old age?”

“I’m telling you, he’s one of those annoying Mages that just flies around. I was only forced to flee because of that bull he’s riding,” Kiralig said, spitting to the side.

Smirking, the scarred man stepped forward and spoke, his voice echoing across the valley.

“I am the Reaper of the Dark Woods, Markov, seventh general under Gorralick the Destroyer. I have come to avenge the honor of the beast army and to take your head.”

CHAPTER 29

Standing in the air over the valley, John frowned. He had spared Kiralig and instructed the bear sage to warn the others that they were not to enter the valley or the land around it, but clearly Kiralig hadn't taken him seriously. Instead of warning his master, the beast king, he had gotten reinforcements and returned to attack John once again, seeking to wash away the stain of his defeat. Glancing down, John saw the wheat spread out below them and his frown deepened. Patting Ferdie on the shoulder, John turned to look at Sigvald who was hovering in the air next to them, lightning dancing across his feathers.

"Go back and guard the farm."

Though Sigvald clearly wanted a piece of the action, he knew better than to defy John's commands, and with an angry chirp he turned and flew back down toward the farm. Watching him leave, Markov's lips curled back, revealing sharp fangs.

"Shame. I was hoping to have some roasted chicken after this."

"You'd need to still have your teeth to eat him," John said, his voice dry. "If you want to fight, we can fight, but not here. We will fight on the same battlefield where we fought before."

Sneering, Kiralig took a heavy step forward, a murderous look on his face.

"Weaklings don't get to decide where their grave is, human."

Giving the bear sage a cold look, John lifted his left hand, causing the red gem on the band he wore to glint ominously. Immediately, both beasts felt a terrifyingly large aura lock onto them. They hadn't noticed it before because it had permeated the whole valley, but now that it was focusing on them, they suddenly felt like ants under a magnifying glass.

"That is a good saying," John said calmly. "I'll remember that. Now, if you'll follow me, we can fight. Otherwise, you can be buried here."

With a snort that sounded suspiciously like laughter, Ferdie trotted between the two beasts who were frozen in place, their instincts screaming at them that if they moved they would immediately die. Only after John had passed them did the presence vanish, melting back into the valley. Exchanging glances, the two sage level beasts followed after John, heading

for the mountains they had come from. Up ahead John's expression was calm, but inside his emotions were in turmoil.

Rebya, how much energy did that take?

A thin thread of thought came through the ring that John wore, but what worried John was how tired Rebya sounded.

[It took about an eighth of my reserves. An actual attack would wipe me out completely and forcefully reactivate the guardians.]

Okay. Try to conserve your energy as much as possible.

The situation with Rebya was starting to grow dire, and it would only continue to get worse if she contributed to the defense of the valley. Most of the energy she had was being funneled into setting up defenses around the edge of the valley, but if John wasn't able to recharge the mana crystal the tower ran off of, the defenses wouldn't even have enough energy to activate.

I don't like the idea of making myself even less human, but at the end of the day, what choice do I have? I either give up on this world, or I figure out a way to stabilize my mana. And so far, there's only one option.

It wasn't long before they arrived at an empty stretch of mountains with a long valley snaking between them. There was nothing but dirt and rocks and an occasional shrub in the valley, so John directed Ferdie to land there and hopped off. A moment later, the two sage beasts slammed into the ground, throwing dirt and stone up into the air. Striding out of the cloud of debris, Markov stopped about a hundred feet from John.

"You have chosen a good place for your death, human. Let us begin!"

Holding up his hand, John shook his head.

"Wait a second. We need to set some rules for the fight."

"Rules?" Markov laughed incredulously. "There are no rules in a fight to the death!"

"That's a rule, actually," John said, nodding grimly. "But you've told me everything I need to know."

"Enough!"

With a roar that shook the air, Markov dashed forward, his body moving so fast he left a flicker of images behind him.

"Fractal Image! Void Prison! Wind Cutter!"

Without his staff or even his sword John was forced to cast with his bare hands, but that didn't stop him from throwing out three powerful spells in a row. The first caused his body to split up into three figures, intending to confuse Markov's senses, while the second formed chains of air that wrapped themselves around the sage beast's limbs. Finally, the third spell was an advanced version of the Wind Blade spell and it shot toward Markov's neck, intending to end the fight instantly.

Somehow, Markov seemed to instinctively guess where John's spells would land and, with a flicker, he vanished, moving sideways and backward at the same time, completely avoiding the two spells targeting him. As soon as he was out of their range he rushed forward again, his hand swiping at the air. Instantly, one of John's figures shattered, torn apart as the air warped. Grinning victoriously, Markov turned and closed in on the other two figures, his arm drawing back as he prepared another attack.

"Void Prison! Fire Storm!"

Again, John cast chains of air at Markov, followed a beat later by a raging storm of flames that rolled over Markov. This time, the sage beast didn't even bother dodging, and instead slashed with his hand again, tearing both spells apart as he blasted through them. In a moment he was on top of one of John's figures, his foot lashing out. Once again, John's body cracked into a thousand pieces, vanishing in a shower of light. In almost the same instant, Markov materialized in front of John's real body, his hand lashing out.

Unable to get a spell off in time, all John could do was lift his arm to block the blow, hoping that it wouldn't be too bad. Like five blades, Markov's fingers tore into John's skin, causing blood to flow freely and sending him flying. The blow wasn't as hard as Kiralig's, but Markov's attack was noticeably sharper, cutting his arm nearly to the bone. Still, John didn't stop casting, and as he slammed into the ground it opened up around him, saving him from smashing into it. Markov was chasing after him, intending to dig his heart out, but at the last second John vanished.

"Blink Step! Stone Tomb!"

The ground around Markov that had opened up suddenly surged back together, completely burying him underground. John had teleported away at the last moment, and he took the moment of respite he had earned to cast as many spells as he could. Elemental shields sprang up around him and the ground began to roil and buckle as jets of flame started to break through the

surface. One of the jets of flame was focused on the spot where Markov had been buried, and a moment later there was a roar of pain and rage as the sage beast broke through the ground, his hair singed and skin burnt.

At the side of the valley, Ferdie and Kiralig were watching each other with fierce gazes. They had both considered jumping into the fight but were wary about being attacked from behind by the other. Flying up into the air, his skin smoking, Markov glared at John. Both fighters were hurt, but the wounds were superficial, a testament to the tremendous vitality and endurance of sage level bodies. Sensing Markov tensing up for another attack, John's fingers flicked and a web of fire formed from the pillars of flame that dotted the valley below.

"Flame Prison!"

"You don't really believe such pathetic spells can hold me, do you?" Markov snarled, his body fading away as the flame chains closed in on him. "I'll tear you limb from limb and drink your blood from your skull!"

Moving at speeds almost impossible to track, Markov dashed toward John, forcing him to abandon his latest spell as he cast Blink Step to dodge. For the next few minutes, John felt like he was playing a deadly game of tag as he desperately tried to avoid Markov's attacks. As for the sage beast, he felt like he was trying to catch a loach with his bare hands, as John slipped away time and time again.

Back and forth across the valley they fought, one chasing and the other running until one of John's Blink Steps didn't take him far enough away and Markov got to him before he could activate his next spell. Ramming into John, Markov sank his fingers into John's shoulder, causing John to groan in pain. Seeing things were about to go bad, Ferdie let out a bellow and started to charge forward, but before he could a giant bear slammed into his side.

Furious, Ferdie unleashed his own giant transformation, turning into a massive bull that dwarfed even Kiralig. Panic colored the bear's eyes, but before he could turn and flee, Ferdie's scale-covered tail slammed into him, burying him in the ground. Letting out a roar that caused a nearby mountain to shatter, Ferdie charged down to stomp on Kiralig, his flaming hooves burning up the air as he fell toward the sage bear like a meteor.

Across the valley, the roar Ferdie unleashed had caused Markov to pause in shock. He hadn't detected Ferdie's power level, and now that it was unleashed, he had to suppress his desire to turn and flee. Still, he had

finally caught John, and he didn't want to waste the opportunity. Figuring that Kiralig would be able to hold on until he could finish killing John, he refocused his attention just in time for John to deliver a fierce uppercut, smashing his mouth closed with such force that his teeth cracked.

John's shoulder throbbed with pain as Markov held him tightly, but John didn't care at all. Instead, he gripped the inside of Markov's elbow and jerked down, causing the distance between them to shrink. Lifting his own elbow, he smashed it into Markov's face, knocking the beast's head to the side. The shift caused them to tumble down toward the ground, but John never once tried to stabilize them, instead focusing on delivering as many blows to the stunned sage beast as he could. As they got close to the ground, he let go of his grip on Markov's arm and kicked him in the stomach, driving them apart.

Clenching his teeth as Markov's fingers were ripped free of his shoulder, John fought through the pain that wracked his body, casting Blink Step to arrest his momentum. Markov wasn't so lucky and crashed into the ground, forming a crater. Unable to lift his arm because of the damage to his shoulder, John used his other hand to cast a Flame Pillar spell, targeting the spot where Markov landed. To his credit, the sage beast responded quickly, but as he tried to escape a wall of earth rose up around him, trapping him in place.

"Wall of Earth!"

The fierce flames burned at Markov, adding to the pain he was feeling. With an enraged scream, his body transformed, turning from a scarred human into a massive panther that burst out of the Wall of Earth. By this time John had backed up a good distance, but all it took was a single step for Markov to close the gap. Realizing he had miscalculated, John knew he wasn't going to have time to finish the spell he was casting. Markov had been fast before, but now he was too fast for John to follow at all. It would have been a different story if he still had access to his mana, but with all of it sealed, he only had the ambient mana to work with, and it just wasn't strong enough.

Just when John thought he was out of options, he felt a sinister presence surge up in his mind and time slowed down to a crawl. From the corner of his eye, he felt as if he could see a draconic figure appear.

"Tsk tsk. Getting yourself into trouble I see. Huh, it's not every day you see a sage level wind panther. Their strength is in their speed, which you're

about to learn the hard way. I don't think this blow will kill you, but it will probably knock you out, leaving you at his mercy. And if I know anything about beasts like this, they won't stop with you. He'll relish hunting down everyone you love, everyone you care about, and carving them to pieces."

"Farroutef," John growled.

"Hmm? You called? It can't be that you want me to save you, can it? My, what a change of roles. Normally you treat me like the enemy, but now you want me to step in? Pathetic."

"If I die, you die," John said.

"Ah, that is where you're wrong, John. Incredibly wrong. You don't understand what I am. I am a dragon. Immortal, unstoppable, all-powerful. You are a pathetic human about to die because you're too weak to know how to handle your mana."

Taking a deep breath, John turned to face the evil-looking dragon. Everything around them was frozen, and John knew they were currently in his mental world. Stretching out his left arm, he caused a blade to appear in his right hand. Curious, Farroutef cocked his head to the side and looked at him.

"You like making deals, right?" John said, his expression steely. "Lend me your strength, and you can have my arm."

Amused, Farroutef smiled like a shark that had just smelled the scent of blood.

"You are right, I do love making deals. And I love making these sorts of deals the most. You trade me your mental strength, and what sort of strength do you want in return?"

"I want your physical strength and endurance," John said.

"Fine! Our deal is made. A pleasure, John."

Without a word, John brought his blade down on his left arm, severing it right below his shoulder. The pain was unbelievable, and John could feel his mental strength tearing as his arm fell to the ground. Farroutef hadn't moved, so John was forced to pick up his arm and toss it over to the dragon, who caught it with a nasty chuckle. Slowly, John felt his grip on the mental space starting to slip as the world around them started to slowly speed back up. Taking his time, the dragon waited until everything was almost back to normal before smirking at John and releasing a surge of azure flame that rippled through John's physical body.

"You have ten seconds."

CHAPTER 30

Markov was having a terrible day. As the seventh general of the beast army, he was considered the eighth strongest beast in this world. Yet a puny human Mage had been giving him the runaround for the last ten minutes and had actually managed to hurt him, burning his skin and cracking his teeth. He had no idea a human could even have fists that hard. Vowing to punish Kiralig for getting him into this humiliating mess, he transformed into his original beast form, launching his most powerful attack at the human.

As ever, he crossed the distance in a flash, taking less than a blink of an eye to arrive in front of John. Bringing his paw down, he could feel his claws finding purchase in the air, creating the wind blades that would rend the Mage into delicious chunks of flesh. Vaguely, he could hear Kiralig's wails as the giant bull gored him, but Markov was too focused to care about his companion's safety. Just as he was about to make contact, however, something shifted in John's body.

Blue flame flickered throughout John's form, wrapping around his bones and infusing his muscles with life. John had already lifted his hands to try to cast a spell, but he was out of time. Instead, he clenched his fingers into a fist and punched forward lightly. At the same time he slid his right foot forward, twisted his waist, and slapped sideways with his left hand. The five wind blades clashed with his hand, causing blood to fly, but a moment later the blue flame wrapped around his finger bones surged and the wind blades were batted aside.

His simple step brought John into striking range and his simple punch smashed through Markov's front teeth, sending sharp shards of bone flying back into the panther's mouth. Pivoting on his right foot, John clenched his left hand and punched Markov in the side of the head, crushing the sage beast's jaw. The beast's forward momentum was redirected to the side with such force that John could hear Markov's spine cracking in multiple places as his large body flew to the side.

Horror sprang up in the beast's eyes, but before he could speak, John had caught up and unleashed another punch, this one landing directly between Markov's eyes. With a sharp bang, the panther's head was pulverized, killing him instantly. John didn't pause to wipe off the blood

that splattered on him as he kicked off the ground, shooting toward the fight between Kiralig and Ferdie. Though he was completely outmatched and suffering greatly, Kiralig's main strength lay in his endurance. It had allowed him to survive Ferdie's onslaught, though he was on his last legs. Unaware that Markov had died to John's punch, he was just considering how best to escape when John appeared behind him and tore through his spine with a swipe of his hand.

About to charge, Ferdie let out an angry bellow, but John ignored him as he checked for any other enemies. Not seeing anyone, he stepped forward, appearing next to Ferdie. Grabbing the bull under his waist, he launched himself into the air, easily carrying Ferdie with him. Together they flew over the mountains toward the valley. Hearing another moo, John shook his head.

"We need to get as far away as we can," he said, his voice cold.

Sensing the urgency in John's tone, Ferdie didn't protest any more. With a flip of his horns, he scooped John up and began to run through the air, crossing the distance at a gallop. Five seconds later, John felt all of the powerful energy that filled his body draining away, returning to Farroutef in his mana pool. It had been a wild bet, made when he had no other option, but John had guessed that the dragon was not bound by the seal he had created. It had paid off, but now it was time to bear the consequences.

Excruciating pain tore through John, as if his entire body had just been roasted over a spit for hours. He had felt this pain before, the first time he had breathed in the flame of the dying dragon, and the memory of it had given him nightmares for years. As he writhed on Ferdie's back, he realized that the nightmares had only been a shadow of the real thing. Normally, his mana would shield his bones and muscles from the pain of using the dragon's flame, but this time, he had to bear the cost all on his own. Unable to stand it any more, John fainted, his body twitching with muscle spasms as Ferdie headed for the farm.

When John awoke, he was in his room, lying in his bed. The curtains had been pulled, but through a crack in them he could see light streaming in. Just then, the door opened and Ellie walked in, carrying a tray of porridge and bread. When she realized John was awake, she yelped happily and quickly put the tray down.

"John, are you okay? What happened? Why were you unconscious?"

Blinking at the barrage of questions, John did his best to answer them, explaining what had happened. When he got to the part about trading his mental strength to Farroutef, Ellie sucked in a sharp breath. She knew how much he disliked the dragon and how committed he was to not using the dragon's flames, so for him to have been forced to resort to that was a sign of just how close to death he had come. As John finished his story with fainting on Ferdie's back, Ellie was able to fill in the rest.

"When you arrived at the farm, you were in a really bad place. We managed to stabilize you with some potions, but your tremors only stopped after twelve hours. I've had Rebya examine you and she says that it was a net benefit, but that your mental strength is probably not strong enough for you to do it again."

"Net benefit, what do you mean?"

"You'll have to ask her for the specifics, but I think she was saying that because your body has experienced that level of strength in a manaless state, it has been forced into a specific shape. Meaning it will accept that sort of mana configuration better in the future. Normally, your mana would bear the cost of using that strength, but this time your body had to absorb it. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, I think so," John nodded. "But she's right about my mental strength. That pain is enough to drive someone crazy."

"It just speaks to how important it will be for us to grow stronger as fast as possible," Ellie said, her expression grim. "The only other option is that we leave. We take Ben, Thomas, and the others, and we leave this world."

Surprised to hear Ellie say such words, John looked at her closely and realized she had been crying. Embarrassment flooded John and he looked down at the blanket that covered him. He had rushed out to fight against the beasts without much thought, and even now he knew he would probably make the same decision again if it came up, but he hadn't thought about what the consequences of his actions would be to Ellie and the others. Taking his silence as something else, Ellie reached over and patted his hand.

"John, I'm not saying we should do it. But if it comes down to it, I think we need a plan B. Or C, or whatever. We need a backup plan. If you can't get this mana issue figured out quickly, we are going to lose everything. I mean, it would be nice if someone else stepped up and saved the world, but considering that even you have to resort to extreme measures to defeat these beasts, I doubt that anyone else in the world is going to do any better."

Nodding, John could only agree.

"You're right. So let's keep our focus on this. No more hesitation. I've already figured out what I want to do, it's just a matter of building the perfect vision for it and then finding the mana to start manifesting it. If need be, I'll go back to Candle Scholar Tower to break my seal and then come back to wipe out any threats that show up. But hopefully we can buy enough time to make that unnecessary."

"You already figured it out? Your adaptations?"

"I at least have the starting point," John said, wincing as he tried to lift his left arm. "Strangely, it was during the fight that I figured it out. Now I'm just running it through the Mental Model to optimize it. What about you? Do you know what you want?"

A slight blush climbed Ellie's cheeks as she nodded.

"Yes, I think so. I want to focus on healing and divination abilities."

"You're not just saying that because I got hurt, are you?"

Avoiding John's gaze, Ellie picked at the hem of her apron.

"No, I just think they'll be the most helpful."

"Ellie, I appreciate the thought, but if what I'm planning works, you won't need the healing part because I won't be getting hurt."

"You're not the only person I want to keep alive, John," Ellie said, rolling her eyes. "What if Ben was lying there instead of you? He wouldn't have survived. No one would have survived. Your body is freakish in its ability to heal, and there were times when I honestly didn't expect you to pull through. But maybe I can help with that. Maybe I can make sure that the next time one of my most important people is dragged back, half dead, covered in blood, and having seizures from the pain, I can actually be helpful."

Reaching over, John covered her picking fingers and squeezed Ellie's hand lightly, causing her to look up.

"I'm sorry, Ellie. I shouldn't have run off like that."

"It's okay. I know that sometimes you have to act. And I trust that you're acting with our best intentions in mind, but it is hard. It's hard to be the person at home waiting."

Falling silent, Ellie held John's hand for a moment longer before sighing.

"You know, I promised myself I wouldn't do this. That I'd be strong and I wouldn't distract you."

“You’re not distracting me,” John said, giving her a crooked smile, “you’re just reminding me what I’m fighting for in the first place. Sometimes, especially when I have mana coursing through my veins and my Mental Model running, it’s hard for me to remember that nothing about this is a game. That this is a very real, very deadly life. And that my actions don’t just impact me but also impact the people around me. Sometimes it gets my face being beaten in to remember that I am, after all, human.”

Chuckling, Ellie reached up and caressed his cheek.

“Well, let’s get that fixed as soon as possible, alright?”

“Agreed. I much prefer being an unstoppable force to an entirely stoppable chew toy,” John said with a grimace.

“What’s a chew toy?”

“Ah, a toy for pet dogs to chew on.”

“You come from a really strange place,” Ellie said, shaking her head. “The only pet dogs people around here keep are for hunting or eating. Why would you waste money buying toys for them?”

“Chalk it up to the lack of brutal violence in everyday life. Ugh, I’m really stiff. Like I said, I think you’re right. We really need to move on these adaptations. No more hesitation. I’ve decided I don’t want to be human anymore.”

“And it only took getting pummeled by a sage level beast,” Ellie said with a small smile.

“Ugh, only. Next time I’ll just listen to you the first time around and save myself the pain. I do agree with you though. Divination and healing are a good mix. If possible, try to build in some defenses too, though if that’s too much of a stretch, I think divination would be the most helpful. Correct decision-making can save a lot of pain. I’m going to start with getting my body to match my mana in strength. After that, I don’t know. But, before we get down to creating these adaptations, I do need to do one more thing. I put the letter that Gofreid brought on my desk. Can you get it for me? I need to go meet with these New Dawn people.”

“Is that wise?” Ellie asked, frowning. “What if it’s a trap?”

“Then I’ll pay the cost and wipe them out,” John replied with a cold edge to his voice. “But either way, we need to make sure they are no longer an issue. If I can’t redirect them toward the beast army, we’re just asking to be stabbed in the back, and at this point, we cannot afford to leave any variables. But if I had to guess, they’re in the same position we are.

Actually, while I'm at it, I need to go to Soaring Cloud Tower as well. If we're going to face off against the beasts, we'll need as many sages as we can get."

Taking a deep breath, Ellie shook her head.

"All this makes me really nervous, John. None of the groups you've mentioned are up to any good. And you're the only thing standing in their way."

"We. We are the only thing standing in their way," John said, cracking a grin. "Don't count yourself out, especially once you learn to tell the future."

Smiling, Ellie rolled her eyes and got up to get the food tray from the table.

"Just eat your food. Once you're done, we should go see Rebya. I'm sure she has some thoughts."

"Sure," John said, rearranging himself on the bed so Ellie could put the tray down.

His body ached terribly, and every time he moved his skin felt like it was cracking open, but when Ellie put back the curtains to let light into the room, John felt a sense of lightness he had never experienced before. The warm sunlight splashed across his floor and up onto his bed, and the curtains stirred in the summer breeze, carrying the scent of life with it. Everywhere John's eyes landed, everything appeared to be new and fresh, as if he was seeing it for the first time. Staring at his window and the barn beyond, it took a moment for John to realize what it was he was feeling. Seeing his smile, Ellie took a spoonful of porridge and held it up to his lips. John turned to look at her, biting down on the spoon and mumbling something she didn't quite catch.

"What was that?" she asked, scooping another spoon of porridge.

Swallowing, John smiled widely.

"I'm really happy to be alive."

CHAPTER 31

John and Ellie were standing in a room at the top of the Shadow Tower with Rebya, having just finished the first of what would be a series of visualization sessions. Two days had passed since he had woken up, three since he had been carried back to the farm, and John's ability to heal had once again shocked everyone. Though he was still slightly stiff in his movements, he was otherwise completely better.

For the last two days, he and Ellie had been holed up in this converted laboratory with Rebya, working on narrowing down what the plant Mage called their *ideal future self*. The process Rebya had used to help them had made John laugh, and even now, when he looked around at the lifelike images that covered every spare inch of the room, he found himself amused. Rebya's idea was simple. Create a visual representation of every single idea they had, and then slowly eliminate them until only the single best image remained.

It had worked too. While John had not yet reached his final image, Ellie had a perfect idea of what she wanted to become. More than that, she had actually found the perfect ways to represent the idea as well. On her half of the meditation chamber there was a single image that looked almost exactly like her. Standing with her arms outstretched, the picture of Ellie had a winding tattoo of a green vine on her right arm and a matching tattoo of dancing lightning on her left. Above her head was a glowing eye that seemed to peer out of the picture, seeing past all things, and behind her shoulders were a powerful lightning bird and a translucent unicorn.

When Ellie had finally settled on this image, every single one of the pictures in her half of the room had begun to shift and change, transforming into the same image to help her lock it into her mind. She had spent the first visualization session making sure she understood and accepted every single piece of this future version of herself. John hadn't been so lucky. Rather than a single image, he found that there were still half a dozen images in his mind whenever he tried to concentrate, and worse of all, they all had distinctly draconic characteristics.

Every time he sat down to meditate, he could feel his weakened mental strength and the pressure that Farroutef's mental image was exerting on him. While it didn't influence his thoughts directly, it was clear that the

dragon's sustained assault was pushing him toward adopting draconic characteristics. All the images appeared to be on a spectrum, with one showing John as a full-blown dragon, and most of the others showing him as a humanoid with draconic characteristics.

Some of the images showed John with scales, or with multiple sets of wings, and many of them showed him with draconic eyes and claws on his fingers. All but one of them showed him covered in powerful blue flames, as if saying that Farroutef's azure flame was an integral part of who he was. The single image that was different was a bit of a puzzle to everyone, including John.

In it, John was standing in the middle of what looked like a field, leaning on a hoe. There was nothing special about him, nothing magical or out of the ordinary, and in fact, he looked like a regular farmer. In the back of the image was a house with an indistinct figure on the porch, a barn, and a grazing bull with flaming horns. The first time John had seen the image he had laughed out loud, causing Ellie and Rebya to look at him strangely. It was clear to him that this final image was a reflection of what he really wanted, but what wasn't clear is what sort of adaptation it was pointing to. As John continued to try to refine his ideal future self, Ellie had gotten started on her adaptations, following Rebya's instructions as she began to channel mana into the image in her mind.

It was a difficult and painful task, but with Rebya's help, Ellie made good progress, and when she was done, the images around the room had gotten even sharper and clearer. John hadn't managed to reduce his conflicting images any further, but he wasn't really worried about it. He knew that it would be much harder for him to resolve the competing visions he had of his future, so he wasn't rushing it. Instead, seeing that Ellie was done, he turned his attention to the next task, revealing the map that would lead him to the New Dawn.

"Are you sure about this, John? It seems like a waste of time."

Shaking his head, John stretched out his hand, holding his palm over the enchanted letter he had gotten from Gofreid. Mana began to pool together, quickly forming glowing lines above the letter as the enchantment was filled. With a snapping sound, the enchantment completed and the hidden map began to appear, showing John a location on the edge of the great plains, north of Kingsmouth.

“Isn’t that a town?” Ellie asked, her forehead scrunching as she looked at the map that had appeared.

“Indeed. That is the location of Barrowvale,” Rebya replied, conjuring a map of Lepiera in the air and pointing at a spot on it. “If I had to guess, I would say that our New Dawn friends have control of the town, or maybe Count Francis, who oversees it.”

“It’s a five-day trip if I go by way of Kingsmouth, or a three-day trip if I cut through the great plains,” John said. “I could make it in two days if I fly, but that increases the risk of alerting the beast army that I’m gone.”

“But it will cut your trip time in half,” Ellie said.

“That’s true. The sooner I can get back and continue to work on this visualization, the better. It’s clear that I need to work on unifying my vision of what I want.”

“You can continue to work on it while you travel,” Rebya said. “The ultimate goal is for you to discover which version of yourself you want to invest into. Once you have that outcome fixed in your mind, you can figure out what you need in order to get there.”

Nodding, Ellie pointed at the image of Ferroutef that was leering at them.

“It might be helpful to think of this as a continuum. On one end, you have the evil within you. It includes all of the negative aspects of you. Your cruelty, your pride, your ruthlessness. And on the far other side, you have the opposite. Your kindness, your humility, your gentleness. Each of the images in between seems to be an indication of how far you are to one side or the other. This is ultimately going to be a struggle between you and Farroutef for control of your body, but as you are walking this path, you are going to have to identify what you are willing to tolerate in yourself.”

Thinking about what Ellie was saying for a moment, John waved his hand and the six images spun, their order shifting. When they stopped moving, they had been rearranged. On the far left was the image of Farroutef, while on the far right was the image of him on the farm. In between, the other four images were arranged by how many draconic characteristics he had, with the more human-looking images on the right and the more inhuman images on the left. With this new order, John felt like he had reached a moment of clarity, but he couldn’t help but frown.

“What’s the matter?” Ellie asked.

“Doesn’t this suggest that I either have to embrace Farroutef’s power or reject my power completely? Neither of those choices is something I can do. Unless I can find a third way in all of this, I’m stuck with two choices that don’t serve me.”

Looking at the images in silence, John, Ellie, and Rebya were at a loss. There really didn’t seem to be another option. Finally, realizing he was engaged in a futile exercise, John waved his hand and the images all shrank down and shot into his head.

“I’ll think on it some more. For now, we’ll leave it here and I’ll get going.”

It didn’t take John long to prepare everything he needed, and soon he was flying over the western mountains, leaving the valley for the great plains. The day was ending, and once he was over the mountains he stopped to look back. He remembered the first time he had seen the valley, though his view from up in the air was much better than it had been from the cart. Much had changed since he had arrived a few years ago, and the danger they faced was exponentially greater. Yet John found himself smiling as he watched the long shadows of the mountain creep across the valley.

The sense of joy he had experienced when sitting with Ellie was still there, lending a new kind of energy to him. An energy he had never experienced before. Chuckling, John turned to face the setting sun and took a breath of the clear, fresh air before shooting off, flying over the mountains. Higher he rose until even the mountains looked like toys down below him. He could feel the air thinning, but he didn’t care and simply flew forward, streaking across the sky.

A distance that would have taken him days to traverse shrank to almost nothing thanks to his flight spell, and as John closed in on Barrowvale a day later, he realized he was actually ahead of schedule. Stopping in midair, he thought for a moment and then changed directions, heading north. As he flew north he scanned the ground far below him, looking for something. It didn’t take him long to find it—a destroyed mountain and a mana-corrupted valley shrouded in a thick fog. This was Aventem, a ruined city where three legendary Mages had fought to the death, staining the land with their magics even as they killed each other.

The result of their forbidden spells was a permanent fog with a mana level that was enough to kill anyone under the legendary stage who stepped into it. Arriving over the ruins of Aventem, John dropped straight down out

of the air, vanishing into the cloud of fog and landing in the middle of the remains of the city. Looking around, he found the area to his liking, so he sat down. The mana density didn't bother him at all, and in fact, he found a sense of comfort in it, as if his body, which was starved for mana, was rejoicing. Sitting down, John crossed his legs and closed his eyes, getting ready to begin his meditation.

If I'm going to go up against the New Dawn and their mysterious leader, I should have some mana. I can't use my own mana, but that doesn't mean I can't create more. If I absorb this, I should have at least something to use. Enough to escape, at least.

This idea was one that John had been mulling over for a while but hadn't had the time to act on. Even when his mana was sealed away, John's breathing method never stopped, and he had noticed that his body was starting to gather mana once again, building up trace amounts of purified mana. That had been part of the reason his body had healed so quickly. Now, however, he wanted to see if he was able to build up his mana intentionally.

Breathing in, John felt the mana contained in the fog surging as it rushed into his body. Passing through his throat, it began to collapse, and by the time it reached his lungs, the mana had transformed into the molten flame he was so familiar with. Cycling through his lungs, John could feel the mana clashing against the seal around his mana pool, bouncing away and spreading through his body. Most of the mana, unable to go into his mana pool, flowed out of his body, so he focused on trapping it under his skin.

With great gulps, he appeared to be drinking down the fog, causing it to boil and dance as it rolled toward him. Over and over again, he breathed it in, his body burning away everything beside the pure mana. For close to four hours, he sat there in the dusty ruins, devouring the fog that surrounded the remains of the city until the mana density had fallen so low that his inhales could no longer capture any fog. Sensing that he had reached the end of his meditation, John opened his eyes and looked around.

No longer was he sitting in a fog-covered valley. Instead, the air had a slight haze and the ambient mana level was only slightly higher than the ambient mana level anywhere else. Checking his body, John realized he had managed to gather what amounted to two drops of absolutely pure mana. While it didn't seem like much, considering John's body used to be chock

full of the stuff, he felt much more relaxed having at least a bit of mana before facing off against the New Dawn. As small as they were, each drop of pure mana held tremendous power, giving John the edge he would need.

Feeling ready, John waved his hand, gathering the remaining mana in the ruins, and wove it into a Levitate spell, flying into the air as he headed for Barrowvale. The city was a small, provincial stronghold that sat along the same river that Kingsmouth was on. Unlike the trading city, however, Barrowvale was set back from the river itself, leaving its docks exposed. It fell under the authority of Count Benjamin Francis, a nobleman whose family had ruled the area for generations.

It didn't take long for John to arrive above the city, but rather than flying down, he took a moment to examine it. Immediately, he noticed a number of abnormalities. The city was filled with activity, from people shopping in the pop-up markets to workmen working on construction projects scattered around the city. A few ships were docked along the river, and a steady stream of goods was being brought into the city. The city was practically bursting at the seams, which was strange.

Barrowvale was supposed to be a quiet city with a small population and a slow trade, but everything that John saw spoke to the complete opposite situation. There were people packed into the streets and trade appeared to be thriving. On top of that, John could feel the heavy defensive enchantments on the walls and the faint layer of energy that covered the city. What should have been a sleepy, quiet place had been transformed into a fortress. Eyes narrowing, he was about to drop down when he saw half a dozen figures shoot toward him, flying up out of the city to meet him in the air.

CHAPTER 32

Two of the Mages rising into the air were familiar to John, and he quickly realized that he had last seen them fleeing from the battlefield outside the capital. The male Mage wore a green robe that was embroidered with delicate silver clouds, and the female Mage wore a tan robe with brown trim. Rising into the air alongside them were four other Mages who looked to be in the first and second order.

"Greetings, Your Eminence."

Coming to a halt in the air, the Mages stopped and the legendary Mage in the green robe bowed toward John. The rest of the Mages hurried to bow, but John caught the confused look the second-order Mages exchanged.

"Our master is waiting for you in the city below. If you would come with us?"

Glancing down at the city, John took a second to analyze the enchantment on the walls. After running it through Mental Model, he was pretty sure it wasn't a trap and was simply intended to strengthen the wall, providing defense against attacks. While John wasn't particularly concerned about himself since he had a few drops of mana, he was wary of the New Dawn sacrificing the city to take him down. It wouldn't have been the first time someone had tried that tactic. Not detecting any danger in the enchantments around the city, John nodded.

"Sure. I'm interested in meeting your master as well."

"Please follow me."

Clumsily reversing direction, the male Mage began floating down toward the city, John following close behind. Under their feet, the citizens of the city continued to hurry about their business, not looking up at the people flying above their heads. The lack of reaction confused John for a moment, but then he remembered who he was dealing with. New Dawn was an organization committed to uniting humanity, and it seemed that their primary tool for that was tyrant dorn, a dangerous plant that produced a highly addictive sap. Combined with the right spell, the sap turned into a potent mind-control drug.

Flying down between the city's tallest buildings, the green-robed Mage led the way into a courtyard, and then further into a wide-mouthed well that sat in the middle of the stone yard between the buildings. Damp stone

surrounded them as they continued to sink further into the ground, and the light of day was soon replaced by the faint luminescence of the blue moss that clung to the walls. With jerky movements, the green-robed Mage changed directions right before they reached the water, flying into a tunnel in the wall.

Looking around, John didn't find any danger, so he continued to follow, entering a twisting set of passages that took them under the city. They had gone down at least forty feet in the well before turning off, and soon they landed, keeping a quick pace as they walked through the tunnels. Here the walls showed less-refined workmanship, and a quick glance revealed the traces of shoddy spell work. Someone, or maybe a few someones, had created these tunnels in a hurry, digging out a warren by using a Shape Earth spell to pack the dirt to the walls and ceiling.

The Mages walked in silence, their thoughts unknown but their tension clear. Only John was relaxed, though that was more from habit than anything else. As they walked further into the tunnels, it struck John that maybe coming down here with a bunch of enemies was a bad idea. Still, he refused to worry about it too much. None of the Mages seemed to be hostile, and if there was a chance of resolving the situation with the New Dawn without violence, John was all for it.

"We're almost there. Our master is waiting for you up ahead," the legendary Mage said, gesturing to a doorway in the distance with a dull yellow glow.

Recognizing the light of a mana lamp, John quietly readied a few spells, just in case he was walking into an ambush, and walked through the door. The bright light that filled the room came from a dozen mana lamps that decorated the walls of the large chamber. Stone tables filled the room, covered in all manner of half-completed experiments. Some held bodies in various states of deconstruction, while others looked like a forest of glass alchemical equipment. At a small table at the other end of the room was a wizened old man, his head bald but for a few scraggly hairs. Looking up with rheumy eyes, he peered at John, his head shifting this way and that as if he couldn't quite make out what he was looking at.

Slowly pushing himself up from his chair, he gripped a cane, leaning on it heavily as he hobbled toward John. Though he was bent nearly in half and was little but saggy flesh on bone, John could feel the power the old man carried.

Another sage? What is going on with this world? Don't tell me I helped him upgrade too? No, his power is too deep. It's too well established.

"You must be the Eternal Flame," the old man wheezed, his voice thin and reedy.

John nodded, his expression slightly cold.

"I am."

"Welcome to the Barrows of Barrowvale."

Cackling, the old man stopped about twenty feet from John, next to a table with a human corpse that had been completely skinned.

Not allowing the revulsion he felt to show on his face, John addressed the old man.

"Who am I speaking to?"

"Torius the Undying, leader of the New Dawn, Sage of the Eternal."

Seeing John's raised eyebrow, Torius let out another wheezing laugh.

"All of those who knew me in the past were skeptical as well, but here I stand. And they're in the ground, providing a feast for the maggots! Heh, but you didn't come to hear me gloat over my long-dead companions. Come, let us move somewhere more comfortable."

Lifting a trembling hand, Torius waved and John felt mana swelling around them. For a brief moment, he considered unleashing his mana and crushing Torius' spell, but then he recognized what it was. Enchantments in the walls connected the rooms together, providing a stable space that Torius could move in and out of with a simple command. Currently, the mana around the old Mage was trying to pull John along as well, so he let it wrap around him, sending both of them hopping through space.

With a soft whump, the two of them appeared in another room, this one a library. Six stories tall at the lowest point, the walls of the circular room were completely covered in bookshelves packed tight with magical tomes. Large lanterns hung in the air, casting their heatless light over the books and the big desk that sat in the center of the room. Hobbling over to his chair, Torius glanced at John from the corner of his eyes, clearly expecting to see shock and awe on the younger Mage's face. When he saw nothing of the sort, his expression tightened slightly.

Placing his cane on the desk, the old Mage made himself comfortable. There were no other chairs in the room, but John didn't mind. He knew plenty of ways to create a chair for himself, but instead he put his hands behind his back and walked over to the desk, looking down at the old Mage.

“As I was saying, you probably didn’t come here to listen to me reminisce, so why don’t we get down to business?”

Holding up his hand to forestall Torius’ next words, John gestured to the bookshelves around them.

“Are all of these books on magic? This looks to be enough magical books to fill a Mage tower’s library. Where did you find so many old books that were intact?”

“Find them? Heh, I didn’t find them. They were mine already when I moved here. This is the largest collection of magic books in the world, most likely. Almost all of the other Mage towers were destroyed in the second Mage War, and their libraries were torn down and burned. Though, sometimes in the other order. I salvaged what I could, but no, most of these books were mine to begin with.”

Letting out a low whistle, John slowly turned around, his eyes scanning the books.

“You said that only most towers were destroyed? Do you know where the surviving towers are?”

“Some,” Torius said with a shrug. “You’ve met the Mages of Soaring Cloud Tower, I presume? There was another tower to the north, but the Mage who controlled it was killed off. By you, if I understand the story correctly. Otherwise, there is this tower, and one more, deep to the south, beyond the great desert. Though I have no idea if that tower still stands. Time has a nasty effect on all of us.”

“True. This is an impressive collection of books.”

“Thank you. I’d be happy to let you read some of them, should we be able to work something out. But speaking of working things out, I want to thank you for responding to my invitation.”

Nodding, John walked back over to the table, his hands returning to their place behind his back.

“Sure. I admit, I was surprised to get it after I captured most of your Mages. I even considered if this was a ruse to get them back by capturing me.”

Shaking his head, Torius blinked his watery eyes.

“Nothing like that, I can assure you. I care little for those you captured. If they were weak enough to lose to you in a battle, their lives are in your hands. Even if you used them all for experiments, I wouldn’t care one bit. No, I requested you come here for a different reason.”

Pausing, the old Mage smiled, revealing his crooked yellow teeth. It was obvious he was hoping John would ask him for his reason, but John didn't respond at all, just continuing to stare at him with indifference. A flash of irritation sped across Torius' face, but he banished it and continued to explain.

"Our conflict, though heated, was an unfortunate start to our relationship, and I have no doubt that our purposes are more aligned than it might appear. You have incredible political power over Lepiera, and even sway over the Moritoi who live in the great plains. Many of the citizens of Allera would follow you without question as well. All of these people look to you as the source of their strength. My influence, though less obvious, is no less deep. It is my desire that we should join hands, creating an alliance that will serve each of us."

John's eyebrows rose slightly as he listened to the old Mage's slow speech, trying to work out what Torius was actually after. A few seconds of silence passed before John asked the question that was on his mind.

"What is your involvement with the Iron Monarch?"

"That fool?" Torius sneered. "He hired us to support him and the device he had created, but that was it. I was not aware of your power or your interests in preserving the nation of Lepiera. If I had known, I would have killed him myself. As I said, it was never my intention to fight against you. New Dawn is an organization that is committed to the betterment of mankind through the establishment of a single, unified humanity."

A slight twitch of John's forehead caused Tarius to pause and look at John with a questioning glint in his eyes.

"Sorry, that just sounds surprisingly like the goal of Soaring Cloud Tower," John said, shrugging. "Have you talked to them about your grand ambitions?"

"Not yet, though I have sent them a similar invitation to the one I sent you."

"Well, you might want to. You both are aiming at the same thing, and unless you can work it out, you're liable to start the third Mage War. I can guarantee you, however, that if you do start another Mage war, it will be much shorter than the last two."

Recognizing the implicit threat, Tarius narrowed his eyes, the mana around him starting to swell dangerously. Pretending not to notice, John followed his words with a smile.

“But as long as you keep the peace, you won’t have any issue with me. I have no desire to start a war, but I will end any fight that begins. With *extreme* prejudice. It doesn’t matter to me what you do with your people, or even what you feed them. None of that matters to me. I only came today for one purpose. To issue a warning.”

Stepping forward so he was right up against the desk, John stared at Torius, able to feel the thick mana that hung around the old Mage. Reaching out with his hand, he manifested one of the drops of pure mana he had built up and tapped in the air with his finger. Like a spark hitting a dry bonfire, the mana around Torius that was so dense it was warping the air burned away, transforming into a roaring flame that lasted only an instant. The temperature of the room shot up as it became a blistering furnace. John was fine, but the old Mage was not so lucky.

The intense heat slammed into him, and he would have burst into flame if not for John withdrawing his mana at the last second. With a deep inhale, John sucked all the heat back into his body, throwing the room’s temperature into free fall. The sudden shift in temperature caused the desk to abruptly shrink, cracking as the wood contracted. Confident he had made his point, John let some of the heat flow back out, returning the room to a normal temperature, causing Torius to gasp as the warmth seeped back into him. His eyes shaking as he stared at John in shock, the old Mage tried to speak, but nothing came out of his mouth for a full minute.

“I had heard that your power was unfathomable, but I confess, I did not believe it,” Torius stammered, when he was finally calm enough to speak. “Today you have made me realize that I was even more of a fool than I thought. I will keep your words in mind.”

“Good. As I said, I don’t care what you do so long as you keep the peace and do not abuse those under my flag. Pass my message to Soaring Cloud Tower and any other old Mages who crawl out of their hiding places. I will not tolerate any more conflict in my world,” John said, a slow smile creeping up his face. “Now, if there is nothing else, I would like to browse your library for a while. You don’t mind if I borrow a few books, do you?”

CHAPTER 33

During the trip back to the valley, John took his time. He had three new books he had borrowed from Torius to read, and mental copies of a dozen more he had managed to skim through before he left Barrowvale. While the old Mage had not hurried him out, it was clear that Torius was not comfortable with his presence in the underground tunnels after his demonstration with the temperature. And John didn't blame him. Having someone nearby who could fry a person with a touch was always going to be nerve-wracking. That's why he had done the demonstration in the first place.

I need to find another forbidden land to pick up some more mana. Hmm. There should be another to the north of my return route.

Shifting his trajectory, John swung north, noticing the land below him taking on a dark tone. Soon he was gliding over a land of dead grass and skeletal trees whose bare branches stabbed up toward the sky like they resented the clouds. Dropping out of the air, John skimmed over the ground, arriving at the hill that stood at the center of the forbidden land. Unlike most forbidden lands that were the result of a battle between two legendary Mages, this land had been poisoned by mana leaking from the sage level Mage buried under this hill.

Stepping onto the top of the hill, John could feel the corrupted mana and the sense of death it carried. It was disgusting, but he still took a deep breath as he began to meditate, his lungs filling with mana. Though the mana that flowed into him was not as simple as normal mana, it could not stand against his body, and after only a few seconds it had deconstructed, joining the drop of pure mana John carried.

As John meditated, absorbing the thick mana that surrounded him, his mind ran through his encounter with Torius. The old Mage had clearly been around for a long time, and John was starting to feel like he was putting the pieces together. He had gotten the chance to look through Torius's library and had made sure to catalog every book he saw. A bad feeling had been growing in his heart from the moment he first felt the old Mage's aura, and he had been hoping that he would be able to confirm his suspicions through looking over his books.

While he had not been able to prove anything, he had grown increasingly positive that Torius was the one pulling the strings behind the vitality sapping curse the other Mages of the New Dawn carried. Even worse, John had seen the signs of both tyrant dorn and the curse on Mages from Soaring Cloud Tower.

I need to ask Rebya about this. This feels a lot like that story she was telling me about the Mage who had the immortality spell. Hold on, could Torius be that Mage? That would make him over five hundred years old, but if he's been absorbing a city's worth of lifespan from mortals and Mages, maybe he could have kept himself alive.

Feeling the mana in his surroundings begin to drop, John opened his eyes and moved over to another spot in the forbidden land. For the next eight hours he continued to move around it, sucking all of the mana up and purifying it, managing to gather another two drops of pure mana before the forbidden land had been drained dry. Unlike the other forbidden land, this one would recover if John destroyed the sage corpse buried in the central hill. Considering it for a bit, John shrugged. This forbidden land wasn't useful for anything anyway because of its location, and so long as he left it alone he would eventually be able to drain it again.

Getting ready to leave, John felt a slight shift in the air and whirled around, mana flaring up around him as a wall of earth jumped up from the ground. Transforming it into a shield, John tried to block the hand reaching for him, but the wall shattered like a clump of dried mud. Still, he had bought himself half a second, which was enough to jump backward out of the reach of the woman who was attacking him.

Surprise colored her features as she watched him escape from her grasp, and she paused long enough for John to get a good look at her. Long black hair cascaded down her back, framing the most stunning face John had ever seen, and her unnaturally perfect proportions and symmetry made her look more like a doll than a real person. But there was no doubt from the interest in her eyes and the amused curl of her plump lips that she was very much real. At least six feet, seven inches tall, her body was muscular without being manly, and her curves were enough to put any woman to shame.

It was impossible to deny how attractive the woman was, from her expressive eyes down to her perfectly turned ankles and flawless feet, but John could feel the hair on the back of his neck standing up. It was like turning over a stone and finding a beautiful viper staring at him. No matter

how colorful its scales, its bite was lethal. Seeing the woman take a step forward, John matched her with a step back, his eyes never leaving hers.

When John retreated her smile widened slightly and she licked her lips, reminding John of a predator staring down its prey. His mind raced as he finally noticed the dark scales that covered her body. He assumed it was clothing or some sort of armor, but on closer inspection it was revealed to be overlapping scales that gleamed with darkness.

"There's no need to run."

Her voice was deep and melodious, carrying with it a rough note that was unnaturally soothing. Carried by the sound, mana flowed toward John, urging him into a false sense of security. It was perfect, too perfect, causing every instinct in John to scream at him to get away. Gathering the three drops of pure mana he had, John lowered his center of gravity, ready to react if the beautiful woman made a move. An amused smile played on her lips as she saw John getting ready to fight and the woman stopped in place.

"You are the Eternal Flame, is that not correct?"

"Who is asking?"

"I am Gorra. I have heard much about you and I see that my subjects have not been lying to me."

"You are Gorraleck the Destroyer?"

Arching a perfect eyebrow, the tall woman rested her hand on her hip as she nodded.

"That I am. You do not seem to be surprised."

Shifting his weight slightly, John tried to estimate the likelihood of escape but quickly came up short. She had appeared next to him without alerting him, and from the way she moved he had no doubt that she would be both faster and stronger than he was. Though he had spells, they had barely worked on the sage level beasts, and she was clearly stronger than either of the two beasts that he had fought.

"I would say that I'm surprised," John said. "How did you find me?"

Sniffing lightly, Gorra tapped her nose.

"Your scent is distinct. It is quite intriguing, really. I've never smelled anything so delicious in my life. Your mana is strong, but there is something else. Something familiar. Something I have not smelled since my father left."

"Your father?"

Nodding, Gorra took a casual step forward, only to stop when John stepped back in perfect sync. Her eyes narrowed, thrown off by his cautious response. She wasn't used to men of any species being so wary, but John clearly wanted to keep his distance.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, her intense eyes practically burrowing into John's. "I just want to speak with you."

Nodding, John straightened back up, though his mana was ready.

"Then speak."

Flashing a brilliant smile at John, Gorra actually took two steps back and casually broke apart a dried-out tree with a light backhand. Trimming off the jagged top of the stump with a swipe of her hand, she sat down and crossed her legs, casually swinging her foot. Like pearls gleaming in the light, her bare toes wiggled as she settled in, forcing John to pull his gaze away.

"Would you like to sit?"

"No," John said, shaking his head. "Standing is fine."

"Suit yourself. I admit, when I first heard of you, I was quite curious. A man who smells like my esteemed father, and can kill sage level beasts, is not common. One could even say that such a man shouldn't exist. Imagine my surprise, then, when not one of those things but two both appear. I was skeptical at first, but after I received the report about Markov and Kiralig, I had to come see for myself. And I'm happy that I did. It is wonderful to meet you."

"Is it? I'm pretty sure we're enemies right now," John said, his eyes narrowing. "I killed two of your generals and I am currently gathering allies to stop your armies from being able to overrun these lands."

Gorra's smile widened further at John's words and she let out a delighted laugh. Covering her lips with her fingers, she peered at him from above her hand, amusement dancing in her eyes.

"I know, and it's so cute. You humans are always so full of hope. You don't *really* think that you can stop my forces, do you? Humanity is so pathetically weak, after all. You have what? Four or five sages?"

"We have our own beast allies."

"Oh come, be realistic. Do you really think the beasts you've tamed are on your side? As soon as they see the beast army, they'll understand they're on the wrong side. And then my forces will sweep this land in blood and

death. The only chance you have to survive is to come to my side. Serve me, and I will even let you keep some of your friends alive."

Though Gorra spoke in a carefree voice, John could tell she was completely serious. There was a familiar expression hidden in her eyes that he knew all too well. Though he hadn't seen it for a while, it had once stared him in the face whenever he looked in the mirror. The faint detachment and complete disregard for anything apart from her own power revealed the way Gorra thought, and John was as familiar with that line of thought as it was possible to be.

Shaking his head, he was going to say something when Gorra's eyes abruptly narrowed and she picked out a sliver of wood, flinging it at John like a deadly arrow. Though it was only a small piece of wood, no bigger than a knitting needle, it was moving so quickly that it began to glow red as the air friction lit it on fire. Luckily, John had been on the lookout and he was able to step to the side, ending up half a step closer. The sliver of wood shot through the location he had just been standing, vanishing into the distance.

John could have responded with an attack of his own, but he was still wary. He only had three drops of pure mana, so if he didn't borrow Farroutef's strength, he would be hard-pressed to escape from Gorraleck. At least she didn't seem to be completely against him, though it was clear from her attack that she was going to test him. When she saw him dodge the attack, an appreciative gleam filled her eye and she clapped her hands together.

"Wonderful! You would not believe how few people can dodge an attack from me. You are quite an impressive specimen, but I confess, I do not understand. Why do you insist on protecting foolish humans? You have more in common with beasts than you do with humans, yet you pretend to be some sort of god, ruling over them and trying to enforce peace."

"I've never considered myself a god," John said, shaking his head as he looked for an opportunity to run. "You would undoubtedly protect your family against threats, and I am the same. I just want the world to be at peace."

"Oh, it will be," Gorra said, nodding her head as she picked at her nails. "I have conquered most of it, and when I take over these last lands, it will become peaceful. There will be no more need for wars."

His gaze sharpening, John thought he might have misheard her.

“What do you mean that you have conquered most of the world?”

“Exactly what it sounds like. My armies have destroyed every other kingdom, nation, and territory held by humans in this world. Only your two nations, Lepiera and Allera, remain. Only you remain. Mmm, you really do smell delicious. Are you sure you’re completely human? You don’t have a powerful wyrm in your ancestry?”

“Yes, I’m sure,” John said. “What about you? You look human.”

Chuckling, Gorra hid her mouth again as she shook her head.

“I am a beast, just the most powerful kind. My father was the greatest of beasts, an immortal dragon. My mother was a fox of unsurpassed beauty. I am the natural ruler of all beasts, and the world is under my heel. Whatever you could possibly want, I have; whatever you could possibly desire, I can acquire. Honor and riches beyond anything you could understand are held in the palm of my hand, and soon this world will be there as well. All the humans will be either enslaved or destroyed, and if you do not want to be among them, you would do well to listen to me.”

Gorra leaned forward, her gaze and voice dripping with mana-infused enticement that swirled around her like a cloud.

“Marry me,” she said, her deep voice completely serious.

Taken aback, it took John a moment to respond. Her request came out of the blue, but it was clear from the expression on her face that Gorra was entirely serious and wasn’t about to take no for an answer. Letting out his breath, John got ready to cast his escape spells, replying with a shake of his head.

“That is impossible. I already have someone I love.”

Laughing, Gorra stood up and brushed herself off. Slowly revealing her sharp teeth as she smiled, she pointed one of her beautifully painted nails at John as she spoke in an imperious voice.

“You misunderstand. I did not make a request. Hear my command and obey.”

CHAPTER 34

Gorra's words were still echoing in the air when she moved, shooting toward John faster than anything he had ever seen before. One moment she was standing next to the chopped-off tree stump, and the next she had nearly reached him, her hand outstretched. Lacking enough time to jump backward, John settled for leaning away from her while he called up a spell, unleashing a blast of fierce air that slammed into her, throwing her back.

"Gale Wind!"

Landing lightly, Gorra dashed forward again, circling to the side to try and force John to turn, but this time John ignored her, all his focus on the new spell he was casting. Stretching out his hands, he infused the first of his three drops of pure mana into this spell, causing its power to jump. Eyes narrowing, Gorra wanted to approach John but the buildup of mana around him was more intense than anything she had ever seen, causing her to hesitate. Licking her lips, she continued to circle, her eyes filled with greed.

Mana spread from under John's feet, shooting out in a ripple that ran through the ground, and a moment later the earth began to buckle as superheated gas erupted into the air, setting everything on fire. One after another, pillars of intense flame burst from the ground, transforming everything around John for hundreds of feet into a hellscape. Squeezing out the last bit of pure mana in the drop he had used, John tacked on an extra spell, causing his body to multiply into half a dozen figures that spread out among the twisting pillars of fire.

"Field of Flames! Fractal Image!"

As a forbidden spell, Field of Flames was a variation on Apocalyptic Flood, using fire instead of water to create a land of death. A normal person or beast would have died instantly under the intensity of the heat, and even a class holder would not have been able to survive for more than a few seconds, but as John started to cast his next spell, he saw Gorra moving between the dancing flames like a fish swimming through water. He could tell that the heat was affecting her, but it wasn't enough to cause her any serious harm, so John tried to activate the second part of his plan.

Lifting his hands, he was about to cast Gale Wind again when Gorra launched herself forward, bursting through the air with a thunderclap that shook the mana he was gathering, forcing his spell to reset. Arriving in

front of one of the mirrored Johns, she punched him in the chest, shattering him into a million pieces even as she moved on to the next. Each tap of her foot sent her rocketing forward, moving at an unbelievable speed.

It almost looked like she was teleporting, and in rapid succession, three of John's doppelgangers had been broken apart. Gritting his teeth, John sent all three of his remaining figures running, heading in different directions while he tried to gather the mana for his next spell, but every time Gorra kicked off the ground, she created a shockwave that disturbed the nearby mana, making it hard to gather enough mana. Appearing next to another of the doppelgangers, Gorra slapped that John's head off and let out a delightful laugh.

"This is so interesting. I've never fought a Mage with such powerful magic, but you'll have to do much better than that if you want to beat me."

Gorra was standing casually in the middle of the Field of Flames spell, both her body language and tone completely relaxed, causing John's heart to fall. He knew she was more powerful than the sage beasts he had fought before, but how much more powerful had been a mystery. Realizing he was still underestimating her, John had his last remaining doppelganger step forward and speak, even while his real body continued to cast.

"I do have more powerful spells, but I typically try not to cast them to avoid destroying the world."

Batting her eyes at him, Gorra began to walk toward John, her hips swaying like she was strolling down a catwalk.

"Oooh, I'd like to see these powerful spells of yours. Just thinking about it makes me shiver."

"Don't say stuff like that," John said, backing up a step. "That's weird."

Chuckling, Gorra stopped when she was a dozen feet away from the doppelganger and gestured for him to come close with a curl of her finger. Calculating how much time he would need to finish his next spell, John walked forward, keeping his steps slow and measured. Both he and Gorra knew he was trying to buy time, but she didn't seem to care, and even looked like she was anticipating whatever spell he could come up with. When he got close to her, she slowly reached for him, her perfect fingers running over his cheek as her lips parted slightly.

Intense desire poured out of her, stirring the surrounding mana into a cloud of pink haze that seeped into the doppelganger. The feelings that the pink haze stirred were so intense John could sense them through the

connection he had with his Fractal Image, and he had to grit his teeth to avoid being contaminated himself. A hint of disappointment flickered through Gorra's eyes, but it was gone as fast as it came, hidden behind the burning desire she was projecting. Turning to look at John's real body, Gorra let her fingers slide down the doppelganger's chin to his neck. With a light squeeze, she shattered John's image, her expression never once changing.

"You should have had enough time by now," Gorra said, her voice husky.

"Plenty," John said with a slight bow. "Thank you."

Waving her hand, Gorra took a step forward. "Of course. I want to see my husband's true power."

Smiling ruefully, John stretched out his hand and got ready to activate his spell.

"Unfortunately, that isn't possible right now."

"Then you're agreeing you're going to be my husband?" Gorra said in a teasing tone.

Ignoring her, John activated his spell with his second to last drop of mana, causing the twisting flames that filled the landscape to surge, gathering toward him as the ground under his feet swelled and rolled. Flame wove through the rock, causing it to glow orange as it transformed into flowing lava, creating a massive serpent that rose up into the air, carrying John on its head.

"Earth Devouring Flame Serpent!"

Staring down at Gorra, the serpent let out a roar that caused all of the flames in the Field of Flames to bend toward her, transforming into a massive prison that shrank down toward her. Launching itself toward her, it tried to bite her with fangs that dripped melted stone but she danced backward. For the first time John saw her frivolous expression falter, causing hope to rise in his chest. He was about to start planning his escape when that hope was completely crushed.

"Impressive. I've never encountered a Mage of your strength. But it's only fair that if you're going to show me your most powerful spell, I should do the same. Look upon me and see what true power is."

Jumping away from the serpent's strike, Gorra dropped to all fours as her body began to change, thickening and growing as dark scales grew on her exposed skin. Her head expanded and her nose and mouth lengthened,

transforming into a fox's snout, while her arms and legs transformed into powerful, scale-covered legs. Eight tails appeared behind her, waving seductively in the air with a naturally hypnotic movement. John's flame serpent was close to twenty feet tall when it lifted its head, but Gorra completely dwarfed the serpent when she finished growing, and with a terrifying grin she stared down at John.

"You have been blessed to see my true form. Submit to me or I will take you by force."

Each and every word Gorra spoke was like a hammer blow, striking at John's heart and mind, trying to break down his defenses and force him into servitude. He could feel the subtle draconic influence that ran through her words like an undercurrent, trying to drag him into an entranced state, but he shook it off as he tried to think of a way out.

"Looks like you're in trouble, John."

The sinister voice of Farroutef echoed in John's head, adding to the pressure John was currently under. It was bad enough trying to deal with Gorra's magic-infused voice, but Farroutef's was even more corrosive, and John found himself unable to completely shake its influence. Before he could reply, however, Gorra moved, her giant paw slapping down on the flame serpent, pinning it to the ground. Roaring in anger, the serpent wrapped its tail around her body, but even with its incredible strength, it couldn't do anything to the scales that covered the dragon fox's body. Pouring out its heat, it tried to burn Gorra, but she just snorted, causing the air to shake so badly that a nearby hill cracked in half.

Biting down, she tore a chunk out of the flame serpent, nearly severing its head. Though stone and flame surged into the wound, it wasn't fast enough and she bit down again, completely destroying the flame serpent. Molten stone splattered against the ground as John's summon was destroyed, leaving him facing Gorra alone. Huge eyes stared at him as Gorra licked her lips again, but John was too busy dealing with the dragon in his mind to worry about the dragon fox in front of him.

"What do you say, John? Want a bit of help?"

In the landscape of his mind, John was staring up at the massive dragon, his mind working furiously. He was no longer missing an arm, but it was clear that his body wasn't as solid as it had been originally. John's mental strength had been depleted by the sacrifice of his arm while Farroutef's body appeared to be even stronger and more stable than normal. John only

had a single drop of pure mana remaining that he could access, and spending it would do absolutely nothing to help him against Gorra, especially in her true form. Sensing that his time was running out, John came to a decision and calmly held out his arm, only for Farroutef to laugh.

"You are not foolish enough to actually expect me to take the same deal as last time, are you?"

"An arm for your strength and endurance."

"Oh, you are," Farroutef said, feigning surprise. "No, that is impossible. I can only lend out my attributes once. You can have something else, but the price will be higher too. In your weakened state, your arm has less value."

"Fine," John said, his voice hard. "Your speed for an arm and a leg."

"Ooh, now that is a deal I can get behind," Farroutef said, his lips curling up to reveal his sharp teeth. "Though we could sweeten it further if you wanted. Give me another leg and I'll grant you another attribute."

Thinking for a moment, John glanced down at his body. He was already fainter than he liked, and losing three limbs would be incredibly dangerous. If he continued borrowing from Farroutef, there soon wouldn't be enough for him to resist the dragon's mental image. He could imagine what would happen as soon as Farroutef felt like he could overpower John, but at this point, he wasn't sure he had any other option. The biggest problem was that, without access to his mana, there was nothing he could do against the dragon fox.

Worse still was that Gorra knew where he lived. As much as she spoke sweetly and seemed to desire to capture him without hurting him, he could sense the deep streak of cruelty that ran through her. She clearly disdained humans, and it would be as simple as turning over her hand to destroy the valley and the farm, killing everyone in it. Unless Rebya's mana stone could be re-charged, there was no one in the valley, including Ferdie, who could put up any sort of defense against her.

John had no idea how she had managed to reach the fifth order, but it was clear from the mana her body contained that she had broken through the natural barrier of the world and reached the next level. The only silver lining was that it proved Rebya's theories correct. Convinced that he was on the right path, John finished his mental calculations and looked at Farroutef, who had been waiting with his usual patience.

"Fine. An arm and two legs. I want your speed and your voice."

Shifting slightly, Farroutef failed to hide his agitation, but quickly recovered when he noticed the slight smile on John's lips. The dragon tried to pretend it meant nothing, but John wasn't fooled and knew he had made the right choice. Since Farroutef had refused to lend him his strength and endurance again, John had guessed it was because the dragon couldn't. Either he only possessed so much power, or the seal that John had set around his mana pool was hampering the dragon's abilities.

Either way, it was great news for John. Despite Farroutef's nonchalance as he ate the limbs John offered him, John could feel the dragon's mind whirling as he tried to work out a way to manipulate the bargain. Unwilling to let him have any more time, John forcefully left his mental landscape, returning his attention to the real world where he faced off against Gorra, who towered over him.

"Have you made your choice, Eternal Flame?"

Taking a deep breath, John nodded and turned to flee, his body moving explosively as Farroutef's speed flowed through him. He could hear the dragon's begrudging voice telling him he only had five seconds of speed and ten words of the dragon's voice, further reinforcing John's suspicions that Farroutef was weakened, so he decided to make the best of them. Behind him, Gorra let out an angry snort and raced after him, her massive body cracking the ground as she ran.

John could feel the world peeling back around him as he moved and he suddenly realized why Gorra could move so fast. He had thought that borrowing Farroutef's speed would empower his muscles, but instead it had caused a particular aura to spring up around him, allowing him to pass through the world without any resistance. It was as if he wasn't moving through the air itself, but instead was passing through another dimension, completely eliminating any force that might work against him. It was a feeling of absolute freedom, and for the full five seconds, he focused on it with all his might, reveling in the ability to move any direction without impediment.

Unfortunately, the five seconds were soon up, and he dropped back out of that special state, feeling the world closing in on him like chains. Gorra closed in on him quickly, her large eyes fixed on John. Seeing him stop, she slowed down as well, her head cocking to the side as she stared at him curiously.

“Aren’t you going to continue to run? I assumed I would have to chase you all the way to your valley.”

CHAPTER 35

"Call me John."

The words flowed out of John's mouth, stamping themselves into the air like law, carrying a subtle power that bound everyone who heard them. The sound wormed its way into Gorra's ears, causing her to stiffen slightly as they passed through her defenses and etched themselves into her heart. At the same time, the greed that filled her eyes bloomed, becoming an insatiable desire.

"I knew it!" she said, practically panting as she stared at John. "I knew you have the power of dragons!"

Ignoring Gorra's words, John slowly walked back toward her, paying careful attention to his body. He could feel the strain from using Farroutef's speed, and even the three words he had spoken were putting intense pressure on him. He had seven more words, but as soon as he spoke them, he fully expected his body to shut down as it was unable to bear the weight of the dragon's power.

"Avoid harming anyone until I recover fully."

Once again, John's words flowed from his mouth, creating a natural law that bound Gorra, wrapping around her mind like a barbed chain. She gasped and opened her mouth to reply, but John never heard what she was going to say as he crumpled to the ground, driven unconscious by the incredible pain that filled him. Dashing forward, Gorra transformed back into her human form and caught him right before he hit the ground. Holding his twitching body, she flushed slightly and carefully picked him up, carrying him as she shot into the air. Eight dancing tails appeared behind her as she flew.

Each step took her thousands of feet, and gradually she broke into a run, speeding across the landscape. Faster and faster they moved as the world parted from in front of her, quickly crossing the great plains and passing over the valley and the mountains around it. Glancing down at the farm down below, Gorra briefly considered going down and wiping them all out, but two things dissuaded her. First was the mental chain John's words had laid in her mind, and the second was the strange feeling she got from the valley, as if it was one giant mouth, waiting to devour her if she got too close.

Shaking her head, she ignored the valley and rushed forward, her attention turning to John, who was still spasming as his muscles tried to deal with the intense pain his actions had caused. The mountains continued for thousands of miles, but by this point Gorra was moving so fast she crossed them in only a few minutes, arriving at gigantic cliffs that fell nearly three miles to a rough ocean. Continuing over the water, Gorra flew for another twenty minutes until an island came into view. Past it were dozens more islands, all teeming with beasts.

Even further beyond the islands was a massive continent with a thick wall of jungle. Dotted throughout the jungle were massive stone cities that looked like they had been created by giants, and as Gorra flew over them, sage level beasts rose up into the air, bowing in her direction. Ignoring them, she flew to a mountain range that rose up in the center of the continent, making her way to the peak of the tallest mountain. The entire top half of the mountain had been carved into a gigantic palace, and she landed in the tallest tower at the very peak of the palace.

Touching down lightly, she carried John to a huge bed that sat in the center of the circular room and carefully laid him down. The room was the entire width of the tower, and instead of walls, the roof was held up by thick pillars that ran around the outside edge of the tower, leaving the room open to the elements. Far above the earth below, Gorra stared at John as his body shook, his skin flushing red and sweating. Unsure what was wrong with him, she stood back and watched him for a moment before turning and striding to the large staircase that spiraled down along the outside of the tower.

"Attend me!"

Her voice echoed through the mountain range and immediately thousands of powerful beasts appeared, hurrying to gather around the tower. Waiting in silence, they bowed their heads, not daring to look at their beautiful ruler.

It was close to four days before John woke, and when he did, it was the strangest sight of his life. A wizened old man with a bent neck and a large shell on his back was standing over him, muttering something while a dozen fox-eared women massaged his arms and legs. Jerking in surprise, John jumped up, sending all of them tumbling. Even the old man was sent flying, nearly skidding off of the top of the tower. Yelping with surprise, the fox women scattered, quickly distancing themselves from him.

A cold breeze surrounded John and he realized he was standing in the middle of a massive bedroom, on a huge circular bed with red silk sheets, high above the world. It was a clear day and he could see for what seemed like thousands of miles, all the way across the jungle-covered continent to the ocean that glittered like a river of gold in the setting sun.

"Ah! You have awoken, Your Majesty! I am so glad!"

The turtle beast waddled forward and bowed his head toward John, a pleased smile plastered on his face. Unable to figure out where he was, John heard a sound and looked around, noticing that all of the fox women were peeking at him from behind their fingers. Though they were covering their faces, he could see two dozen eyes staring at him and the chilly feeling he had been feeling registered once again. Looking down, he realized he was standing on the red bed without a stitch of clothing, the covers crumpled at his bare feet.

Coughing lightly, he reached down and picked up the cover that had slipped down when he jumped up, wrapping it around him, all the while hoping his face wasn't as red as the crimson silk. The fox women's tittering caused his ears to burn, but he quickly got himself in order and turned to the old man.

"Who are you? And where is Gorra?"

"Ah! My apologies, Your Majesty. Forgive this servant for not performing my duty. I am Danolorus, Sage of the Beast King. I serve as attendant to you and her majesty, Gorraleck the Destroyer. I have served as __"

Hearing the emphasis the turtle beast put on Gorra's full name, John ignored it and cut him off impatiently.

"Enough. Answer my question. Where is Gorra?"

"Your Majesty, it is not my place to correct you, but it is not proper for you to refer to her majesty, Gorraleck the Destroyer, without her full name."

"Leave him, Danolorus. He can call me whatever he wants."

Hearing Gorra's sweet voice, John turned and saw the beast king walking through the air toward the room. A moment later, she touched down and all of the beasts prostrated themselves, keeping their heads firmly fixed to the floor. Sweeping the twelve fox women with a dispassionate stare, Gorra's expression transformed back to a beautiful smile as she looked at John.

"It seems you have given my handmaidens quite the show, husband."

It looks like one of the commands I gave has worn off if she isn't calling me John. That means the other probably isn't far behind.

"I'm not your husband," John said, his expression cold. "What did you do with my clothes and weapons?"

Turning her beautiful lips down in a pout that was enough to melt anyone's heart, Gorra gave John a piteous look, but he remained unmoved. Realizing she wouldn't be able to get through to him, Gorra chuckled mischievously and skipped over to him, stepping up onto the bed where he stood. An intoxicating fragrance followed her, so light it was almost impossible to identify, and John could feel it causing his heart to stir in his chest. Noticing the effect she was having, Gorra reached out and placed her finger on John's bare chest, dragging her nail down his skin lightly.

"Why are you worried about silly things like clothing, husband?"

Grabbing her finger, John pushed it away, his expression still stony.

"Enough playing around, Gorra. Tell me what you actually want."

Though there was no real power in John's grip, Gorra let him push her hand away, her expression showing genuine puzzlement. Never in her entire life had she found someone she couldn't charm, yet John stood in front of her like a block of stone, unmoved by her advances. By this point, most beings, man or beast, would be throwing themselves at her feet, but far from that, she could sense the faint revulsion John felt toward her. But even more puzzling was the intense disdain he carried.

Far from growing angry, observing such feelings in John drew out her curiosity, making her wonder what was actually going on. John was already a bundle of contradictions, and for the first time in her long and often boring life, Gorraleck the Destroyer found herself unable to unravel a mystery. Stepping back to give him the space that she wanted, she waved her hand and Danolorus jumped up.

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Take these ladies out. Remove their tongues so they never speak of what they've seen and gouge out their eyes. Now that they have looked upon the glory of my husband, there is no need for them to see anything more."

Frowning, John wanted to speak up, but he noticed that none of the fox women so much as twitched as Gorra had pronounced their sentence. Noticing John's change of expression, Gorra turned toward him and smiled sweetly.

“Unless, of course, my dear husband wishes to take their lives? I can order them to serve you however you wish if you desire them, or even have them killed if you believe their gazes dishonoring. Though, from what I saw, you have nothing to be ashamed of.”

Not taking the bait, John shook his head, his expression returning to normal.

“Fine, then carry out my word,” Gorra said, waving her hand for Danolorus to continue.

Without any fuss, the twelve fox beasts were led away, leaving John and Gorra alone at the top of the tower. Gesturing for John to follow her, Gorra walked over to a table and chairs that were set up near the edge of the tower, overlooking the jungle that stretched to the sea in the distance. It was a truly wondrous view, and because of how high up they were it was completely silent, creating a sense of pure peace. Long strips of gauze fabric hung between the pillars, billowing and dancing in the breeze and lending an ethereal feeling to the bedroom that only added to the otherworldliness of the environment.

Sitting down on a loveseat, Gorra tucked her beautiful feet under her body and leaned on the arm rest, inviting John to sit down next to her. Shaking his head, he took the chair opposite her, the long covers that he was using to cover his body stretching out across the floor. Shooting a pouting look at him, Gorra turned her attention to the mountains and jungles that stretched in all directions. They sat in silence for a few minutes, both occupied with their own thoughts until Gorra shifted and glanced at John’s profile.

“Would it really be so bad to be my husband?”

Shrugging, John turned to meet her impassioned gaze.

“For another person? Maybe not. But my heart is already committed, and there is no room for anyone else.”

“She must be an impressive person to be able to capture your heart like that,” Gorra said, a mocking note in her voice. “Is she a powerful ruler like me? Or a warrior of unsurpassed skill?”

It was easy to tell that Gorra was being sarcastic, but John just shook his head calmly.

“No, but none of that matters. I’m strong enough for both of us.”

“That is a curious thing to say, considering how weak you are.”

“It’s a temporary state,” John said, flashing an unconcerned smile. “A matter of necessity, but only a momentary inconvenience.”

“Hah, I wondered. Your body is currently like a dry sponge or an empty bucket. I’ve never seen a creature like you, who is so adept with mana, yet so lacking in it.”

Shrugging, John didn’t elaborate, his gaze turning back to the far-off ocean and the land he knew lay beyond it. Though he couldn’t see the continent they had come from, he knew what direction it was, thanks to the flower ring he still wore on his left thumb.

“You seem determined to keep your secrets,” Gorra said, an edge to her words. “Tell me, why should I keep someone who refuses to submit to me? If you protest too much, beware, for I may just get tired of playing with you and kill you.”

Not turning his head, John nodded.

“That is your choice, but if you try, you will doom this world to obliteration and I will be very angry. Angry enough to strip your scales from you, one by one, until you do not remember a world that is not filled to the brim with pain.”

Slowly turning to face Gorra, John’s absolutely still gaze met the fury in her eyes without backing down one bit. For a few seconds it seemed as if the dragon fox would erupt, but then the anger she was displaying suddenly drained away and she smiled sweetly, looking like a young wife who was besotted with her husband.

“There is no need to talk like that,” she said, blushing and fanning her face. “Though, I confess, I like it. Never has there been a man who could master me, but I must say, you’re making a good start.”

Hiding the shiver that ran down his spine at her words, John quickly looked away as she laughed delightedly. She was clearly enjoying teasing him, but John had no desire to play along. Instead, his attention was occupied with something else. The tower they sat in was filled with mana, mana that felt strangely familiar to John. He had never left the continent he had originally been summoned to, but the feeling of this tower gave him the same impression as the hidden area under the valley where the dimensional gate stood.

If he wasn’t mistaken, he was currently sitting in a tower that had been constructed by Azewick Valehawk, the first Mage of this world. The beasts who currently inhabited it had no way of casting spells, and even Gorra, as

powerful as she was, seemed oblivious to the faint mana that infused their surroundings. There were powerful spells woven into the tower, and John was curious to see what they could do. Now the question was how to keep Gorra occupied while he figured out how to connect with them. Thinking for a moment, John gestured to a few of the nearby mountains.

"You claim to have conquered the world, Gorra. Tell me, what lies beyond the borders of this continent?"

CHAPTER 36

Shifting her position on the couch, Gorra looked out to the horizon, her gaze turning sharp as if she was remembering difficult memories. After the silence stretched for close to a minute, she spoke slowly, her voice thick with reminiscence.

"There are two other major landmasses beside this land and the western continent where you live. Both were filled with humans, each with their own nations and factions. It was only here where the beasts were able to maintain a foothold on this world. However, our lands were constantly raided by the humans of the other two continents and our resources stolen. When I was young, I was taken from my home here and forced to serve the empress of one of those nations, even as my mother was forced to serve the emperor.

"It was an amazing place in some regards, with a level of power that makes your nations look like nothing more than children playing at government. Yet it could not stand before the might of my armies once I rose up to destroy it. The second continent is far to the south and remains frozen for the entire year. They refused to let us go, so I led my armies to eliminate them as well. Those humans were the most like beasts and the hardest to defeat, but once I reached my current power, they too fell beneath my claws. That leaves only you and your pathetic nations remaining.

"But enough about ancient history, I want to talk about something more interesting. After my father left this world, my mother raised me by herself and told me that no other dragons existed in this world. Yet you smell so similar to my father. Are you actually a dragon in disguise? But that cannot be, or you would not have been defeated so easily. Also, I heard your dragon tongue, and even now that enchantment ensnares me. How can you use the dragon tongue without being an old dragon? And how did you come to be without mana?"

Holding up his hand to stem the flow of questions, John tried to figure out how much to share. He was feeling himself starting to warm to Gorra, but that was a function of the dragon magic woven into her voice. Reminding himself that she was a cold-hearted beast, he shook his head.

"I am not a dragon. As for why I can use dragon tongue, that was a fluke thing. It is unlikely to happen again, so I had to make use of it as best

as possible. As for how I came to be without mana, that is a complicated story. Suffice it to say I am working on fixing it. Speaking of, do you know any nearby places that have a high density of mana I could absorb? I need a huge amount of mana."

Laughing lightly, Gorra shook her head.

"Nice try. I much prefer you weak like this. You're much easier to tease and bully, and I don't need to worry about you escaping."

About to say something else, she paused, her head snapping to the side. From another mountain peak, a tiny dot was starting to rise up into the air, causing a scowl to break out on her face.

"Excuse me, an upstart thinks he can meddle in my business. I must attend to him before anyone else thinks they have the right to interfere in my affairs."

Practically growling, Gorra stood up, all of the sweetness she had shown John a moment earlier hidden by a rapidly brewing anger. Striding to the edge of the tower, she paused and looked back at John, her expression dangerous.

"Stay here. If you try to escape, I will pay whatever price I need to break the mental chain you put on me and go to your precious valley to tear your friends and lover limb from limb, before drowning your nation in a sea of blood."

Raising his eyebrows at the threat, John held out his hands.

"I'm not planning on leaving while you're killing your subjects. If I do leave, it will be through the front door, not by trying to sneak off."

Laughing, Gorra's brilliant smile returned.

"Good! I'll hold you to that."

Turning, she vanished from the edge of the tower, reappearing in the distance as she moved toward the mountain peak where the small figure had appeared. Left alone in the open-air room, John glanced at the sun that was just starting to dip below the horizon.

"She could have left some clothes at least," he grumbled, looking down at the crimson cloth he was using as a makeshift skirt.

Grabbing it, he was about to rip it into a more manageable size when a thought struck him.

"Danolorus?"

His voice had not finished ringing in the room when the old turtle beast appeared, beaming at him.

“Yes, Your Majesty? How can I serve you?”

“I need some clothing. Preferably mine. Get me my gear as well.”

“Ah, Your Majesty, I would be happy to fetch you your clothing, but I’m afraid that her majesty, Gorraleck the Destroyer, found it unsuitable to display your glory. Never fear, however, the replacement garments are already done. I will bring them immediately.”

“Hold on,” John said, his eyes narrowing dangerously. “Did you say you destroyed my clothing?”

“Ah, no, no, forgive me, gracious one! We have simply stored them away. But I must request that you wear the clothing her majesty asked to be made for you.”

Irritated, John waved his hand, “fine.”

Beaming, Danolorus bobbed his head and rushed out of the room. For a turtle beast, the old man was able to move with astounding quickness, and no more than three minutes passed before he returned with six of the fox women. All six of them had strips of black cloth across their eyes, but that didn’t seem to impair their movement at all. They still walked with grace and were able to follow behind Danolorus in perfect formation. Still, the sight of them caused John’s heart to clench. Noticing John’s shift expression, the old turtle shot a shrewd look at John but didn’t say anything.

Waving the women forward, Danolorus had them present the pillows they were carrying to John, revealing what they carried. There was a fine silk shirt with wide sleeves that was open in the front, a delicately embroidered belt, leather bands for his wrists, soft undergarments and pants, and a pair of sturdy leather boots that were perfectly sized for him. The last fox woman held a pillow with a golden circlet set with a large ruby, but John ignored it, taking the rest of the clothing and quickly putting it on.

Tucking the shirt into the belt that wrapped around his waist, John felt like a pirate king as he looked at the richly decorated clothing. Though it was subtle, all of the cloth had metallic thread sewn in, causing the clothing to shimmer with every movement.

It wasn’t a pronounced thing, but the effect was quite impressive.

“You look magnificent, Your Majesty. I—”

“I’m not your ruler,” John said, cutting the old turtle beast off. “I am not Gorra’s husband, no matter what she might say.”

“Ah, of course, Your Majesty,” Danolorus said, bowing and gesturing to the circlet John had ignored. “If you would take your circlet, I can teach

you how to wear it."

"Take it away. I don't want it," John said, shaking his head. "I would like to be alone."

"Of course, Your Majesty. I'll just leave it here, next to your bed. If you have any wishes, simply call out and I will be here to attend to you."

Once Danolorus and the six fox women had left, John took a deep breath and resisted the urge to curse. His first encounter with Gorraleck the Destroyer had not proceeded how he had imagined it would, but he didn't yet know if it was better or worse than he had imagined. Still, he had two primary tasks right now. Sitting down in the center of the massive bed, John sank into a meditative state and began to draw mana in from his surroundings, as the same time feeding his only remaining drop of pure mana into the ring on his thumb.

The mana seeped into the flower ring, causing it to brighten considerably. Focusing his mind on it, John realized that his mental strength wasn't quite strong enough to activate it, and he was unable to keep the curse suppressed. He had not thought about the fact that the ring Rebya had given him required his powerful mental strength to use, and since he had given up some of his mental strength to Farroutef's image, he could no longer activate it.

My only option is to recover. Which means needing a lot of mana. Hopefully, Rebya can sense my ring since I powered it with my mana. Maybe she'll be able to open up a line of communication. For now, I really need to focus on my recovery.

Recentering himself, John began to pull the mana in the air toward him. The tower naturally gathered mana, and the open-air room where John was sitting seemed to be one of the pooling points so the mana was plentiful, but after a few dozen breaths, it had all been consumed. More mana was trickling in, but according to his best calculations, it wouldn't return to its normal level until the following day, causing John to be despondent. Such a speed was miraculous, but for John it wasn't nearly enough.

While he waited for the mana to refill, John instead began exploring the enchantments that surrounded him. The entire tower was made of hard white granite that was native to the area, but rather than being cut out and stacked together, it appeared that the entire structure had been carved out of a single giant slab of stone and then enchanted afterward. Such a task would have taken a long time without magic, but from the magic that filtered

through it, John was pretty sure it had been the first Mage, Valehawk, who had created it. Closing his eyes, John tried to let himself relax as much as possible before attempting to communicate with the tower.

At first there was nothing, no movement in the mana and no change in his environment, but as he persisted, John began to notice a subtle shift. It wasn't like a concrete movement of mana, but instead it felt like a tiny trickle of sand that piled up at the edges of the room, stacking up in the pillars that ran around the edge of the tower. Not wanting to miss what was going on, John remained still, continuing to draw in trace amounts of mana while trying to speak to the tower spirit.

Hello? Are you there?

Though there was no answer, John was emboldened when he felt the mana moving into the pillars speed up. For the next four hours he sat quietly, continuing to wait as the mana in the pillars grew and grew until the pillars were completely saturated. A gentle chime rang out and a faint presence suddenly appeared in the air above John. It wasn't visible to the naked eye, but it was definitely there and it was clearly staring at John.

"Who are you?"

The voice that rang in John's head was ephemeral and childish, but it thrilled him.

"I am John Sutton, a Mage in the line of Azewix Valehawk. Are you the tower spirit of this tower?"

"I am. How do you know the master? Wait, where did all these beasts come from? What have they done?!"

Unsure why the spirit was getting so agitated, John desperately tried to communicate calmness through their bond. The last thing he needed was for a Mage tower to go ballistic. Especially in his current situation. Thankfully, his projected emotions seemed to help the tower spirit calm down slightly.

"Master Valehawk would be quite upset if he knew that the beasts had taken over. Oh, this is terrible, really terrible."

"Did Master Valehawk not like beasts?" John asked.

"Of course not. It was his goal to free this world from their grasp, but it has been many years since he was last here, and it appears they have survived. But who are you? How are you here if the beasts occupy the tower?"

"I'm a prisoner. Thankfully, they don't seem to know about you, but I could sense you immediately."

Once again, John felt the faint anger of the spirit, as if the idea of a human being a prisoner of the beasts infuriated it. Before the anger could grow, he quickly changed the subject.

"Do you still have full control of the tower? How are your mana reserves?"

Distracted by the question, the tower spirit began to circle around John, its attention brushing over him like a million butterfly wings. Stopping in front of his chest, the spirit seemed to be trying to enter his body but a moment later it recoiled.

"What happened to you? Your body is like a devouring hole! Where is your mana? How are you even alive?"

"As you can see, I need some help. My mana got sealed away, and I need more mana to fill myself back up. Once I'm back to normal, I should be able to deal with the beasts, but without my mana, I'm not even close to strong enough."

"I can see that. My mana reserves are almost depleted, and there is not enough for me to reawaken myself, otherwise I would obliterate all these beasts myself," the tower spirit said, reminding John of a child stomping their feet. *"But if I give you my mana, I'll fall back to sleep forever."*

Frowning, John shook his head.

"I have no desire to kill you just to fill up my mana. Let's come up with another idea."

"You can't kill me," the spirit said, swirling around John. *"I've never been alive. Tower spirits are not real entities, so much as the echoes of our creator. My purpose is to serve the tower master, and the best way I can do that is by ensuring all of these beasts are killed. Are you sure you will be able to kill them if you regain your power? Ahhh! I wish I could just smite them! But my mana cannons are offline and there isn't enough power to restart that function."*

Thinking for a minute, John tried to work out the best solution. It was a bit strange how antagonistic the tower spirit was toward the beasts, but from what John remembered, Mage Valehawk's primary purpose in coming down to this world was to free humanity and defeat the beasts, claiming the world for the human side. It made sense, then, that the tower spirit would be so eager to wipe them out.

He had no idea how much mana he needed in order to return his level of strength to the point that it could handle his sealed mana without destroying

the world, but he was willing to take whatever the tower spirit wanted to give him. However, they would have to do it in a way that wouldn't arouse Gorra's suspicions. John had no idea if that was even possible, but he knew he didn't have a choice. He had to at least try.

"Is there a way you can give me mana without it being noticeable?"

This time, the tower spirit fell silent for a good while, continuing to slowly circle John as it thought through the problem. It was smart enough to read between the lines and knew that John was concerned with his captors discovering the problem. After almost twenty minutes of silence, it finally spoke up.

"If you can give me a few hours, I should be able to reroute power here. You can pick a spot to sit, and I can funnel the power there. I'll only open the stream when you are sitting there, and as long as you absorb all of the mana, it shouldn't leak. Oh! Someone is coming. I'll return later!"

Looking up, John saw that Gorra was flying toward them, her expression dark and blood dripping from her crimson fingers. Landing in the tower, she strode over to where John sat, her eyes scanning over him as he stood up. Slowly her fury died down as she took in the gallant clothing he was wearing and her smile returned. With a flick of her fingers, she got rid of the blood on her fingers and spoke sweetly.

"You look great! I knew those clothes would suit you."

CHAPTER 37

There was something intoxicating about sitting high above the world, and as the morning light broke over the horizon, casting golden light across the tops of the jungle trees, John found himself entranced by the breathless beauty of the land he had been stolen away to. He was sitting cross-legged on the edge of the platform, looking out toward the ocean that separated him from his valley home, and had been sitting in the same spot all night. After returning to the tower, Gorra had teased him for a while and then collapsed on the bed, falling asleep almost instantly, leaving him at a bit of a loss.

She had continued to sleep, even after he climbed down from the bed and walked away, and hadn't stirred when he returned to cover her with a blanket, merely turning over and snuggling down into the soft sheets. Thankful she hadn't tried to drag him into bed with her, John found a nice spot on the edge of the platform and sat down to meditate. A few hours after he began, a small but steady stream of mana rose from the stone under him, seeping into his mana-starved body.

Without even trying, his body gobbled up all of the mana, pulling it in as fast as it appeared. Emboldened by his rate of absorption, the trickle increased to a constant flow, allowing John to increase the speed at which he was taking in the mana. Like water pouring from a hose, the mana left the tower and vanished into John's body, where it was refined and transformed in purity. Thankfully, it was already very pure, so not much was lost in the transformation and John felt his heart lifting as he realized it might actually work.

A faint presence rose around him, indicating that the tower spirit had appeared once again. Noticing that the tower spirit was clearly weaker than it had been the first time, John's forehead wrinkled slightly.

"Is everything okay? You look like you're weaker than before."

"It is natural. I shouldn't have woken up. My mana reserves should have dispersed. A thousand years ago. You must. Take all the mana you can. Much will be lost."

Listening to the tower spirit's halting speech, John thought he understood. It had been so long since Azewix Valehawk had been in this world that the tower spirit should already have disappeared, its mana dried

out. It had been in a dormant state, however, allowing it to survive this long. Having woken up once again, it was about to lose the last of its mana reserves, and unless he took advantage of the mana it could channel, he would miss his chance. Throwing away any hesitation, John nodded and gestured to the stone floor where he sat.

"I can handle a lot more mana, if you can increase the flow."

"Double?"

"Easily. I can probably handle more than triple the rate of flow. As much mana as you have, I can take. Just don't let anyone notice."

"Right. Hide mana. Kill the beasts."

Fading away, the tower spirit returned to the core of the tower and a moment later the flow of mana that was pouring into John began to grow stronger. It was a slow increase, as if a few extra trickles of mana started coming in from other parts of the tower, but as John waited, those smaller lines of mana began to combine until the flow had nearly doubled. Sensing that it was continuing to strengthen, John turned his attention to his next step. Rebya had already explained at length what he needed to do, so John allowed himself to sink into his mind.

There he found Farroutef lounging in the middle of the hazy space, his scales gleaming as he stretched lazily. The dragon had grown larger and more realistic since he devoured John's arms and legs, and it was clear from the mocking expression he wore that he considered the fight between him and John to be just about over. With a deep breath, John walked over toward Farroutef, stopping just out of range of the dragon's long neck and sharp teeth.

In an ideal situation, John should have been the only one in his mental space, but with Farroutef's mental image forcefully occupying his mind, it was impossible for John to avoid having his own mental image corrupted with the dragon's influence. The mana his body was absorbing felt like a stream of life-giving liquid drenching a parched land, and with every second that passed the amount of pure mana in his body crept up. Without any time to waste, John began focusing, creating a mental image to funnel all the mana into.

Just like the other times he had tried this, the image that appeared was more of a dragon than a man, but John didn't stop. Four bat-like wings sprouted from his back, flapping powerfully as his head stretched out and transformed, his lower jaw and nose extending and gaining scales. Thick

muscles grew on his shoulders and chest, and a powerful tail with a row of sharp spines grew from his tailbone. Across from him, Farroutef's mocking smile grew into an expression of glee, only to freeze as John launched himself forward, attacking with a swipe of his sharp claws.

Taken off guard by the abrupt attack, Farroutef folded one of his wings to try and block the attack, but John's new dragon claws tore through the leathery skin, sending a spurt of blood into the air. Furious, Farroutef unfolded his wing, slamming it into John and sending him skidding back. Lifting his head to glare down at John, the dragon looked like he was about to speak but John shot toward him again.

This time, Farroutef met John with a claw of his own. The two dragon claws crashed into each other, one large and the other small, and Farroutef's attack won out, tearing through John. His image flickered as Farroutef's claws carved him in half, and a moment later John reappeared in the distance in his human form once again. Seeing John smile and step forward again, Farroutef's eyes narrowed, sensing a plot of some sort.

"What are you doing?" the dragon asked, his voice lacking its normal power.

"Don't worry about it," John replied with a grim smile.

Once again, John's body began to change as he tried to create a mental image, and once again he transformed into a dragon man. As soon as the change had been completed, John launched himself at the dragon again, this time taking to the air as the wings on his back spread out. Trying to take advantage of his speed, he still found himself outmatched and soon fell to a powerful bite after a short dance.

Appearing at a distance again, John winced slightly, his body wavering. Taking a deep breath, he pulled on the mana that was filling his body and transformed again before throwing himself at Farroutef, who was starting to get annoyed by the constant attacks. Ignoring the dragon's growing anger, John refused to stop. Over and over again he transformed himself, taking on a draconic form and attacking Farroutef, only to die and return to his human body.

At the fifth attack, Farroutef's disdainful look had transformed into a sneer, and by the tenth he began openly mocking John. By the time John had launched his twentieth attack, Farroutef's mocking words were replaced with angry bellows, and by the fortieth he had fallen silent. When

John launched his 46th attack, a tiny thread of fear had appeared in the dragon's eyes, and with each successive attack it grew thicker and stronger.

Somewhere around the 15th attack, John's transformations had begun to change, with each iteration being less draconic-looking than the last. At first it had been almost unnoticeable, as he lost a few centimeters off his claws, but soon the changes had started to affect the rest of his transformed body as well. The draconic head grew smaller and his skin less scaled, and the wings on his back got smaller and slimmer until they were reduced from four wings to two. With each loss and new transformation, the weaknesses of John's partially dragonified body were revealed and cut out, causing each transformation to shift back toward a more human look.

By the time John attacked for the 85th time, the draconic influence on his body was nearly gone. Only a few things remained, like a thin scaled pattern on his skin and sharp claws on his fingers. His tail was gone, as were the wings and horns. His face had returned to its normal look, though his eyes were still changing into the vertical pupils that mirrored Farroutef's. Throwing himself at the dragon, John moved like lightning, his body shifting back and forth in an erratic zigzag as he dodged Farroutef's claws.

He had discarded the tail because it slowed him down and gotten rid of the wings because they made him a bigger target. Dodging his way through a storm of claw strikes, John slashed out with his claws, leaving deep scratches on Farroutef's scales, clicking his tongue when he didn't manage to draw blood. The dragon's scales were impossibly tough, and so far John hadn't been able to wound Farroutef at all. Sensing a flicker at the corner of his vision, John barely managed to jump back as one of the dragon's legs smashed into the spot he had been standing, but he missed the incoming tail and it slammed into him, sending him flying.

Before he could get up, the enraged dragon pounced on him, tearing him to shreds. Farroutef wasn't able to kill him completely, or stop him from returning to attack again, so the dragon seemed to be venting his anger by killing John as savagely as possible. Each death sapped John's strength, but still John rose again and threw himself forward, using the mana he was receiving to refresh himself. Reappearing in the distance for his 86th attempt, John took a moment to center himself before he transformed.

Despite his persistence, his constant deaths were starting to take a toll on his mind, but he was determined not to stop. His goal was simple.

Through the punishing cycle of transforming, attacking, and dying, he was ruthlessly eliminating all of the superfluous, extra features Farroutef was trying to force on him. Every time he died to the dragon, it was another layer of proof that the adaptations Farroutef was trying to influence him into creating weren't helpful.

Gnashing his teeth as he saw John charging forward, Farroutef opened his mouth and let out a fierce gout of blue flame, intending to burn John to a crisp. Seeing the attack coming, John dodged to the side and slipped through the dragon's defenses, closing in with incredible speed. He no longer had any claws, but John didn't care at all as he clenched his fist and drew it back. Planting his feet and twisting his waist, he slammed his fist into Farroutef, hearing a rewarding crack as the dragon's scales were smashed into pieces.

Blood seeped from the point of impact, but what was even more impressive was that the dragon was thrown back, stumbling a few feet as he tried to disperse the force of the punch. Laughing, John followed closely, dodging a few wild swipes as he punched again, his fist landing in the same place. This time, the already-cracked scales shattered and John's fist sank into the dragon's flesh, causing Farroutef to roar in pain and try to retreat.

Unwilling to let him go, John followed closely and they began a terrible brawl. John's body was soon torn up, but he still persisted, landing his attacks on Farroutef with increasing frequency. What truly frightened the dragon, however, was that John kept getting stronger and faster the whole time. Even as Farroutef did more and more damage to John's body, John never stopped, as if he was filled with an endless vitality. Soon, the dragon noticed that John's body was constantly healing, repairing the damage his claws and tail caused almost as soon as it happened. Though he managed to catch John off guard with a tricky tail strike and then finished the fight with a powerful bite, the dragon was not happy.

John appeared in the distance once again, his breath coming in ragged gasps after the fierce fight. Despite his exhaustion and the dull ache that ran through him, John's face was covered in a massive smile. Stabilizing his breathing, John stepped forward once, his body not changing at all as he stared at Farroutef. It felt like weeks had passed since he began his attacks, but John knew that only a few hours had passed in reality.

He had started with transformations that slowly made him more dragon than man, but after each loss, he had managed to reject a small piece of the

subtle influence Farroutef had been using to corrupt his mental image. Each time he died, it had gotten easier to reject the changes the dragon had foisted on him, and now, after ninety deaths, he was finally completely free of the dragon's influence. That didn't mean, however, that there was nothing draconic about him. Rather, there were parts of Farroutef's strength that he had actually embraced.

Instead of accepting the dragon's scales or muscular form, John had fixed in his mind the feeling of infinite endurance and overpowering strength he had experienced during his fight with Markov and Kiralig. He had borrowed the dragon's power, giving him a short but unforgettable experience of possessing the same endurance and strength Farroutef enjoyed, but in a completely human form rather than a dragon form. The same was true for the dragon's speed, which he had borrowed in his first encounter with Gorra.

It was that state that John focused on, shaping his mental image to replicate the feeling of carrying the dragon's power while maintaining his human body. Death after death had helped him narrow his mental image, tearing away anything that wasn't necessary until nothing but the speed, strength, and endurance of the dragon remained. Now, as he walked toward Farroutef, he could sense the dragon's fear. Never had John felt so in control of his body or his movements. He had only to think it and his body responded by doing it.

With a slight pressure in the ball of his foot, he could launch himself in any direction at an unbelievable speed. A casual punch could crush dragon scales and a kick could shatter dragon bone. And though it looked completely normal, his skin was harder than any armor, turning aside both tooth and claw with hardly a scratch. Still, it wasn't enough for John. Even though Farroutef retreated when he advanced, John knew that their power was almost evenly matched. His body was in a practically perfect state, but John wanted to push it a step further if he could.

"Enough!" Farroutef growled, glaring at John with hate-filled eyes. "This is a pointless exercise. I concede that you have outplayed me, but you will gain no further ground."

Stopping, John stared at Farroutef for a moment and then shook his head. Immersing himself in another memory, John wasn't surprised when the dragon realized what he was about to do and let out a scream of rage, launching himself toward John with a powerful flap of his wings.

Undisturbed, John's lips parted and he spoke, his voice filled with power as he echoed the voice he had borrowed from the dragon.

"Seal."

Though the word wasn't loud when it slipped from John's mouth, it grew in power, echoing through the mental world until it smashed into Farroutef, crushing him down into the ground. His struggling wings were locked in place, and his legs were bound up by invisible chains of sound, leaving the dragon helpless. Even his mouth was forced shut by the pressure, leaving him unable to speak as John walked toward him. Stopping in front of Farroutef, John looked down at the dragon for a moment, his gaze inscrutable. Slowly lifting his hand until it was above the dragon's head, John ignored the frantic look in Farroutef's eyes and spoke once more.

"Devour."

CHAPTER 38

"Are you really just going to sit there?"

Ignoring the voluptuous beauty who was doing her best to drape herself all over him, John kept his breathing even, inhaling and exhaling as if he was meditating. Having defeated Farroutef's mental image, John had not only bought himself a respite from the dragon's corrupting influence, but he had also managed to set up a perfect mental image for what he wanted to become with his guided adaptation.

He knew that Farroutef wasn't truly defeated and that his real soul, which still lay slumbering in John's mana pool, was countless times stronger than the mental image the dragon had projected, but he was content with the small win. Now it was simply a matter of channeling all of the mana the tower could give him into realizing the image he had formed. It was a slow and painstaking process, but John was committed to doing his best to keep at it. Though the mana came quickly enough, his biggest issue was Gorra, who desperately wanted his attention.

"Come on, let's go do something fun! Are you hungry? Don't humans get hungry a lot? I can bring you some food. Do you want me to have my handmaidens come back? They can dance and play music. I can dance too if you want to see. Do you like dancing?"

Pouting when John didn't respond to her steady stream of questions, Gorra pursed her lips and poked his cheek.

"If you keep ignoring me, I'm going to get mad, you know. And I'm not nice when I'm mad."

As she spoke, ethereal tails began to materialize around her, causing the air to stagnate as a fierce power started to grow. Realizing he couldn't keep ignoring her, John sighed and turned his head to meet her gaze. Delighted, Gorra smiled at him and her tails vanished, replaced by soft pink clouds. Clasping her hands together, she took a deep sniff of John's scent.

"Mmm. Has anyone ever told you that you smell wonderful?"

"You can't keep bothering me," John said.

Gorra's smile vanished at John's words and she raised her eyebrows imperiously.

"Excuse me? What did you just say?"

“I said, you can’t keep bothering me,” John said, his voice calm. “You don’t want to keep a useless person, do you? I already told you, I’m not even close to my real power level. If you want to see true strength, you’ll have to wait for me to regain it.”

Pushing herself back from where she knelt next to John, Gorra smirked at him.

“And you think that by sitting there doing nothing, you will be able to get stronger? Humans have such strange ideas. Strength is gained through action, not inaction. That meditation, or whatever you call it, is worthless compared to taking action. Look at me. I didn’t get to be the strongest beast in the world by sitting around and breathing in and out, but by killing until the land ran red with the blood of my enemies. If you want to get stronger, I can arrange some fights for you, but whatever you are doing is a waste of time.”

John’s expression remained unshaken, and he just smiled faintly at Gorra’s blistering indictment.

“Every race advances differently. You beasts use food and your breath to gather mana, fighting to shape it, and sleep to integrate it. Humans use food and meditation to gather mana, meditation to refine it, and sleep to integrate it. Beings like me use breath to gather mana, understanding to shape it, and meditation to integrate it.”

Completely ignoring everything else that John said, Gorra leaned forward again, her eyes staring at John with bright passion.

“Beings like you? What sort of being are you?”

“Unimportant,” John replied, his lips twisting in a self-deprecating smile.

“On the contrary, it is of the utmost importance, but that’s fine. I can wait until you are more settled to speak to you again. Come, I have much that I wish to show you. You will need to understand our land and customs when you are this king’s consort.”

This time, it was John who raised his eyebrows, though not as imperiously.

“I have told you, I am not going to be your husband, Gorra. You will have to look somewhere else for a lover, as I’m already taken.”

Slowly smiling, Gorra revealed her perfect teeth, managing to convey the sense of a dangerous maw ready to devour John. Standing up, she summoned her eight ethereal tails and used one of them to wrap around

John, forcefully picking him up. As soon as she lifted him into the air the flow of mana from the tower ceased, and John found himself wrapped in a thick band of energy. It wasn't uncomfortable, feeling like a tight blanket had surrounded him, and though he was confident of being able to break out of it, he didn't bother. Gorra was determined to take him somewhere, and he was not yet strong enough to resist her.

Leaving the tower, Gorra flew into the air, dragging John along with her as they headed toward the sea. As they left, John once again saw thousands of beasts in humanoid form appearing from the lower parts of the mountain palace. The sight was shocking, as John thought that only those beasts who had reached the sage stage could transform into humans, but if that was the case, then he was looking at more sages than he could count. Realizing that most of the beasts weren't even legendary beasts, John grew curious and pointed to them.

"How come they have human forms? Don't you need to be a sage for that?"

Laughing lightly, Gorra shook her head and turned to face John, lounging on her tails even as they flew forward.

"No, that's a misconception. Beasts can gain a human form whenever they want, but doing so makes it much harder to grow stronger because it dilutes our perception of who we are. These are beasts who have grown as strong as they can. They take human form in order to better serve me and other powerful beasts. After all, you humans are practically made to be slaves. Opposable thumbs are so incredibly useful."

"Is it the same for you? When did you get your human form?"

Puffing out her cheeks, Gorra pretended to be cross with John, shaking a slim finger at him.

"Don't you know it's not polite to ask a lady questions like that?"

"No?"

Smiling, Gorra reached out to caress John's cheek, chuckling when he pulled his head back.

"That's true. You probably don't know much about beasts. But don't worry, I'll help you understand us soon enough. To answer your question, I only took human form after ascending to my current level."

"But you said that will slow you down and make growth almost impossible. Don't you want to see what's beyond it?"

Rolling her eyes, Gorra started to dive down, descending rapidly toward one of the stone cities that dotted the jungle.

"Of course I do, but there is an impossible barrier blocking the way. Believe me, I spent multiple human lifetimes trying to crack it with no luck. No, this is the peak of the world. But don't worry, I'll help you climb up to my level too so we can live happily together forever and fill this world with our children. Who knows, maybe one of our offspring can break the barrier of the world."

Biting his tongue before he blurted out the truth, John distracted himself by turning his attention to the city they were quickly approaching. Last time he had seen it, it had just been a blur, a gray smear in the expanse of green as they flew by. This time, they approached slowly enough that he could clearly see the massive stone buildings piled on top of each other. There were no discernable roads in the city and the stacked structures created a tangled warren of small passages and large rooms that filled every available space between the large walls that kept the creeping foliage at bay.

In the center of the city there was a large open area with a red sand floor where John saw hundreds of bloody fights between beasts of all sizes taking place. The area was close to a mile long and half a mile wide, and there were beasts watching from the roofs of the buildings that were piled around it. Carrying John to one end of the massive arena, Gorra touched down lightly, a ruthless smile playing about her lips as she set John down next to her. They were standing on a platform that jutted out over the crimson sands, offering an excellent view of the fights taking place below.

"Welcome to the Arena of Law," Gorra said, sitting down on the large throne that dominated the platform. "It is here that the beasts of the land can work out their differences, be they petty squabbles or blood feuds."

John hadn't noticed it while they were flying, but as he stood on the platform, the stench of blood filled his nostrils and he suddenly realized that what covered the arena floor was not naturally red sand, but rather sand that had been drenched in so much blood it had been dyed. The smell was almost overwhelming, and seemed to have a powerful effect on the beasts who stepped into the arena, awakening their bloodlust and driving them into a frenzy.

Everywhere he looked, John saw bloody fights and cruel deaths, with the only rule seeming to be that one of the combatants had to die before the fight was over. Not too far away he saw a huge creature that looked like a

rhinoceros trying to stomp on a three-headed hydra, all the while bleeding from a dozen terrible gashes that dripped blood to the sand below, adding a fresh layer to the blood-soaked floor. Further out, a beast with horns like a deer and a long, spiked tail had just gored a big cat, and after shaking the cat from its horns, began to rip at its flesh with sharp teeth, eating its opponent alive.

It was a savage sight, and the longer John looked, the more death he saw. The entire arena was dedicated to nothing but slaughter, and it carried on without pause. As fights ended, the slain beasts were most often consumed by the victor, either on the spot or after being dragged off to the side. A steady stream of beasts also entered the arena, walking across the blood-soaked sand to find an open space where the beasts could face off with each other. John had spent many years on some of the most horrifying battlefields that had ever appeared in this world, but seeing the beasts throwing themselves at each other without regard for life or limb turned his stomach.

"It's wonderful, isn't it?"

Shaking his head, John turned to look at Gorra, clearly disagreeing with her.

"What is the purpose?"

"I told you already. If beasts under my rule wish to settle a grievance, they do so by entering the arena. This ensures two things. One, little time is wasted on petty things, as only those who have real grievances will fight. Two, those who survive become stronger, thus fulfilling the prime law. All that matters is strength."

Gorra's eye narrowed slightly as she smiled at John, her expression saccharine but her tone of voice cold.

"Unlike you humans who encourage weakness in people, we beasts know the true way of the world. Life is a struggle, a struggle for power, for resources, for everything. And so our laws mirror that struggle. Claw your way up to the top and bite your way through those who would stop you, and glory will be yours."

"Don't you worry that someone will challenge you?" John asked, pointing down at the bloody arena.

"Hah, if anyone could grow to my level, I would welcome it. But it will not happen," Gorra replied, shaking her head. "The bloodlines of this world are not strong enough to break past the sage barrier. That strange surge in

the world's mana allowed many beasts to advance, but the problem is that their bloodlines hinder them. Which is why I am so interested in you."

Taking a small step back, John looked at Gorra warily, causing her to chuckle.

"Surely you must have expected it," she said, curling one of her ethereal tails around him and pulling him closer. "In order to strengthen the bloodline of this world, I need one who can match my draconic blood, and you just so happen to be the perfect candidate. In short order, we will wipe out the rest of the humans and then you and I will rule, filling the world with our children. Does this not sound like a dream come true? You can have whatever you want, command whoever you want, and become the father of an entire world. Give yourself to me."

Staring at John with burning excitement, Gorra was disappointed to see that John clearly didn't share her ambition. With every word that Gorra spoke, John's face grew colder, until it was like a mask of stone. He was unable to step back because of the tail wrapped around him, but he looked at Gorra dispassionately and shook his head.

"No. I've told you already that I will not join you. And I will not change my mind."

For the first time since John had met Gorra, he saw her composure crack and an intense bloodlust began to seep out of her. Many of the beasts who were near to the platform where John and Gorra were stopped their fights, frozen by the terrifying feeling the dragon fox was giving off, and countless other beasts who were observing started backing up. But as quickly as it came, the bloodlust was hidden again, and Gorra sighed, her expression turning sad as she shook her head at John.

"If you remain stubborn, you will find that my patience is not unlimited. I will give you a bit more time to reflect on your choice, but if you continue to deny me, I will have no choice but to continue on my original path, squashing the rest of humanity like the bugs they are."

Rising to her feet, Gorra took off once again, dragging John with her as they returned to the palace. This time, however, they didn't go to the tall tower but instead flew into the mountain, taking a passage that sank deep into its bowels. By John's estimation, they were nearly a mile underground before they stopped in front of a large block of cells. At Gorra's command, the ape jailer opened up one of the cells and John was tossed inside. There was nothing else in the cell apart from a set of chains that were attached to

the wall, and John didn't resist as they were buckled around his wrists and ankles.

As soon as the metal touched him, John could sense a piercing, bone rattling coldness that entered his body, causing his arms and legs to tremble. Seeing him starting to shake, Gorra nodded and started to turn away, only to stop and speak to John.

"I have shown you what you could have if you obey me, and now I will show you what you will earn by defying me. In a week we will speak again."

CHAPTER 39

"I figured out where John is!"

Hearing Rebya's shout, Ellie jumped up from her stool, ignoring it as it clattered to the ground. She had been in the Shadow Tower for three days, working tirelessly with Rebya to try and unravel the mystery of John's disappearance. Three days ago, they had gotten a garbled message from the ring he wore, alerting them that while he was safe, he had gotten abducted and was now an entire continent away. Coming to stand next to the plant Mage's flower, Ellie stared at the map Rebya had created, her finger tracing the line that Rebya had drawn on it.

"How did someone kidnap him?" Ellie asked, repeating the question for what felt like the hundredth time.

"In his weakened state, John is significantly more vulnerable. A group in the fourth order might be able to do it, but I think we're dealing with something else," Rebya replied. "I think we're dealing with a threat that could destroy the valley. That's the only reason John would go without a fight."

Rubbing her forehead, Ellie tried to smooth out the wrinkles that seemed to have become permanent.

"The beasts."

"Precisely. We couldn't get the whole message, but I think that John may have met Gorraleck the Destroyer, or at least her generals."

Nodding, Ellie was quiet for a moment as she stared at the map. It showed the edge of their continent and a long stretch of blue before the line moved onto another land, this one covered in dense green. While she had traveled before, she couldn't even fathom the distance that lay between her and John at the moment. But none of that mattered. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and turned to look at Rebya.

"I want to ask a favor, Rebya."

Meeting Ellie's gaze with an inscrutable expression, Rebya gestured for her to continue.

"I have a really bad feeling, and as a Witch, I know to trust my instincts. John is running around, solving the problems of the world, and at the same time drifting further and further from the valley, from his home. From us. I need to go get him back."

“Can you?” Rebya asked, her expression growing curious.

Biting her lip, Ellie didn’t rush to answer, instead taking her time to seriously consider the question. As much as it stung to be asked, Rebya was not asking it to poke at her weakness, but instead to tell her to think about what she could actually do. After a moment, Ellie nodded slowly.

“If I bring Sigvald and Ferdie, I think we can. Or, at the very least, we can make a good effort. I don’t know how strong this Gorraleck is, but Ferdie can hold his own, and Sigvald is almost as strong. While I am weak in comparison, I have my divination and my spells, so I’m not entirely useless,” Ellie said, the conviction in her voice growing. “Yes, we can bring him back.”

A smile crept onto Rebya’s lips and she clapped her hands together.

“Good! That is what I wanted to see. If you hadn’t brought it up, I would have suggested it. We don’t have the luxury to wait, since I am running out of mana, and without John, there will be no way to defend the valley from the coming beast wave. If my roots could reach that far, I would go myself, but sadly, I cannot accompany you. Instead, I will ask you this. How much do you want to save John, and how willing are you to suffer?”

From the way that Rebya was looking at her, Ellie felt like she had a sense of what Rebya was talking about, but instead of backing down, she nodded.

“I’m completely committed. What do I need to do?”

“Come with me.”

Wrapping a tendril around Ellie’s waist, Rebya pulled her through the halls of the Shadow Tower, accelerating until everything was a blur. A few seconds later, they entered the main shaft that ran down the center of the tower and the vine that wrapped around Ellie lifted her up, shooting toward the top of the tower where a giant glowing crystal stood, depositing her next to it after a jarring stop. A purple flower bud spread its petals and Rebyba appeared on top of it, her finger pointing at the crystal.

“My mana reserves are low, but low is a relative concept. The amount of mana John infused into the crystal is enough that I can forcefully push you into the evolution you chose, but the pain will be significant. You will have to bear it on your own, all while keeping your mental image in mind. Furthermore, it will change your body, making it impossible for you to grow stronger without acquiring more mana of the same purity.”

“How strong will it make me?” Ellie asked, her pale face reflected in the surface of the crystal.

“It will push you to the top of the fourth order, and give you a step into the fifth.”

“Then let’s do it.”

“Are you sure? You will be leaving your humanity aside, never to be returned to.”

Turning away from the crystal, Ellie faced Rebya squarely, her eyes completely calm and filled with wisdom.

“Rebya, I’ve known for a long time that I would have to grow if I want to be with John. He occupies a world that none of us understand, a world that contains only a single being. Himself. He pretends to live in our world, with us, but that is out of kindness, not necessity. If he was cold-hearted he would have left this world to burn, and all of us in it. I thought that we were growing closer together, that we were becoming something, but the recent months have taught me something.

“When he thinks about how to solve problems, he doesn’t consider how to work with us, with me. He just tries to solve them on his own. That’s not the relationship I want. I don’t want to be his subordinate, trailing behind him. I want to walk by his side. But right now, I’m just watching him get further and further away. I don’t know if I will be able to break through that wall that surrounds him, but I want to try. And if this will take me a step closer to entering into his world, then so be it.”

Nodding, Rebya’s face lit up with a happy smile.

“Good. He needs a real companion, and I’m cheering for you, Ellie. Come, sit below the mana stone and we can begin.”

Despite her brave words, Ellie was nervous, but she still sat down, resting her back against the glowing crystal. She could feel the intense mana it contained, swirling around at her back, and knew that if she tried to channel it herself, it would burn her to ash in a moment. The idea of using John’s pure mana to forcefully advance was nerve-wracking, but also thrilling, and a wild feeling was born in her heart. Recently she had been incredibly frustrated, both with John and with herself, and she wondered if she was making the wrong choice, driven by her desperation to figure out a way to pierce the barrier that had caused their relationship to stall.

A faint touch on her shoulder alerted her that Rebya was going to start the process, so Ellie banished all of her worries and concerns, focusing

instead on the image she had been polishing. It had undergone many faint changes since she had initially come up with it, but the core remained the same. Her main goal was to develop her divination abilities, allowing her to peer into the truth of the world by transforming her Truesight ability into a permanent buff that would continually peel back the mysteries around her.

The second step would be in developing her connection to Sigvald, allowing her and her familiar to both grow in strength. She had felt that the giant lightning rooster was unable to grow to his full potential because of her lack of strength, as if her weakness was putting an artificial limit on how strong he could get, and she wanted to remove that restriction. If the process went as she desired, she would begin elementalizing her body to take on the aspects of a storm, with a focus on lightning to help Sigvald improve in that regard while simultaneously borrowing his natural affinity with lightning.

Sigvald had completely merged with the lightning spirit familiar she had summoned and subdued, and just as he could borrow and was limited by her strength, the same was true in reverse. With a lightning spirit familiar, Ellie already had a maxed-out affinity for the lightning element, and she was completely confident she would be able to succeed in elementalizing. The major challenge would be the third and final adaptation she was trying to create.

She wanted something that would make her potions more potent, allowing her to support those she loved better, and for that, she had been working with Rebya to increase her affinity with plants. The thought was that by borrowing some of Rebya's nature, she would be able to grow to the point that she could shape plants into whatever she needed. Along with her focus on healing, she had also decided on her next familiar. While she hadn't been strong enough to choose what sort of familiar she wanted initially, Ellie was confident she could call a specific spirit the next time she tried to summon one.

Of all the familiars and spirits that existed in the records left by her grandmother, Ellie was most attracted to the fabled unicorn, a powerful being that symbolized healing and purity. Her hope was that by gaining a measure of Rebya's plant affinity, she would be able to attract a strong unicorn to her side, increasing the healing effect of her potions and gaining another powerful guardian. Keeping the image she had chosen in mind,

Ellie felt a burning pain starting to seep into her back as Rebya allowed the stored mana to begin to move.

Gritting her teeth to keep the pain under control, Ellie channeled the mana into her mind, pushing it into the mental image she was holding. It was an excruciating process, and terribly slow, but even as her mind started to waver, she brought herself back into focus. Beads of sweat formed on her body, gathering until they dripped down, soaking her dress. Still, she refused to move, maintaining her position sitting against the giant mana crystal.

"Ellie, I'm about to start increasing the speed of the mana. Get ready."

As Rebya's words ended the burning flow of mana surged, causing Ellie to let out a muffled scream. It was like molten gold drilling into her, but she endured the suffering, doing her best to keep her mind focused on the image she desired rather than on the pain she was feeling. Every second that passed felt like it stretched out into minutes, and she quickly realized there was no way she was going to be able to maintain the process. It wasn't that she couldn't deal with the pain, but rather that the thick mana that was entering her brain was starting to burn away the image she had created for herself.

Even as she watched, the mana from the giant crystal entered the image, causing it to brighten and solidify. Unfortunately, it also started to crack, as if it simply couldn't contain the intense power contained in the viscous mana. Starting to panic, Ellie realized she was going to completely lose the image if she didn't do something, but she was currently in so much pain that she wasn't sure that she could do anything at all.

Like flames licking at the edge of a paper, the mana entering her mind began to burn away at the mental image she was trying to hold, causing her body to spasm. Vaguely, she could feel heavy vines wrapping around her body to keep her from moving away from the crystal and breaking the connection, but the sensation was drowned out by the waves of pain that accompanied the pure mana. Her body seemed to be screaming in protest, but Ellie didn't pay it any attention as she held onto her mental image with every ounce of her remaining strength.

The unicorn was the first thing to vanish, burned away by the pure mana until not even the memory remained. The plant tattoo followed, slowly being erased from Ellie's arm as her image began to collapse. Terrified, she did her best to fight against the destruction, but the pure mana was simply

too strong as it turned the thought to ash before creeping toward the other side. A scorching breath filled Ellie's lungs and she felt like crying, but instead she took another breath.

Her only comfort was that John must have felt the same thing. She had talked to him extensively about his experiences, often while sitting on the porch in the early morning or late-night darkness, with a cup of steaming tea in her hand, and she knew that this was a feeling he lived with on a daily basis. It wasn't until now, however, that she really understood how different they were.

The mental image in her head was still falling apart, unable to bear the weight of the pure mana that was pouring into her, but Ellie's mind was elsewhere, focused on an entirely different picture. A memory had risen to her mind, of the two of them in the sky, dancing along the lightning in a powerful storm. It had been a moment of freedom, a moment of connection, a moment in which she had finally felt his equal.

And now, in the midst of pain that threatened to burn away her mind, it was that image that remained fixed in her head. The pure power of the storm, the connection of two hearts, the coordination of two bodies that moved in a perfect dance. With a final crackle, the original mental image vanished and the pure mana flowed deeper into her mind, entering into this new image. Locked in a trance, Ellie couldn't feel the pain any longer as the feelings were drowned out by the storm of emotions that came with the memory.

Watching over her, Rebya saw that Ellie had stabilized and let out a sigh of relief. She had not spoken the whole truth to Ellie but had instead taken a gamble, trusting that the most powerful feelings and memories that Ellie had would carry her through. Rather than saying that one could create an image to guide their adaptations, it was better to say that the most powerful identity they held would manifest their adaptations. While this approach carried a risk of manifesting the ugliness hidden in the hearts and minds of both man and beasts, it also carried the potential to transform individuals positively.

For the next twelve hours Ellie underwent a powerful change, her body filling with mana that rewrote her flesh and bones, along with every other inch of her. The first outward manifestation of the change were two wings of lightning that burst from her back, crackling with power and giving the impression that she could move unhindered through the world. Shortly

after, lightning began to manifest on her fingertips and slowly trace up her hands to her wrists. From there, the lightning continued to crawl up her forearms and over her elbows, only ending on her biceps.

Faint black lines were left behind, like a stylized tattoo of the lightning that occasionally flashed with a sharp blue light. While there were no other physical changes to her body, it was clear when Ellie opened her eyes a few hours later that she had completely transformed, and as she stood up next to the darkened crystal, a thunderclap shook the air. Bowing to Rebya, who was looking quite faint, Ellie straightened and spoke with a quiet intensity.

“Thank you. I’m going to go bring John home.”

CHAPTER 40

The cold of the stone floor felt positively warm compared to the chill radiating through the chains that bound John's wrists and ankles, but he did his best to ignore it and concentrate on the mana that was coming up through the floor. The tower spirit had appeared almost as soon as Gorra had left and then spent the next four hours complaining bitterly about how much mana it had to waste to move the mana channels to the prison after spending all that time and effort getting them up to the original spot at the top of the tower.

Still, after a few hours the flow of the mana from the tower appeared once again, and John was able to resume filling himself. There was a strange emptiness in his mind now that Farroutef's mental image had been destroyed, and John was feeling stronger than he ever had. But there was also something bothering him. The mental image he had created included the dragon's strength, endurance, speed, and voice, and by devouring Farroutef's mental image, he had also gotten a template for mental strength.

Yet he felt like something was missing. He wasn't sure what it was, but the feeling was so strong he didn't dare pour the mana he was collecting into the mental image he had made. If he did, it wouldn't take long to begin filling it up, completely transforming his body and allowing him to start using his mana once again, but rather than rush it, he was determined to figure out what he was lacking.

A few days had already passed since he had sat down in the jail when he felt the mana that was flowing into him starting to taper off. He had absorbed all of the reserves the tower possessed, leaving just enough for the tower to keep its lights working to avoid alerting the beasts that something was wrong. The tower spirit had already vanished, but only after spending nearly a full day reminding John that it was only giving him this mana so that he could kill the beasts. Though he never made a firm promise, John knew he owed the spirit a firm debt of gratitude and had sworn that he would not allow the beasts to dominate the world.

Stirring, John heard a sound and looked out through the bars, seeing that the big man with a shock of red hair who was chained up in the cell across from him had moved to the bars. Noticing John look up, the big man grinned.

“Look at that! He lives. I almost thought you had just given up and died from the way you sat there, but I guess you’ve still got some hope in you. My name is Felix. Who are you?”

“John.”

“Hello, John. Considering that Gorra threw you in here herself, you must be her newest suitor.”

Frowning, John was going to shake his head when he realized that Felix was teasing him and laughed.

“I wouldn’t use the word suitor.”

“Heh, don’t let her hear you say that,” Felix said, leaning against the bars. “Though, I must admit, you look quite a bit tougher than the other poor men she tossed in here. Most of them were driven mad by the chains, but you look like you’re doing just fine. It even took me a few weeks to get used to them, but you’re just sitting there like it’s nothing. So, what got you into this mess? Wait, let me guess, you have a powerful stone wyrm in your ancestry?”

Shaking his head, John stood up, shaking out his arms and legs. The chains were long enough for him to go to the bars, though not long enough for him to lean against them like Felix was. Still, it was easier to talk from closer to the bars, so he walked over and stood there.

“Not a stone wyrm, but something like that. What about you? Are you one of Gorra’s suitors?”

Pointing at himself, Felix shook his head.

“Me? No, not a suitor. I don’t think I’d survive. Hah, no, I’m just a regular old man. You might call me an old friend of Gorra’s. I knew her when she was little. She, uh, invited me along when she struck out on her own and has been kind enough to give me a place to stay ever since.”

“Wasn’t that hundreds of years ago?” John asked, carefully looking Felix over.

“Has it been that long? I guess it has. I don’t really keep track of the time anymore, since every day is pretty much the same down here.”

Smiling, Felix shrugged his broad shoulders. Though he looked like he was in his mid-fifties, Felix’s hair showed no gray and his skin was relatively smooth, which made John question if he was telling the truth. From the amused smile on Felix’s face, it was obvious that the red-haired man knew exactly what he was thinking, but rather than bring it up, he just waited for John to ask the question.

“Why do you look so young if you’re that old?”

“Beast blood,” came the reply, leaving John even more confused than he had been before. “The heart blood of really powerful beasts allows humans to increase their lifespans. I happened to drink the heart blood of a very powerful eight-tailed fox, granting me a portion of her longevity and strength. Gorra didn’t like that, but also couldn’t bring herself to kill me since the blood I drank was her mother’s.”

Shrugging, Felix flicked the bars, causing them to ring.

“That landed me here. But tell me about you. Are you really her new husband?”

“No.”

“Then you better enjoy your remaining time,” Felix said, giving John a lopsided grin. “Gorra might have a soft spot in her heart, but it’s awfully small. Power is the only thing she respects, and unless you can punch in her weight class, you’re on a dangerous path.”

Before the conversation could continue, the door at the end of the hallway opened and a familiar figure strolled in. Still holding a gleaming golden fruit, the humanoid beast John had seen in Soaring Cloud Tower walked over, nodding to Felix.

“Hello, Felix, you’re looking as spry as ever. Makes me wonder what would happen if I cut open your heart to drink your blood.”

Pulling his shirt open to bare his chest, Felix smiled at the second general.

“Any time you want, Corrian. You know where I am.”

Tsking, the second general turned to look at John, his monkey tail lashing behind him.

“And you, I told you that you’d catch her majesty’s eye. Gorraleck fancies your type.”

“Incredibly handsome and intellectual?” John quipped back, causing Felix to laugh.

Corrian smiled at John’s response, though there was little humor in it.

“Something like that. I’m here to fetch you. The council is demanding an answer, and her majesty intends to throw you to them. Come on, let’s go.”

Raising his eyebrows, John tugged on his shackles, causing the chains to clink.

“Are you going to free me first?”

“Do you actually need me to?” Corrian asked, taking a bite of his fruit. “I thought you Mages were supposed to be masters of mana manipulation.”

Shrugging, John focused for a moment and the shackles clicked open, falling to the ground with a clatter. The locks themselves were fairly simple, though any Mage under the sage level probably would have had significant trouble with them. Seeing Felix looking at him in wide-eyed shock, John just nodded and waited for Corrian to open the door to his cell. Though John was confident in overpowering him thanks to the pure mana he had absorbed over the last few days, he didn’t want to waste any of it, so he just followed Corrian out of the dungeon, leaving Felix staring after them enviously.

In silence they walked together up through the lower reaches of the palace, taking nearly an hour to arrive at a giant hall that dominated the center of the mountain building. John could see a huge set of doors that were opened, providing a view of the jungle and the glittering band of the sea on the horizon. The great hall was relatively simple, though there were a number of tall pillars that ran around the outside of the room with big arched windows that showed the nearby mountains.

The center of the hall was covered in the same blood-soaked sand John had seen in the arena, and standing around it were nine humanoid beasts, each radiating a powerful aura. Lounging on the throne that sat opposite the doors, Gorra looked like she was trying hard to suppress her fury without quite succeeding. Her tails thrashed behind her, a faint crimson glow spreading from them that pressed down on the others, forcing the nine beasts in the hall to combine their auras to resist the pressure she was exerting.

It was into this invisible war that Corrian and John walked, their bodies pressed down by the intense struggle. Noticing John, Gorra suddenly smiled and her pressure vanished, causing the other beasts to stagger as their auras suddenly surged. She clearly wanted to come down from her throne, but the looks that the generals were giving her kept her from doing it.

“Is this the human you have chosen?”

The first person to speak was a massive man whose thick arms hung almost to his feet. With arms that were almost as big around as his waist and a massive, bulging back, John could tell he was an ape beast.

“He is not a human, Torik,” Gorra said, her pretty lips turning down, “but yes, he is the one I’ve chosen.”

Another of the generals, a woman who had a strangely wide smile and razor-sharp teeth, spoke up quickly, her eyes raking over John as if she was looking at a juicy piece of meat.

"Then he must be tested. Let him prove his worthiness in the blood sand."

"Wouldn't it be better to use a bed?" Corrian asked, looking around with a wide smile.

"Don't mess around, monkey," Torik snapped, glaring at Corrian with bloodshot eyes.

Holding up his hands, Corrian didn't say anything else, leaving John to stand by himself in front of the bloody sand pit. Snorting, Torik waved one of his hands and one of the generals stepped forward, his body shifting strangely as he did so. About the same height as John, his body seemed abnormally flexible and John could see that his palms appeared to have holes surrounded by teeth in them. Opening his mouth to reveal another maw with rings of teeth, the humanoid beast flicked out his tongue, hissing as he did so.

"I am Issiric the Blood Worm. I look forward to feasting on your blood!"

Holding up his hand, John looked past the ugly man and spoke to Gorra.

"Wait a second. I don't know what's going on here. Why'd you drag me out here to fight this guy?"

"Only the strongest beast deserves to mate with Gorraleck the Destroyer, and we intend to prove you are not qualified," Torik snapped, not giving Gorra a chance to respond.

A quick glance showed that Issiric was likely the seventh most powerful general, causing John's forehead to furrow.

"Do you mean to tell me that if I want to marry Gorra, I have to fight all of you? Then that's easy. I can just give up my claim. I have no desire to marry her, so you can just fight amongst yourselves for her hand."

The room fell silent, and as John finished speaking all the generals flinched. A moment later, a grim voice leaked from the figure on the throne as Gorra leaned forward, her expression murderous.

"No one I've set my eye on can do anything but exhaust themselves to win my hand. Fine, you wish to reject the gift I've offered you? You can do it, if you manage to walk out of here alive."

Thinking rapidly, John tried to calculate his chances of winning. If he used all of the mana he gathered he was confident he could win, but that would send him right back to square one, leaving him helpless once again. However, if he didn't use the pure mana he had accumulated from the tower, he wouldn't be able to beat even one of the generals. Realizing he was stuck between a rock and a hard place, John was about to throw caution to the wind when a voice he had never expected to hear filled the room.

"Can your words be trusted?"

Spinning around, John had never been so shocked in his life. Standing in the massive doorway was Ellie, her hair windblown and her robe disheveled. Behind her stood Ferdie, his big eyes looking around with interest, while John could see Sigvald lying on the stone steps that led up to the hall, his beak open and his chest heaving. The rooster was a dozen times larger than John remembered, and even Ellie and Ferdie seemed to have changed.

Beyond the shock of seeing them in the doorway of the palace, John could feel his heart thumping with another emotion. He couldn't tear his eyes away from Ellie, and his chest felt full to the point it would burst. When she started walking forward after straightening her robe, he felt his heartbeat speed up and a lightness filled him, threatening to completely overpower his mind.

"Who are you?" Gorra growled, not liking the way John was looking at Ellie.

Ignoring the beast king, Ellie marched straight up to John and grabbed the lapel of his open shirt, pulling him down and planting a kiss on his lips. It was as if a bolt of lightning slammed down on the top of John's head, completely shaking his thoughts apart. For a moment, his Mental Model skill, that he had been running almost non-stop since he had been captured, short-circuited and he felt like his entire world came crashing down. Lingering on his lips for a moment, Ellie pushed John back and looked him up and down, her eyes shining.

"You look good, John. Those clothes suit you."

Still in a trance, John couldn't answer. A million tangled thoughts that had been running through his head had been obliterated and a clear stream of pure enlightenment raced through him, shaking him to the core. Stepping past him, Ellie faced Gorra, whose hands were squeezing the armrests of her throne so hard that they were starting to crack.

“You must be Gorraleck. The one they call the Destroyer. I am Ellie of Sutton Farm. Thank you for entertaining John, but we need him back home. If you were serious about your words, we will take him back now.”

Rising from her throne, Gorra glared down at Ellie, her eyes promising the worst sort of death as her murderous aura swelled to fill the room. Before it could come crashing down on Ellie, there was a low moo and a flash of flame as Ferdie appeared in between the two women. Heat shot from his eyes and flames rose from his horns, destroying the wave of aura Gorra had unleashed.

CHAPTER 41

The room froze as Ferdie appeared, each of the generals reacting to the new threat by stepping back and tensing. For some reason, none of them had managed to get a handle on the bull's strength before he unleashed his flame, but once he did, the pressure he released was almost the same as Gorra's. Ferdie's eyes were narrowed and he pawed the ground, glaring all around at the generals as if daring them to make a move. Locked in a tense standoff, no one moved until a wheezing Sigvald dragged himself up the stairs and staggered into the room. He was so large he had to shrink down to fit into the doorway, and by the time he reached Ellie he was back to his normal, six-foot size. Despite his exhaustion, he squared up next to her, his feathers bristling as he glared around with his uncovered eye.

"Moooooo? Moooooo!"

The sound of Ferdie's low moos shook the air, causing all of the beast generals to shift slightly, their faces blanching while Gorra's expression froze in shock. All of the murderous aura she had been trying to send toward Ellie suddenly found a new target in Ferdie, but apart from taking half a step back, he didn't seem to care. Glaring at Ferdie, Gorra was so angry she could barely speak.

"What did you say?"

"Moooooo!"

Blushing bright red, Ellie tried to say something, but Sigvald let out an excited crow and walked up next to Ferdie, his beak held high. Patting the bull on the back with a wing, he crowed a few more times, clearly bragging about his friend. Nodding along, Ferdie tried to puff up his chest, lifting his head to display his horns at their best angle. Finally, Torik couldn't stand it anymore and launched himself forward with a powerful roar, his massive fist shooting toward Ferdie. Three other beast generals attacked at the same time.

Issiric the Blood Worm, Corrian, and the female general with the wide smile all jumped forward as well, intending to help Torik subdue Ferdie, but Sigvald let out a furious shriek and shot toward Issiric, scratching with razor-sharp claws. Only a millisecond behind, Ellie stretched out her hands, lightning dancing from her fingertips as wings burst from her back. With a powerful flap, she moved to intercept the female general, unleashing a bolt

of lightning as she closed in. Caught off guard, the female general abandoned her human form, transforming into a massive crocodile, hoping to use her thick scales to block the lightning.

Ferdie's flames surged as Torik and Corrian both closed in on him, and he met the ape's fist with a headbutt, stepping forward as he smashed his skull into Torik's fist. There was a fierce bang as the two beasts clashed, and a moment later Corrian arrived at Ferdie's side, intending to tear into his ribs with the sharp nails. Before he could, Ferdie's tail extended and thickened as scales began to emerge, running down the bull's back and onto his dragon-like tail. Whipping it to the side, Ferdie sent the surprised monkey flying. Staggering slightly as he absorbed the shock of Torik's punch, Ferdie shook his head and unleashed a blast of flame from his nostrils as he lunged forward.

The ape wasn't in nearly as good shape after their first clash, and it was with an expression of fear that he defended against Ferdie's next attack. Across the room, the crocodile beast was trying to bite down on Ellie but was moving too slowly to catch her. Every flap of Ellie's wings sent her dancing through the air in an entirely unpredictable pattern, making it impossible to lock onto her location. Every swing of Ellie's hands sent bolts of lightning zipping toward the crocodile beast, scorching her scales and burning holes in the flesh underneath.

Nearby, Issiric the Blood Worm seemed to have met his nemesis and was forced to try and escape as fast as he could to avoid Sigvald's fierce pecks and scratching spurs. Those generals who had not yet joined the fight exchanged glances and were about to throw themselves into battle when Gorra stomped her foot, causing the entire mountain to shake. The unexpected tremor caused the combatants to fall back, and the fight fell into a lull as the two sides stared at each other.

Ellie stood next to Ferdie with Sigvald on her other side, her gaze meeting Gorra's. The dragon fox had a strange expression on her face, and her eyes kept drifting between John and Ellie, with occasional glances at Ferdie. In the silence, John finally broke out of his trance and walked over to where Ellie was standing, taking in her wings and the lightning that covered her fingers. Reaching out, he took her hand, his fingers entwining with hers.

"What did I miss?" he asked, facing Gorra and the beast generals as he stood between Ellie and Ferdie.

Nearly choking at the question, Ellie shot an annoyed glance at Ferdie, who just raised his head proudly and let out a low moo.

"Only Ferdie asking Gorra to have his babies, and then a bit of a fight," Ellie said, her cheeks glowing pink.

Chuckling, John held out his fist and Ferdie bumped it with his horn. Though she didn't understand the action, Gorra could understand the intent behind it and ground her teeth together, though she didn't explode like she had earlier. Instead, she sat down on her nearly ruined throne and gave John and the others an appraising look.

"Your courage is admirable, if foolish, but like master, like beast I presume. Fine, I can see that if I do not get involved, you would likely be able to defeat my generals. And I am a woman of my word. I will let you go today. But I am curious. Will your strength allow you to survive the flood of my armies when they sweep across your valley and the lands beyond?"

Feeling Ellie's hand tighten in his, John looked at Gorra calmly and shrugged.

"Only one way to find that out."

"That is true. I will give you a single day. We will march after that," Gorra said, her beautiful eyes narrowing and turning to Ferdie. "And you, I will give you a chance. Though it is different, you share the scent I desire, so you will have an opportunity to prove yourself. Defeat me in battle and I shall grant you your heart's desires."

John didn't even know that bulls were capable of grinning, but somehow Ferdie managed it. Wiggling his butt happily, he let out a low moo that was filled with confidence, causing the beast generals to glower at him. Gorra simply chuckled, though it was clear from the look in her eyes that Ferdie would suffer tremendously if he couldn't live up to his claims. Sensing it was time to go, John tugged on Ellie's hand. Bowing his head to Gorra, John spoke as calmly as he could.

"I sincerely hope you rethink your attack, but I know that it is unlikely. If you arrive at the valley, know that we will resist with all of our strength."

"Enough," Gorra said, waving her hand. "Your deaths will arrive soon, so treat your remaining time together as a gift."

Bowing again, John, Ellie, Ferdie, and Sigvald all turned and left the palace, feeling Gorra's eyes burning into their backs.

As soon as they were out of the palace, John slipped his hand around Ellie's waist and jumped up on Ferdie's back, neatly depositing her in front

of him. Sigvald let out a loud cry and transformed into lightning, melting into Ellie's back as Ferdie took off. Though none of them thought that Gorra would change her mind and chase them down, they also wanted to get back to the valley as fast as possible. To John's surprise, however, they didn't head for the jungle and the sea beyond it. Instead, Ferdie galloped toward a mountain on the other side of the palace where another large building made from stone loomed above the mountain peak.

Racing toward the building, Ferdie headed for a hole that had been smashed in the side of it, barreling through and disrupting the beasts who were all standing around inside, trying to figure out what was going on.

"Hey! That's the bull I was talking about!"

Ignoring the shout, Ferdie bellowed, causing the beasts to scatter in fright as he stepped onto a massive portal stone that took up the majority of the building. Mana poured out of him and, with a shimmer, John, Ellie, and Ferdie all vanished, reappearing a world away deep under the valley. A dead stone wyrm lay against the wall, its body burned from flame and lightning. No sooner had they appeared than Ferdie let out a loud snort and stomped, smashing the portal stone under their feet.

[The King of Beasts: You have destroyed one of the four portals through which Gorraleck the Destroyer was going to launch her invasion. Three more remain.]

John was thankful he hadn't destroyed the portal when he had originally found the stone wyrm. From the damage the room had suffered, it was clear it had been a fierce fight, clueing John in on what had gone on in the valley while he was gone. Slipping down from Ferdie's back, John lifted Ellie down and held her tightly, kissing her lips with a fierceness that surprised even himself. Hearing Ferdie letting out breaths that sounded like snickering, John shot the bull a glare, but that just made Ferdie snicker all the more. Ignoring Ferdie, John looked at Ellie who was staring at him, wide-eyed.

"Thank you. Thank you for coming to get me. Thank you for sticking with me even though I'm denser than a box of bricks. Thank you."

Instead of saying anything, Ellie just wrapped her arms around his waist, holding him tightly. After a moment, she gave him a last squeeze and stepped back, her expression serious. Sensing that something was wrong, John took her hand and they began to follow Ferdie back to the surface.

"What's wrong?"

“It’s Rebya,” Ellie said, her expression dim. “In order to strengthen me, she used all her remaining mana. She had to shut down the tower to avoid reactivating the flower guardians, so she is completely dormant right now. We need to get her recharged, but that won’t be possible if you don’t have your mana back.”

“That’s fine. I can solve it, though if I do, I’ll need to leave the defense of the valley in your hands. Are you okay with that?”

Taken aback, Ellie glanced at John but saw that he was looking at her with a clear gaze, his eyes full of trust. Blushing slightly, she nodded and flexed one of her thin arms.

“I don’t know if you saw, but I’m really strong now.”

“I did see,” John said, giving Ellie a smile that set her heart fluttering. “Between you, Ferdie, Sigvald, and the others, I am more than confident I can trust you to keep the valley safe.”

“Wait, where will you be?” Ellie asked, her eyes narrowing suspiciously. “Are you leaving again? We just went through all that trouble to bring you back.”

“No, I’ll be here, but I’ll probably be occupied,” John said, holding his hands up placatingly. “Remember how I have a dragon in my mana pool? Well, to help Rebya, I need to unseal it, and I’ve already hurt him by devouring the mental image he planted in me, so he’ll probably be pretty upset. I’d assume that the moment that seal drops is the moment our final showdown begins. I also need all that extra mana that I stored to complete my adaptations. Sort of a catch-22 situation.”

“A what?”

“Nothing, it just means that both can only happen with the other. But tell me about your situation? How did you find me? And how did you get so strong?”

Walking out of the underground cave, Ellie and John hopped up on Ferdie as the bull took off, heading straight for Sutton Farm and the portal stone that could take them to Shadow Tower. As they made the short trip, Ellie explained.

“After Rebya helped me advance to the sage level, I used the records you had left on the portal stone and made some adjustments to it. After we killed the stone wyrm of course. It took all of Sigvald’s mana to power it up and fly out of the building, but thankfully we found you quickly. It looked like we came right in time.”

“I’ll say. Are your powers all lightning?”

“Lightning, and divination,” Ellie replied, explaining the troubles she had when she had advanced, causing John to let out a low whistle.

“It’s obvious to me now that instead of being based on our desired images, the advancement happens based on what we truly believe about ourselves,” John said.

Nodding, Ellie lifted her fingers and watched as the lightning played across them.

“Exactly. I’m not a Witch anymore, though I still have my class and all of my class features. But it’s unlikely I’ll ever improve them, since I’ve elementalized. I think in my heart I really wanted to match with you, and what better to accompany a being of flame than a being of lightning?”

“Do you have a full body transformation?”

“No, not yet,” Ellie shook her head, “but it will come with time. About one tenth of my body, mostly my wrists and hands, are fully transformed, but as long as I stick to this path, I’ll get there. Though I’ll need more of that mana you’re hiding.”

Seeing Thomas come out to greet them, John waved as he stopped to face Ellie directly.

“Once we’re through this crisis, you can have as much as you want for as long as you want. For now though, we need to focus on getting our defenses ready. Even if they give us a day, there are three portal stones out there the beast army can use, and chances are they’ll be here in two or three days at most. We need to let everyone know that the beast wave is coming and we need to prepare our own defenses. Mostly, that is going to look like waking up Rebya and getting her powered up, but that will take me out of commission almost completely.”

Hearing a low moo, John laughed and patted Ferdie on the back.

“Alright, we’ll leave Gorra to Ferdie here, but the rest of the beast generals are going to be trouble. If we can, let’s get some messages to the other sages. Between you, Thomas, Rebya, and any other sages who come, you’ll need to protect the valley, but you’ll also need to protect the rest of Lepiera. Chances are high that the beasts will launch attacks from everywhere all at once. I will try to deal with Farroutef as soon as possible and be available to help you, but I can’t tell how long it’s going to take. I don’t want to ask you to step into danger on my behalf, but I can’t solve all of these problems on my own.”

A smile slowly crept across Ellie's face as she stared at John, and with a laugh she fixed his open shirt, re-tucking it into his belt.

"It's about time you realized that, John. Go kick some dragon tail and leave the valley to us."

CHAPTER 42

Stepping through the portal stone in the cheese cellar, John appeared in the darkened halls of the Shadow Tower. It was completely silent, even to his incredibly sensitive hearing, and as he proceeded up to the top of the tower, John heard nothing but the movement of his own feet. The silence would have been unnerving, but John was completely focused on what was coming. When he had devoured Farroutef's mental image, he had gotten a notification. Closing his eyes, he pulled it up once again, trying to see if there were any clues hidden in it that would help with his upcoming fight.

[A Dragon's Heart: A dragon's soul cannot be destroyed by conventional means, and even if its body is destroyed, its spirit will continue on. Due to a chance encounter, the soul of Farroutef the Deceiver slumbers in your mana pool, sheltering your own soul while using your body to grow in strength until he can awaken. Should he awaken and seize your body, he will bring about the end of the world. You have destroyed the mental image Farroutef was using to corrupt you, eliminating much of the influence he was able to wield.]

[You have lessened a threat to this world. The Apocalypse weakens.]
[Apocalypse Points: 7/10]

Though he had managed to reduce the total number of Apocalypse Points he had, John wasn't sure it was a good thing. He hadn't forgotten that for every two Apocalypse Points he reduced, the Final Day would creep closer. In fact, he was starting to wonder if keeping the world in one piece was actually the right goal. It seemed that, no matter what he did, the end of everything crept closer. The world was currently in the midst of the apocalypse, and though he had managed to stave off the more immediate threats, it was starting to get overwhelming.

Heh, it looks like I don't need Farroutef's influence to be pessimistic.

Shaking himself free of the negative thoughts, John focused on the mental image he had completed. He could have tried to activate it when he was in Besari, the forgotten land of beasts, but it wasn't until Ellie had arrived and kissed him that all the pieces had fallen into place, giving him

the confidence he needed to face both the mental image he had created and the dragon who slumbered in his mana pool.

Arriving at the top of the tower, John crossed the small bridges to stand in front of the large mana stone. This crystal had once taken much of his energy to power up, and even now, he could have used the pure mana he had gathered from the tower spirit in Besari to recharge it. However, that would have prevented him from achieving his real goal. Instead, John sat down cross-legged and placed his hand on the mana crystal, gathering his mana in his other hand and focusing it in his finger. What he was about to do was dangerous. So dangerous he hadn't dared tell Ellie for fear that she would have stopped him.

But even as he trusted her to keep the valley safe while he dealt with Farroutef once and for all, he also trusted himself. Trusted that, even if things didn't turn out exactly as he was hoping, he would be okay. Clearing his mind, he brought all of his attention to bear on the mental image he had used to defeat Farroutef the first time and then jabbed himself in the chest, right above his heart, unleashing the mana he had stored up.

Tearing through his body, the mana slammed into the seal he had layered there, causing it to crack open. Instantly, a few things happened all at once. Like a flood, the mana trapped in the seal and in his mana pool poured out with unstoppable force. A fraction of it was diverted from his body, expressed into the mana reserve crystal he was touching. Lighting up with unbelievable radiance, the crystal sent mana surging through the tower, filling up every part of the tower with brilliance as all of the mana lamps sprang to light.

So intense was the energy pouring into the crystal that it began to overflow, running through Rebya like a scorching wave. Explosive growth sent her roots deeper and further in an instant, and all of her flowers bloomed, causing a thousand copies of Rebya to appear with a start. Even that wasn't enough, however, and more and more flowers started to appear on the vines that ran throughout the tower. In places all over the valley strange-looking plants began to grow at an unbelievable rate, spreading out until there were a dozen small forests scattered around the valley floor. Rushing out of the house, Ellie turned to look in the direction of the tower, her eyes taking on an ethereal look as a bolt of lightning appeared on her forehead, opening like a vertical eye.

“Lady Ellie? Is something going on?” Thomas asked, staring at her in concern.

“Yes. John is powering the Shadow Tower’s mana crystal. He broke his seal.”

“Will he be okay?”

Smiling wryly, Ellie shrugged.

“Honestly? I don’t know. I can see a lot, but not that. If he isn’t okay we’re all dead, but I have faith. Come on, we need to leave to tell everyone about the beast invasion. I’ll be dropping you off in Kingsmouth and then heading to Soaring Cloud Tower. But first, let’s stop by to talk to Eva.”

Nodding, Thomas got ready to go as Ellie summoned Sigvald. Her familiar was exhausted from using all his mana to transport them through the portal stone to Besari, but he still grew until he was two dozen feet across, bending down to let Thomas and Ellie climb onto his back. Right before he took off, Ellie glanced in the direction of the tower once again, saying a short prayer under her breath. What John was about to face was something only he could handle, and while it did her no good to worry about it, she couldn’t help it.

Back in the Shadow Tower, John’s body was undergoing a metamorphosis as the pure mana filled him, soaking into his body in a way it never had before. His body began to melt as the mana fried his skin and boiled his blood, but he didn’t even twitch. There was so much mana that any movement would have destroyed everything around him, including the crystal he had just powered up. But as long as he didn’t move, he was able to contain it.

At the same time, in his mind, John was facing down the most frightening sight he had ever seen. While he had seen Farroutef before, it had only been a mental image, the idea of the dragon rather than the dragon itself. Now, Farroutef was present in all his terrible glory. Farroutef the Deceiver lived up to his name, and John found himself trying to avoid instinctively lowering his guard. The dragon was beyond beautiful and had a sleek power that made envy naturally spring up in John’s heart.

Quickly quenching it, John tried to stabilize himself, keeping his heart as even as he possibly could. Farroutef was looking at him with eyes full of cunning and could clearly see the struggle John was going through. Chuckling, the dragon suddenly transformed, morphing into a man that looked exactly like John, except with a pair of dragon horns.

“I find mortals so humorous,” Farroutef said with a smile. “Do you really think it wise to fight yourself? Can you even win?”

“We are not the same,” John said, shaking his head. “You are an evil dragon and I am not.”

“Evil? I’m hurt, John. After I helped you so much too. Betrayal is the worst, you know? In fact, I’ve never betrayed you, but you’ve already set yourself as my enemy. That’s a tragedy, you know. A positive tragedy. We were doing so well in this world. But now you want to throw that away for what? Love? Listen, John, take it from one who has seen the rise and fall of a hundred worlds. Love does not last. It eventually withers and dies, drying up like a lake in the desert, leaving nothing but the bones of those who once believed in it.

“Do you know what doesn’t dry up or wither, John? Power. And that is exactly what I offer you. Power. Power to destroy your enemies. Power to take the world. Do you want to possess something? Power will get it for you. What about that cute farm girl you’re sweet on? You can possess her, you know? She can be absolutely, unquestionably, completely yours, in body and mind. But not through love. Through power.”

As much as he wanted to recoil from the dragon’s words, John couldn’t deny their allure. He believed, with all his heart, that what he felt in his heart for Ellie was love, but there was no doubt that every love had a hint of darkness in it. Shaking his head, John pushed away the thoughts that the dragon’s words conjured and stepped forward, refusing to allow Farroutef to take the advantage.

“Power? I have enough of that. I’ve had more power than I’ve needed for years, and ultimately, it hasn’t done anything good for me. Besides, we both know full well that you don’t offer anything besides a poisoned chalice. I’d have to be an idiot to take you up on anything you offer.”

“Even if I could get you back to your world? You could see your brother. I’ll even let you in on a little secret.”

Feeling his breath catch in his chest, John almost swore. It was clear that Farroutef was exceptionally good at poking at his opponent’s weak points, and with a simple sentence, he had thrown John’s heart into turmoil once again. Of all the regrets in John’s heart, the fact that he had left his brother behind was one of the largest. It had been years since he had revisited that particular wound, but the reality of inter-world travel had caused it to resurface. Though he had been trying to avoid dealing with it,

Farroutef had been riding around in his mind and clearly had a good grasp of his heart. Sensing an opportunity, Farroutef smiled and stepped closer, a shadow falling over his face.

"With my power, it's really not hard. Not only that, but I can access those deep, dark memories you have sealed away. Memories that include your previous world. Once I pull them up, it wouldn't be hard to discover where your original world is located, and from there, open up a portal to send you home. You could even bring your little girlfriend. Wouldn't it be so nice to introduce her to your brother? What a touching family reunion that would be."

Unable to stop himself, John blurted out a question that had risen to his mind.

"How could you access those memories? If I can't remember them, how could you?"

"Never underestimate magic, John. Mana is truly the most miraculous substance in the universe. It can do *anything*."

Letting out a short, sharp breath, John nodded.

"Right. It can. It can transport me to this world, so it can probably get me back. But I don't need you for that. There is no magic I can't learn, no spell I can't cast. What do I need you for? Enough of this, why don't we deal with what we gathered here to deal with? No more of this messing around. You want my body, I want you out. That's it."

Stepping back, the shadow drained away from Farroutef's face, and once again John was facing a horned version of himself. The dragon chuckled and waved his hand, causing the landscape to change from the empty gray space it had been to a pleasant garden. A tall tree stood near them, and under it was a table and chairs. Waving for John to follow him, Farroutef strolled over to the table, reaching up to pluck a piece of fruit from the tree along the way. Pulling out one of the chairs, he was about to sit down when he saw that John was still standing where he had been originally.

"Come on, John. Come sit and talk to me. I don't bite."

As if to punctuate his statement, he lifted the fruit to his lips and bit into the fruit without his gaze ever leaving John's, crimson juice squirting from the punctured skin. With stained teeth he grinned at John and continued to bite down on the piece of fruit, each of his bites managing to be more gruesome than the last. It only took John a moment to recognize the mental

manipulation the dragon was employing, and instead of allowing his fear to grow, John walked to the table and took his own seat, staring at Farroutef across the table.

"See, isn't this nice? Want something to drink?"

"Is it poisoned?"

"Really, John? This is your mind. How would I poison something in your mind? Why are you so suspicious? Do you really think I'm your mortal enemy? Let me enlighten you to something, kid. You are alive because I allowed you to use my flame. You are alive because I wanted you to live. I could have incinerated you with a breath when you first saw me. Hah! I wouldn't have even needed that. You were so weak that a single thought would have ended your existence. And then, when you faced off against all those Mages? For years. Years! I protected you when you were too dumb to know how to use my magic.

"My brethren would skin me alive for ever allowing a human to touch dragon magic. If they found out that you could touch dragon flame without being burned they'd kill you, and everyone who has ever heard of you. They'd go so far as to hunt down your brother back in your original world to wipe out the memory of you from the universe. You don't understand what I gave you access to. You don't understand how much danger you're in. And then you sit here and accuse me of such petty things as poison? I don't need to poison you. I have *never* needed to poison you, John. If I wanted, the very flame that you carry would consume your flesh, transforming you into nothing but ash. Want to give it a try? I could take a finger just to prove it to you."

Leaning back, John crossed one leg over the other, his arm resting on the table as he listened to Farroutef's rant. When the dragon seemed to be winding down, John cocked his head to the side and smiled.

"Tell me, Farroutef, where did you get the moniker 'the Deceiver' from? Was that given to you by people, or by your kin?"

CHAPTER 43

The wind brushing against Ellie's face was cold, but she barely noticed it, her mind entirely occupied with everything that had to be done before the beast army arrived. She was riding on Sigvald's back, heading for Soaring Cloud Tower to warn the Mages there of the impending attack after dropping Thomas off in Kingsmouth, and already she could see the imposing tower in the mountains ahead. The giant rooster's transformation gave him incredible flight speed as well, cutting the trip down from the couple days it had taken Ellie and John to less than a day, so Ellie was hopeful she would be able to make it back to the valley in time to assist with the defense.

As Ellie got closer to the tower, she brought her thoughts back to the present and focused on the task at hand. All day her thoughts had been wandering to both John and her younger brother, Ben, but right now she had other things to worry about. Looking ahead, Ellie's eyes narrowed and she tapped Sigvald's back, causing the lightning-covered bird to stop in the air, hovering just outside of an invisible barrier that extended across their path. Not feeling like wasting any time, Ellie pointed her finger at the barrier and unleashed a bolt of lightning, causing the air to warp.

The sound of the lightning striking the barrier rang out over the tower, throwing everything into turmoil as Mages boiled out of the tower. Many of them hurried to cast their levitation spells, but to Ellie they appeared clumsy and slow. Since she had improved her power, she was starting to realize just how different each of the levels was, and the magic that had seemed so strong before was now little more than child's play. From the top of the tower, a blazing figure shot toward Ellie, flames rippling out in every direction.

Recognizing Folis the Forge Lord, Ellie patted Sigvald, warning her familiar not to do anything foolish as she waited for the sage to arrive. Slowing down, Folis stared at Ellie with hard eyes, almost as if he did not remember who she was. Still, he wasn't a fool and could see that the giant lightning bird she rode on was powerful in its own right, making him wary of her.

"Who are you and what do you want?"

“I didn’t mean to startle all of you,” Ellie said, “but this was the most expedient way to get your attention. I’ve come on behalf of the Eternal Flame to warn you. Gorraleck the Destroyer and her beast army are coming. They will likely arrive in the next day or so. We are already warning as many people in Lepiera as we can, but the wider you can spread the word, the better.”

“What are you talking about?” Folis asked, his voice suspicious. “We have seen no sign of the beast army coming. Our scouts scour the edge of the continent daily and we have had no reports.”

“That’s because they’re not coming over the ocean,” Ellie said, shrugging. “We discovered and destroyed a large portal stone, and it’s likely there are more scattered around the land. We heard from Gorraleck herself that she is going to be launching her attack, so I would recommend you prepare your defenses. I have delivered my warning and I hope you heed it.”

Giving the Forge Lord a nod, Ellie was about to command Sigvald to turn away when she felt him stiffen and saw that the feathers on his back were bristling. A faint figure suddenly appeared in the air nearby, grinning at her and Kolis. Corrian’s monkey tail lashed at the air as he stared at Ellie, the murderous look in his eyes at complete odds with the relaxed smile on his face.

“You’ve come all the way here, it would be a complete shame for you to leave already,” Corrian said. “Why don’t you stay and play with me?”

Frowning, Ellie blinked her eyes, causing them to surge with ethereal light. Immediately, Corrian’s figure grew translucent, giving her a clue as to what was going on. From the angry expression on Folis’ face it was clear the Forge Lord wasn’t as quick on the uptake, and he pointed his staff at the sage beast.

“How did you escape from your prison, beast?”

“I thought that Gorra said she would give us a day? It has only been twenty-three hours by my calculations,” Ellie said, ignoring Kolis’ question.

“Twenty-three hours and forty minutes,” Corrian said, his grin managing to grow wider. “Believe me, I’m keeping track. We have been waiting for this moment for a long time. In just under twenty minutes, we will bathe this land in blood and you humans will be dealt with once and for all.”

“If we have twenty minutes, what are you doing here?” Ellie asked.

“Oh, I’ve been here the whole time,” Corrian replied, his body splitting into a dozen copies that quickly encircled both Folis and Ellie. “But don’t be in such a hurry to leave. The party hasn’t started yet, and it would be a shame to miss the opening. Ah, which reminds me. We should get the pre-party festivities started.”

As soon as he had finished speaking there was an explosion in the mountains and a powerful roar echoed out as a hydra shot up into the air, accompanied by a strange eagle-alligator hybrid beast. Recognizing both legendary beasts as the ones she had seen in Soaring Cloud Tower’s beast pens, a premonition filled Ellie and she glanced at Corrian, who was chuckling happily.

“You might want to go help your students with those two beasts,” Corrian said, speaking to Folis the Forge Lord. “They’re pretty upset after being trapped by you for so long and are out for blood.”

Letting out a shout, Folis took off, flames filling the sky around him as if he was afraid that Corrian would try to stop him. Instead, the monkey beast moved his bodies aside, giving Folis a clear path. Once the sage was gone, he turned his attention to Ellie and Sigvald and floated closer, tightening the net around them.

“I was pretty impressed with your strength in the palace, and you’re pretty cute too, at least for a human. Want to come and be my woman? I promise that I’ll keep the others from cutting your skin off and drinking your blood.”

Disdain flashed across Ellie’s face as she heard Corrian’s offer, and she could feel fury building in Sigvald under her. Shaking her head, Ellie stood up on Sigvald’s back and looked at one of Corrian’s figures, completely ignoring the others.

“Why would I want to be with a weakling like you? My man could squash you with his pinky finger, no matter how many illusions you create.”

Surprised, Corrian’s other bodies faded away, leaving only the single body Ellie was looking at. His smile faltered slightly as he matched gazes with Ellie, as if he could sense something strange about her that made him uneasy. The unease intensified when she took a step off of Sigvald’s back, standing in midair unsupported. Only sage beasts could support themselves in the air without spells, and seeing Ellie casually standing there caused Corrian’s smile to crack completely.

“Sigvald, go deal with that flying beast.”

Crowing with excitement, Sigvald suddenly took off, smashing through the barrier that separated them from Soaring Cloud Tower, causing it to crack apart as lightning raced along it. Near the tower, the two legendary beasts were causing havoc, their powerful bodies smashing through buildings as they attacked the frantic Mages with tooth and claw. Folis the Forge Lord and Lady Orateth of the Dark Path were both doing their best to fight the hydra, but their magic was poorly suited to fighting directly with powerful beasts, and even when they managed to kill one of the monster’s heads, its skin split open and two more heads rapidly grew from the wound.

Corrian started to move, intending to go after Sigvald, but before he could a powerful bolt of lightning slammed down on him, forcing him to dodge away. Despite his dodge, he wasn’t faster than lightning, and his skin grew red as the edge of the lightning bolt brushed past him. Realizing he was going to have to deal with Ellie, he turned toward her and split up into a dozen figures once again. Claws were brandished as he darted toward her from both sides, his figures weaving in and out of each other to try to confuse her senses.

Forcing herself to remain calm, Ellie reached up and tapped her forehead, causing a lightning bolt to appear. With a cracking sound, the lightning bolt split open, creating an eye formed of lighting that laid the truth of the world bare to Ellie, allowing her to accurately pick out which of the figures was actually Corrian and which were just illusions. Wings expanded from her shoulder blades, sweeping left and right to block the illusions that charged her while a thick bolt of lightning formed between her fingers.

Realizing that Ellie’s three eyes were locked on him, Corrian let out a shriek of fear and anger and darted away, trying to lose her, but she simply pointed her finger at him and the lightning bolt slammed into his hip, spinning him around and sending him tumbling toward the ground. The other figures vanished as Ellie slapped at them with her wings, and then she tucked her wings close and dove after Corrian, who was fleeing as rapidly as he could.

Near the tower, the eagle beast had just snapped his alligator jaws on a few of the second-order Mages, tearing their bodies apart and drenching those around them in a gruesome shower of blood when Sigvald arrived with a sharp cry. Lightning-wreathed talons tore at the eagle, ripping apart

its feathers and cutting deep into its wing. Caught off guard, the eagle beast was badly wounded, but it still tried to counter-attack, flipping around and using its powerful wings to knock Sigvald aside.

In a tumble of feathers the two birds careened sideways, slamming into the tower with such force that they cracked the gleaming stone. Barely managing to get away, the eagle beast pushed off from the wall, throwing itself into the air, its wings beating as quickly as possible to help it get away from Sigvald's claws and beak. Dozens of Mages who were trying to fly over were knocked aside as the wind surged and a few of them even found their spells shattering, causing them to fall screaming toward the ground.

Kicking off the tower, Sigvald gave chase, letting out a loud crowing that shook the air. Folis and Lady Orateth were still fighting against the hydra, and while it looked like they were winning, the draconic beast kept regenerating new heads to attack them and the Mages around them. Though it looked like the human side was slowly gaining the upper hand, the fact that three beasts had thrown them into such turmoil sent a spike of worry through Ellie's heart. If a sage level beast and two legendary beasts could prove so dangerous, then what would happen when nine more sage level beasts and thousands of legendary beasts arrived? To say nothing of Gorraleck, who was in the stage above sage, or the hundred thousand beasts under the legendary stage.

Up until this point, Ellie had been confident they would be able to defeat the beast wave without that many issues, but now that she was getting a chance to fight them, she was realizing just how tough of a fight they were in for. She had landed at least six lightning attacks on Corrian, but he was still hopping around like he was fine, a testament to the unnatural vitality all beasts possessed.

Slowing her pursuit, Ellie sent another bolt at Corrian, forcing him to continue dodging, all the while scanning the ground around Soaring Cloud Tower. Corrian had agreed that the attack wouldn't come for another twenty minutes, yet he was already here, which meant it was likely he was guarding a portal stone. The thought had popped into Ellie's head as soon as she had seen him appear, and now she wanted to try to find it and destroy it. A few minutes had already passed, and as Ellie continued to fight a few more quickly passed.

Finally, after exchanging a dozen blows with Corrian, Ellie spotted the portal stone. It was hidden under the giant tree that dominated Corrian's

cage, and even as Ellie watched, the vitality of the tree was being sucked up to power the portal that would unleash a wave of beasts to destroy this continent. Shifting her trajectory, Ellie shot toward the portal stone, but Corrian had clearly guessed what she was trying to do and he jumped in front of her, his claws slashing at her neck.

Forced to block with one of her wings, Ellie was driven back by the blow, flipping over in the air to stabilize herself. Not about to let his advantage go, Corrian followed up his successful attack with a dozen more, each unleashed at lightning speed. The fierce fight between Ellie and Corrian grew in intensity as they dashed this way and that, leaving streaks in the air as they tried to land hits on each other. At the same time, Sigvald had just triumphed over the eagle beast, severing both of the beast's wings and tearing out the monster's neck.

Blood splattered as Sigvald let out a victory cry, throwing the piece of the beast to the ground where they smashed apart one of the buildings. Looking around, he saw that Ellie was struggling with Corrian, but before he could fly over, Ellie gave him another command.

"Sigvald! There is a portal stone under the tree. Smash it!"

Turning to look at the hole in the mountain where the hydra and eagle beast had escaped, Sigvald flapped his wings and left a streak of lightning behind as he shot toward the tree. There was only a minute or so left before the invasion would begin, and Ellie was starting to grow truly worried. Seeing that the rooster was heading for the tree, Corrian tried to go after him, but thick lightning chains wove a net in the air, trapping him in place. Diving into the hollowed-out mountain, Sigvald was nearly thrown right back out by a thick branch from the tree with the golden fruits, but he managed to avoid the attack by shrinking down.

Angered by the surprise attack, Sigvald shrank down even further, returning to the size of a normal rooster. As he shrank, his lightning concentrated even further, until he looked like a glowing ball of pure energy. Falling like a meteor, Sigvald tore through the tree's waving branches and slammed into the wide portal stone that sat under the tree, causing a massive crack to run through it. Letting out a shriek, the tree thrashed about as the energy that had been building up in the portal stone went haywire, transforming into a fierce explosion. The proud look on Sigvald's face turned into pure terror as he felt the portal stone starting to

detonate and he took off as fast as he could, streaking across the sky to hide behind Ellie.

The boom shook Soaring Cloud Tower as the entire mountain the beast pens were in collapsed around the destroyed portal stone. Corrian's face was savage as he stared at the destruction, and after shooting a venomous glance at Ellie and Sigvald, he vanished, fleeing the area as fast as he could. A moment later, a shudder ran down Ellie's back as a premonition of intense danger arrived. Letting out a worried breath, she canceled her lightning wings and floated down to where Kolis and Lady Orateth were standing over the corpse of the badly mangled hydra. Both sages looked at her with pale faces as Ellie spoke in a grim voice that echoed among the ruins.

"The beasts have begun their invasion. We must gather our strength or face annihilation."

CHAPTER 44

Sitting across from himself, John found himself more relaxed than he thought he would be. He was facing off against a supremely evil and unbelievably powerful creature, but his heart was almost completely calm. Occasionally Farroutef would say something that would stir up John's emotions, but each time John was able to get them back under control quickly. He was realizing that the fight had started from the moment he had entered his mental space to face the dragon, but rather than it being a battle of blows and wounds, it was a struggle of tiny advantages.

Farroutef sought tiny advantages, constantly pushing and pushing to gain small positions from which he could push John back even further. The dragon was attempting to build momentum by dominating the conversation, and he was unbelievably adept at it. He could twist anything to suit him, even leveraging John's silence to give him a more dominant position. John had never fought a battle like this, and it was starting to hurt his head. Weaving a labyrinth of words, Farroutef was trying to trap John's mind in confusion, all to make his work easier when he finally attacked John directly.

The problem was that John wasn't actually sure how he was going to destroy the dragon. If he had known, he would have dispensed with the conversation entirely and attacked immediately. Instead, he was stuck sitting here, trying to figure out how to deal with the dragon. Worse still was that Farroutef seemed to know it. Leaning back, the dragon grinned at John.

"What do you think, John? Want to know that secret I mentioned before?"

Blinking at Farroutef, John tried to remember what the dragon had been talking about.

"Secret? Wait, you mean the one about my homeworld? No, not interested. I don't need your secrets. Besides, my brother has probably moved on by now. There is no need to show up after a dozen years to ruin his life. Plus, mana doesn't work in that world, so the chances of me being able to come back are too slim. No, I think I'll stay right where I am. Thanks though."

“Oh, that’s where you’re wrong,” Farroutef said, his eyes lighting up. “Listen—”

“No, you listen,” John said, leaning forward. “I don’t want anything from you. You forced your way in here and now you’re trying to force your gifts on me. That’s not how this works. You chose my body, that means you play by my rules. And my first rule is that you shut your mouth.”

“You’re such a frightened young man, John. I would have thought that after the horrors you’ve caused, you would have built up a thicker skin. Do you really think that I’d calculate every single favor I’ve ever done for you and demand repayment? I am not so petty, John. If I was, you’d owe me more than you could pay back in a dozen lifetimes. Just think about all the times that I’ve saved your life by letting you use my dragon flame. Each of my favors is worth an entire life, and believe me when I say I’ve done a lot of them for you.”

“I thought you weren’t keeping track,” John replied, smirking.

“I’m not,” Farroutef replied, rolling his eyes. “But I have an excellent memory, and I’d be happy to start putting together a list if you’d like.”

“No need. You’ve done me no favors, dragon.”

“What do you call saving your life then?”

“Self-preservation,” John said, his tone cold. “You *used* me to keep yourself alive and avoid being eaten by that stone wyrm. I should have just let you die in that cave. I wonder what would have happened to you then? No, you haven’t done anything for me that wasn’t actually done for yourself. None of those things count as favors. In fact, I don’t owe you anything. You owe me.”

Sneering, Farroutef shook his head.

“Your delusions are starting to get the better of you, John. How do you figure that I owe you?”

“Call it unpaid rent,” John said, crossing his arms. “You prevented my mana pool from growing properly by absorbing the mana in it. You caused me endless suffering by forcing me to learn your mana breathing technique. You’ve been messing around with my mind to try to turn me into a monster that you can control. Instead of helping me, it’s clear that your objective has always been to supplant me. I’d say that you owe me a debt, Farroutef.”

“Oh? Is that how you calculate it? I’m sad to hear that you think the value of your life is so small. Tell me, John, if I owe you, what do you

want? I've already offered you power, but you've rejected me over and over."

Taking a deep breath, John pushed his chair back and stood up, waving his hand. The garden where they were sitting was wiped away, replaced by a black battlefield, its sky dyed the crimson of blood. This was a familiar place to John, but the skeletons and spirits that had once reached toward him were gone forever, destroyed in his fight with Kythov the Eyeless. Now, he faced down Farroutef the Deceiver in this same battlefield.

"I want to end this. You will never get control of my body, even if I have to destroy it myself. You should have died ten years ago, Farroutef. It's time for your karma to catch up with you."

Looking around, Farroutef chuckled and stood up, the chair he had been sitting on transforming into ash that drifted away on the bloody wind. Cracking his neck lightly, he looked at John and shook his head.

"You have no idea what you're doing, John. I've been trying to be as kind as I can, but you simply insist on walking this path to your destruction. Fine. I'll let you taste firsthand what sort of path you are embarking on. Maybe you'll understand why fighting me is pointless if you suffer a bit. Though, I must admit, I hope you're a slow learner."

As he finished speaking, Farroutef's shadow grew and stretched, forming two bat-like wings and a tail. Claws grew from his fingers and his jaw lengthened, transforming into a form that looked suspiciously like the earliest version of John's adaptation image. Across from him, John concentrated and a silver sword appeared in his right hand and his shield bracer appeared on his left wrist. Without waiting for Farroutef's transformation to complete, John launched himself at the dragon, his sword stabbing toward Farroutef's heart.

Spinning away, the dragon blocked John's stab and returned a slash with his tail, forcing John to hop over it. At the same time, John twisted his torso, using his shield to block a slash while swinging his sword around to hack down on Farroutef's shoulder. The blade glanced off of the scales that were starting to appear on Farroutef's body, but the weight of the strike caused the dragon to stagger.

Fury bloomed in Farroutef's eyes and he lunged forward, his draconic jaws heading directly for John's jugular, but a swipe of John's shield knocked the bite away. Back and forth they danced, their feet stirring up the dark dust of the crimson battlefield until it formed a swirling storm. Using

the cover of the dust cloud, John dodged to the side, ducking under Farroutef's arm and using his shield to strike at the dragon's side, scoring a hit on his ribs that sent him flying. Planting his foot, John kicked off and followed closely behind Farroutef, putting all his strength into a stab that pierced between two rib bones, allowing his silver blade to slide into Farroutef's flesh, cutting the dragon open.

A roar of rage so loud it had physical presence sent John tumbling backward as Farroutef abandoned his humanoid form, transforming into a massive dragon that lurched into the air. Large draconic eyes locked onto John as he rolled to a stop and bound to his feet, trying to regain his balance. Seeing Farroutef's mouth opening, John quickly lifted his shield and ducked down, getting himself under the cover of his magical shield as a pillar of blue flame shot out of Farroutef's mouth toward him.

The flames were impossibly hot and burned at John's skin even though they didn't touch him, but rather than stay passive, John suddenly stood up and hacked down with his sword, causing the flames that had passed him by to turn and fly back toward the dragon, like two arrows. Startled, Farroutef closed his mouth, choking off the flame attack he had unleashed. Not one to wait around, John followed up that attack by charging forward, his sword absorbing the remaining flame in the air as he struck at Farroutef's chest.

Sparks flew as his sword tore into the tough scales on Farroutef's chest, but rather than contributing to the damage, the flames that covered John's blade seemed to be healing Farroutef, causing the dragon to let out a sinister laugh. Jumping back, John looked at the wound he had caused which was burning with blue flames as it closed up, vanishing as if it had never existed. Irritated, John flicked his wrist, extinguishing the blue flame that surrounded it as he retreated.

"Come on, John, I would have thought better of you. Do you really think I would be injured by my own flame? How foolish. Now, let us start this battle in earnest."

With a mighty flap of his wings, Farroutef shot forward, his body moving toward John like a freight train. Caught off guard by the dragon's speed, John tried to dodge but quickly realized he wasn't going to get away in time. All he could do was lift his shield and sword to try and absorb as much of the impact as possible. Feeling the force of Farroutef's head slamming into him, John was able to avoid the dragon's bite by warding

against his teeth with a shove of his sword, but the blow still sent him flying.

Spinning over and over, John hit the ground and turned over, managing to get his shield under him as he cut a furrow in the dark earth. Spitting dirt from his mouth, John threw himself to the side as Farroutef's tail slammed down where he had landed, cracking the ground. Noticing that the dragon's tail had hit so hard it had actually sunk into the ground, John threw out a spell.

"Earth Prison!"

The dark earth piled up around Farroutef's tail, covering it and hardening into stone, temporarily locking the dragon in place. At the same time, John pointed toward the crimson clouds with his sword, calling down a lightning bolt.

"Greater Lightning Strike!"

The lightning slammed down onto his sword, and at just the right moment John slashed forward, directing the lightning into Farroutef's back. The bolt was as thick as a massive python and it jumped toward Farroutef, but before it could hit the dragon twisted his head around and unleashed a torrent of sapphire flames. The two energies collided, causing a shockwave that crushed the stone trapping Farroutef's tail and threw John back.

"Wind Storm! Volcanic Eruption!"

Powerful spells formed around John even as he was sent flying, transforming the battlefield into a terrifying hellscape of erupting flames and tearing winds. The combination of the two spells drastically increased the danger of each, but Farroutef didn't seem to care as blue flames spread over his scales. Barreling through the pillars of flame that tore through the ground, Farroutef used his own flame to block the damage Volcanic Eruption should have done. Even the razor-sharp wind from the Wind Storm spell was unable to get through the blue dragon fire, allowing Farroutef to close in on John.

Doing his best to block the dragon's biting jaws and slashing claws, John twisted, dodged, and stabbed, his silver sword cutting at the dragon even as he continued to cast every spell he knew. Elemental spells continually transformed the battlefield, each one adding a new layer of complexity until the entire space was filled with a chaotic swirl for burning flames, cutting winds, tearing water, and crushing earth.

Occasionally, John managed to land a real hit on Farroutef, but as the fight dragged on those blows got less and less frequent. Farroutef was both stronger and faster than John, and despite not using magic, his flames could block almost anything John could throw at him. Over and over again the two of them clashed, until John had completely lost track of the number of times he had swung his sword. To make matters worse, John found himself instinctively wanting to use the blue dragon flame himself, despite knowing that doing so would just increase Farroutef's strength.

Blocking a particularly nasty swipe with his sword, John tried to close in but Farroutef's tail slammed into his shield, driving him back across the battlefield. Feeling the ache of a bruised rib in his side, John staggered to his feet and saw that Farroutef was flying over slowly. The dragon had a sinister smile on his face as he stared down at John. A moment later, blue flames began to pour out of John's mana pool, tearing into his body.

Desperately, John tried to take control of them, but the flames refused to obey his commands, scorching his flesh and burning at his bones. A scream of pain rose in John's throat but he clenched his jaw, swallowing it. Letting out a mocking laugh, Farroutef landed on the ground in front of John and stared down at him.

"Strange, isn't it, how the flames you once controlled with such ease simply don't obey anymore. Do you know how many people you have burned with these flames, John? How many souls you've incinerated? Tell me, how would you like to feel the pain of each and every one of them? How would you like to know the suffering of all those you have harmed? I know you don't want to know any secrets, but I'm feeling generous, so I'm going to share one with you anyway.

"You and I? We are connected. At the core level. I don't live in your body as a second soul, I *am* your soul. And I've been storing up all the pain you've ever caused with my flames for just such a day as this. You don't control these flames, John. I do. And if you grovel at my feet and beg for salvation, I *might* let you off. But probably not. Get ready to suffer, John."

The burning in John's chest was slowly spreading, bringing with it the excruciating pain of being burned alive. Still, John lifted his sword and shield, refusing to give up his fight. While he hadn't expected to be completely defenseless against Farroutef's flames, John had expected to be at a disadvantage in this fight, and far from giving up, he found his will to fight was only growing stronger with every moment that passed. Lifting his

sword, he glared at Farroutef and threw himself forward, his body streaming blue flames.

CHAPTER 45

Flying over the great plains, Ellie saw a massive cavalcade heading for the valley, made up of dozens of Moritoi tribes. The warriors rode their horses on the outer edge of the procession, while the women and children rode together in the middle, bringing with them their herds and carts that carried their tents and supplies. Flying along the route they were taking, Ellie saw another group further ahead, this one made up of Lepierian citizens. Seeing a figure waving at her from atop a cart, she had Sigvald swoop down and, when they were close, she hopped off his back and landed next to Thomas.

"How did it go?" Ellie asked, looking back over the long line of carts and the people who were trudging along beside them.

"Good, though some people elected to stay. Those who follow the Eternal Flame are headed for the valley, and the Ecclesia is spreading the word to other towns and cities. Honestly, I'm not sure we'll be able to fit everyone into the valley."

"We can use the mountains, and the tunnels underneath too," Ellie said, biting her lip. "I'll go ahead and see what we can set up. Hopefully, you can make it before the beasts come. We destroyed the portal stone that was at Soaring Cloud Tower, but there are at least two more out there. I'm just praying that we bought ourselves more time. If the other portal stones are closer, we'll be in trouble."

"There was a portal stone at Soaring Cloud Tower?" Thomas asked, his brow furrowed. "Did the Mages know about it?"

"No, they were completely oblivious. It was being hidden by a sage level beast who had been pretending to be captured. But the fight that broke out alerted them to the danger. Two of the sages are going to be coming to the valley to help defend, along with most of their Mages. Lady Orateth and Folis the Forge Lord will be a good addition to our forces, though they're honestly pretty weak for sages. Ah well, we can only take what we can get I guess."

"And John?"

Looking at Thomas' hopeful expression, Ellie could only sigh and shake her head.

"No word yet. But don't worry. I have a good feeling about this. He's going to pop up at the last second and carry the day for us."

“He usually does,” Thomas said, a relieved smile on his face.

“I’ll see you at the valley,” Ellie said, summoning her wings and shooting up into the air to rejoin Sigvald.

By the time Ellie landed at the farm, she had passed over a dozen other groups of people all heading for the safety of the valley. The Ecclesia had already been alerted that there would be refugees coming to seek shelter, and Eva had begun organizing the camps they would be put in. Rebya was the one who was in charge of the defensive line being established in the mountain range around the valley, so Ellie made her way through the cheese cellar to the Shadow Tower. Going out to the central shaft, Ellie flew up to the top of the tower, where Rebya was frantically siphoning mana off of John.

His body was perfectly still on the surface, but underneath it was being remade as the pure mana from the upper world was channeled into the adaptation he had locked in his mind. At the same time, Ellie could feel the faint fluctuations coming from John’s mana pool, as if the mana inside of it was being thrown this way and that by some sort of force. Noticing her arrival, Rebya split off one of her flowers to greet Ellie.

“Welcome back. How did it go? Were the sages willing to come back?”

“Two of them. I’m not sure where Joro is, or what he’s doing. We were able to slow the beasts down, however, and I think we might have bought ourselves a few more days.”

“Good,” Rebya said, her expression serious. “The amount of mana coming off of John is almost overwhelming, and I’m using it as best as I can, but I’m burning through vines almost as fast as I’m able to create them.”

As if to illustrate what she was talking about, one of the thick vines that wrapped around the crystal began to crack and splinter, unable to bear the flow of pure mana it was absorbing. Another vine snaked over the bridge, quickly replacing it as the dried vine fell away, charred black.

“But with a few more days, I think we should be okay.”

“What about John? How is he doing?” Ellie asked, her eyes drifting to John’s silent figure.

“As well as can be expected. If he wakes up in control of his body, I have no idea how strong he’s going to be. But if it’s Farroutef, we’re in real trouble.”

“It will be John,” Ellie replied firmly. “I know it will.”

“I’m glad you’re so confident, Ellie. But just in case, I’m getting ready to deploy my guardians.”

The days in the valley were busy, and there wasn’t a single moment to spare, so apart from a few hours of sleep here and there, Ellie was constantly running, helping wherever she could. She was using an army of air spirits to watch for the beasts, and it was on the morning of the fifth day that they finally brought word that the enemy had arrived. Feeling the tug on her sleeve, Ellie sat up with a gasp. She had been catching a quick nap, but it only took her a moment to figure out what was going on. Hurrying out to the yard, she summoned Sigvald and the giant rooster took to the sky, letting out a crow that echoed across the valley.

Immediately the entire valley sprang into action as the women and children ran for their shelters and the men grabbed their weapons.

“Where are they coming from?” Thomas asked, buckling his sword around his waist as he strode out of the bunk house.

“Northwest. It seems like Rebya’s guess for the locations of the other portal stones was right,” Ellie replied.

“Mooo.”

“Yes, you can fight Gorra. In fact, I think I can sense her. Come on, let’s go.”

Leaving Thomas to head toward Gem, the mining town on the edge of the valley where the defense was being coordinated, Ellie and Feride joined Sigvald in the air. A few moments later, a group of Mages rose into the air as well, their expressions grim. Nodding to Kolis and Lady Orateth, Ellie led the way to the first line of defense, which was along the mountain range bordering the great plains. There they settled down to wait.

At first there was nothing and the group fell into an uneasy silence, but then they started to feel the earth trembling. Looking at the vibrating pebble that was dancing at her feet, Ellie let out a sigh and opened her third eye. Turning to scan the horizon, she felt her breath catch in her throat. She had heard the beasts described as a wave but had never understood exactly what that meant. Now, however, she realized exactly why it was called a beast wave.

Initially, it appeared as if the line that made up the horizon was starting to grow thicker, almost as if a shadow was being cast across the curve of the world. But then the beasts began to get closer, and like a wave they completely covered everything in their way. There were flying beasts and

beasts that bounded along on the ground, as well as massive beasts that walked in long strides. There were so many beasts that the ground vanished beneath them, made invisible by the sheer number.

According to Gorra's own words, there were ten thousand legendary beasts in her army, and that may have been true, but what was even more terrifying were the hundreds of thousands of weaker beasts that ran and stamped and scurried and slithered across the great plains as they headed for the valley. The wall of sound reached Ellie and the others next, drowning them in a terrifying symphony of screeches, grunts, barks, and roars.

Up above the beast army, four sage level beasts carried a huge palanquin through the air while two more raced ahead. Set up like a smaller version of Gorra's room, the palanquin was surrounded by sheer curtains that blew in the wind, providing occasional glimpses of the stunning woman who sat inside. Coming to a stop about a mile from the edge of the mountain, the two sage beasts advanced until they were only a few hundred feet away. The larger beast was Torik, and accompanying him was the female beast who had turned into a crocodile. Beating his fist on his chest to produce a heavy booming sound, Torik spoke in a voice that filled the mountain range and the valley beyond.

"I am Torik the Iron Fist! With me is Vares the Tearer. We come on behalf of her majesty, the king of all beasts, Gorraleck the Destroyer! Give yourselves up now and we will spare your lives! Resist your subjugation and lives shall be forfeit!"

Stepping forward, Ellie didn't give the ape beast the chance to continue as she cut him off.

"Go back to your master and tell her that we are not giving in, Torik. If you wish to enter this valley, you will pay in blood and flesh."

Hearing her bloodthirsty words, the two sages shared a quick glance, concern clear in their expressions. Neither was opposed to a peaceful resolution to this situation, and while they had been preparing for and guarding against this moment for their whole lives, now that they were actually facing it, they found their courage waning. Ellie clearly had no such concerns, and Torik had even fewer. Grinning, the ape beast revealed his large canines and clapped his hands together.

"Good! That is what I was hoping to hear. Listen well, woman. By decree of the beast king, all the lives of the humans in this valley are forfeit.

You have chosen—”

“Moooooo!”

Ferdie’s angry moo shook the air, interrupting what Torik was saying and causing Sigvald to let out a cackling sound, like he was laughing. Eyes narrowing dangerously, the ape sage let out a savage roar and leapt through the air toward Ferdie. Nudging Ellie as if to say good luck, Ferdie turned and dashed into the air to meet Torik.

Both beasts started to grow larger as they got closer, but when Torik stopped at fifteen feet tall, Ferdie kept growing. From fifteen feet tall to twenty feet tall, and then to twenty-five and finally to thirty feet tall, the bull got bigger and bigger and bigger. Thick scales grew around his shoulders and back, running all the way down to his serpentine tail. Each of his hooves made a crunching sound when it landed in the air, producing a sound like thunder as he charged toward the ape sage. Molten stone dripped from his horns as he lowered them, and jets of flame streamed from his nostrils and mouth.

Whatever excitement Torik had been feeling when he started his charge had vanished and the sage beast threw every ounce of his strength into his attack, not to hurt Ferdie, but so that he had a chance of surviving. Unleashing a punch, his fist slammed into Ferdie’s head, but the force of Ferdie’s charge threw him back and then Ferdie trampled straight over him, sending him smashing down into the gathered beasts below. Letting out a mighty bellow, Ferdie chased him down, intending to finish the job.

Before he could reach the dazed ape a figure flashed in between them, causing Ferdie’s eyes to light up. Letting out a happy snort, Ferdie wiggled his eyebrows at Gorra, causing her to growl in annoyance. In a flash, she transformed into her dragon fox form, growing even larger than Ferdie. At forty feet tall, she was able to look down at the bull, but he just snorted again and increased his size once again, growing to forty-five feet tall. Unhappy with that height, he bellowed angrily and sucked in a breath, nearly swallowing a flock of flying beasts who were too close.

With the breath he took his body grew bigger once again, slowly reaching fifty feet tall. A pleased chuff incarcerated a huge swath of beasts and sent countless more running for safety, while Ferdie’s tail wiggled rapidly, crushing its way through the beast army. Exasperated, Gorra let out a snarl and threw herself at Ferdie, who met her happily. Crawling out of the pit he had been blasted into, Torik barely avoided getting stomped right

back into the ground by one of Ferdie's feet and was forced to flee up into the air to avoid being crushed in the fierce fight that ensued.

With their king fighting, the beast army couldn't just stand around, so they charged forward, led by the six sage level beasts. Like a wave crashing against a beach, they slammed into the mountains, the force of their charge causing everything to shake. Instead of engaging, however, Ellie called for the Mages to retreat. Throwing the spells they had prepared into the endless swarm of beasts, the Mages turned and fled, falling back to the next position. Because they could fly, the Mages could hop from mountain peak to mountain peak, leaving the beasts behind to struggle through the valleys that lay between the mountains.

Using this strategy, they were hoping to buy the time they would need to deal damage to the enemy army, but as the Mages threw spell after spell at the attacking beasts, it felt like they were spitting on a house fire. Even the forbidden spells unleashed by the two sage Mages were unable to stop the tide of beasts rushing through the mountains.

Meanwhile, Ellie and Sigvald had risen into the air to fight against the sage beasts who were advancing. There was no way Ellie and her familiar could stop all of the sage beasts herself, but she didn't have another choice. The two so-called sages on her side could barely deal with a single legendary beast between them, and while their spells were devastating the weaker beasts, there was no chance they would survive against a sage beast. Taking a deep breath, Ellie was just getting ready for the fight of her life when there was a sudden cracking sound that caused the six sage beasts to freeze, their eyes going to the fluctuation in the air that appeared between them and Ellie.

With a screeching sound that sounded like the world itself screaming in pain, the air split open and a tiny mechanical bird flew out, circling the sages and Ellie in a flash. Stopping, it stared at Sigvald for a second and then opened its mouth impossibly wide, forming a portal. Out of it a scarred woman strode, her cloak blowing with an invisible wind, and behind her followed a quiet-looking young man with hair that stuck up and a pair of glasses. Looking around, Katrine saw Ellie and grinned.

"About time you got the location right, Cavvod. Hey, Ellie. I'm not too late, am I?"

CHAPTER 46

John had been fighting for days. It felt like years, and the dull ache that filled his body was a painful reminder that every moment he continued was draining his energy even further. The only saving grace was that Farroutef was slowing down just as much as he was. John could see the disbelief growing in the dragon's expression as they continued their fight, and it thrilled him. The biggest concern John had coming into this fight was that he wouldn't be able to go the distance with Farroutef, but so far his exceptional mana purity had allowed him to keep pace with the dragon.

He was helped, of course, by the fact that he had starved the dragon of any of the mana he gathered in the upper worlds by sealing it outside of his mana pool. Now that he was confronting Farroutef in his mana pool, the mana he had gathered was being channeled into his body, empowering him without giving the dragon even a drop. Despite that, John was still losing the fight. And badly. Farroutef's claws and teeth left violent gashes across every part of his body, and he had been forced to replace his sword and shield a dozen times already.

Yet John's face was covered in a smile, because he could feel that the end of the fight was nearing. Seeing his smile and fearing a plot, Farroutef withdrew, giving John a chance to gulp down some air. The dragon couldn't understand what was keeping John going and was starting to fear he had missed something.

"You're on your last legs, John. But remember, you brought this on yourself. You could have had the world at your fingertips, but instead, you forced yourself into this dead end. Now, all that will remain of you is a memory."

"You talk a lot," John said, his words punctuated by a bloody cough.

Wiping his lips with the back of his hand, John rolled his shoulders and lifted his shield, holding it in front of him. Taking a step forward, John began to speak, his voice quiet.

"You know, for a long time, I've wondered if there was any way for me to find peace. After all, I've proven time and again that I'm a monster. Sure, I've saved people, but the number of people that I've killed far outweighs those I've saved. If we were judged simply based on the number of lives we've extinguished, I'd end up in hell for sure. You had something to do

with that, of course, so maybe I could pass the buck to you. After all, without that blue dragon fire there isn't any way I could have done what I did.

"However, I can't blame you for my actions. Mine was still the finger that pulled the trigger, even if you provided the gun. And the truth is, even before you came into my life, I pulled the trigger a lot. Just in a smaller, less mass-murdery way. You might think that you were the one who corrupted me, Farroutef, but that isn't true. My darkness is my own, and it's been with me forever."

Backing up as John continued to advance, Farroutef crouched, his large eyes narrowing and his scales rising slightly. He didn't understand some of the words John was using, but the tone of John's voice was enough to let him know that something was off. Taking another step forward, John staggered slightly but managed to catch himself in time. Stopping, he swayed for a moment and then took another step closer, forcing Farroutef back once again.

"See, that's just part of being human. We come as a wild mix of good, bad, indifferent. Not like you dragons. You're evil through and through, and from everything I've learned about you, you aren't able to change. You couldn't be altruistic or kind or merciful, or anything, apart from selfish and evil. That's strange to me, but helpful to know, since it means that everything you do is aimed at undercutting me and promoting yourself. But me? I'm different. No matter how many evil things I've done, no matter how close I get to becoming you, I always have the choice.

"I have the choice to be different. The choice to make a change. The choice to reject my desires and live for other people. The choice to do the right thing and not kill someone even if they really, really deserve it. Or I can. I guess that's my point. You? You can't change. Which means that you can't grow. Which means that you will never be more than you are. But I can grow past that. I can become something more. Something much more."

Taking another step forward, John took in a ragged breath, but when he breathed out, his breath had evened out. The change shocked Farroutef and he nearly launched an attack, but something about John's expression kept him pinned in place. Lifting his hands, John spread his fingers, allowing the silver sword he had been using and his magical bracer to evaporate. Unarmed, he faced down Farroutef, but somehow his open hands felt like more of a threat to Farroutef than the weapons had.

“It’s interesting how life works. I may as well have been this world’s destroyer, as almost every problem the world is currently facing can be traced back to me. But it seems like the world wants to give me another chance. And I’m going to take it.”

Sneering, Farroutef lowered himself even further, his tail lashing back and forth as he got ready to pounce.

“You have nothing left, John. Your strength is exhausted! The flame that you have prized so highly has returned to its rightful owner! You have nothing without me, John! Nothing!”

A crooked smile worked its way across John’s lips and he shook his head.

“That’s not true. I have hope.”

From the center of John’s body, a tiny spark leapt out, its bright blue reflected in John’s eyes. As soon as it appeared, the battlefield transformed. The spark shot into the air, dying the crimson sky with a blue that brought with it a soft summer breeze. Under John’s feet green shoots began to sprout, rapidly spreading out until they reached Farroutef, forcing him to jump into the air to avoid them. Breathing deeply, John stepped forward with his right foot, causing the shoots to expand rapidly, growing up into tall stalks of waving wheat. A golden hue appeared on the tops of green wheat, spreading until John was completely surrounded by a wave of deep gold.

Spreading his arms out, John let out a loud laugh, his voice returning to its normal strength as the exhaustion that filled him melted away under the sheer joy he felt. Hovering in the air, Farroutef roared angrily and unleashed a blast of dark-sapphire flame, but John simply waved his hand and the spark that had transformed the sky dropped down to intercept the dragon’s breath.

There was nothing in this world that could compare to the pure destructive power of dragon flame, but as the eternal flame touched it, the dragon flames lost their destructive quality and began to transform, turning from the dark blue into a brilliant color that merged with the sky. Startled, Farroutef tried to cut off his flame, but before he could, the sky-blue flames surged into his mouth, causing him to howl in pain.

Never in his long life had Farroutef ever felt a flame that could harm him, but this bright blue flame burned with something he could not understand. It tore into his body, changing everything it touched into a

brilliant blue hue. Frantic, Farroutef lunged toward John, trying to bite down on him, hoping that killing John might solve this crisis, but instead of crunching down on an exhausted man like he hoped to, Farroutef was met with a fist that cracked one of his teeth, sending pain shooting through his skull.

Unable to process what had just happened, Farroutef tried to retreat, but John didn't let him go. Reaching out, John grabbed the dragon's face and slammed his fist down again, breaking the tooth he had cracked a moment before. By now the dragon was in a pure panic, but John didn't stop. His fist rose and fell, carrying with it a tremendous amount of fury and resentment as it cracked Farroutef's scales and crushed his bones. With every punch, the dragon felt the eternal flame sinking deeper into his body like a ravaging plague.

Finally, John seemed satisfied, and he tossed the broken and beaten dragon to the ground. Farroutef's energy was almost completely gone, and as he lay pathetically among the wheat, John crouched down to stare him in the eyes. He could tell that the dragon was thinking about attacking him, but John didn't care one bit. He had won this war and he knew it. Cracking a smile that looked scarier than anything Farroutef had ever seen, John leaned in and spoke quietly.

"I realized something recently. Something that overturned my world. You didn't give me anything except permission to be myself. Sure, you lent me some dragon flame, but let me tell you something. Even without the dragon flame, I would have burned all those people to ash myself. I would have wiped out those cities and killed those Mages. The evil I've done wasn't because some ancient evil was sleeping in my mana pool, it was because that evil was in me. You may have made it easier, but that doesn't change the fact that I did it.

"You pretend that you made me, that you saved me, but that's not true at all, is it? I don't know why I'm surprised that everything that comes out of your lips is a lie, considering that even your own people call you the Deceiver. You didn't save me. I saved you. I don't know why you were about to die, or why you decided it would be a good idea to bind yourself to me, but you did, and now you get to pay the cost for hitching a ride all these years.

"See, I know what you are, dragon. You aren't a big bad monster waiting in the wings to devour me. Because I can't be devoured. You aren't

an evil mastermind waiting for all of the pieces to fall into place so you can destroy everything I've created. Because I haven't created anything. You're nothing but a shadow. My shadow. You don't get to think without me, you don't get to speak without me. You don't exist without me."

Terror seemed to overtake Farroutef and the dragon transformed back into a copy of John, his face strangely shadowed as he shrieked and began to back up, scrambling back through the waving wheat. Yet no matter how far he scrambled, he could never leave John's feet. Still smiling, John reached out and patted the dragon on the shoulder, causing Farroutef to tremble and collapse into a puddle of darkness.

"You can try to run, Farroutef, but when you merged with me, you sealed your fate. Mana, it's the most wonderful thing. And you've been feeding on my mana for years. In fact, it's probably fair to say that the only mana in you is mine. Not yours. Mine. And since its mine, it will obey my commands. As for the dragon fire? I gave that back to you. It was exhausting getting all of it out of my body, but it was worth it, because I've got a new flame now. A flame that can undo all the damage I've caused. It was clever to hide as my shadow so that you could replace me without killing me, but you underestimated how absurdly strong hope in the heart of a human can be."

Twisting and writhing, the shadow transformed into the silhouette of a dragon, raving in a voice that only John could hear.

"You can never be good! Never! Nothing you can do can ever make up for the sin you bear! You will never exist without me! I made you! I saved you! You owe me everything!"

Standing up, John looked around at the shining fields of wheat that stretched out under the brilliant blue sky. It was not the first time he had been here, but this time he had no doubt that he was home. This place was his and no one else's. And that included the immortal dragon soul that lurked in his body. Hearing Farroutef's screams, John suddenly laughed, causing the dragon to fall silent.

"Maybe I can't ever make up for my sin, dragon. But that won't stop me from trying. I took back my physical abilities from you, took back my strength, my speed, my endurance. And I took back my voice as well. But that wasn't enough. And then I discovered that the most important thing was something that you had never been able to steal. My heart, and the hope that it carries."

“Sentimental words, John, but they will never be more than that! Just words! You can’t kill me, and so long as you live I’ll be right here, gnawing away at you until you go mad! I will succeed, John!”

“I know that I can’t kill you,” John said, glancing down at the shifting shadow under his feet. “And why would I want to? You give me something to aspire not to be. Enough of this. Get behind me where you belong.”

Ignoring Farroutef’s screams, John turned around and lifted his eyes, his face lit up by the bright sunlight that filled the sky. He knew that Farroutef was right. He wouldn’t be able to kill the dragon, but he didn’t need to. They were bound together, two sides to a single being. John would always have that cold, murderous, selfish side, but he was determined that it would forever remain nothing but a shadow.

[A Dragon’s Heart: A dragon’s soul cannot be destroyed by conventional means, and even if its body is destroyed, its spirit will continue on. Due to a chance encounter, the soul of Farroutef the Deceiver merged with your soul, taking the form of your shadow self. You have recognized this situation and in a thrilling turn-around tightened your bond, making it impossible for him to act without you. The threat of Farroutef seizing control of your body and destroying the world has been removed.]

[You have lessened a threat to this world. The Apocalypse weakens.]
[Apocalypse Points: 6/10]

[The date of the Final Day draws closer.]

“System. Are you writing these prompts?”

Only silence answered John, but John could sense a faint embarrassment in the air. Shaking his head, John took one last look around and then vanished, returning to his body in the Shadow Tower. Ever so slowly, his eyes opened up and he took control of the mana around him, binding it into his body. He could feel the absence of the dragon flame in his body, and for a moment he almost panicked. For the last ten years he had lived every moment with the destructive force hiding inside each of his cells, but now it was gone.

What replaced it was pure mana. Lifting his hand from the giant mana stone, John clenched his fist, feeling the power his hands contained. He had been telling the truth to Farroutef in their last encounter. The strength the dragon had lent him was nothing more than John's actual strength, had he not been afraid of what it would do. Mana truly was a wonderful thing, and thanks to his realization, John had successfully completed the adaptations he had so desperately needed.

Contained in his mana pool and spread throughout his body was enough perfectly pure mana to completely destroy this world, but not even a drop spread out from his skin. Taking a deep breath, he marveled at the sweet, pure air that entered his lungs. A presence appeared next to him and he saw Rebya's frantic face staring at him from above her flower. Realizing that the plant Mage was unsure if it was actually him, John chuckled and stood up, brushing off the dust that had collected on his body over the last few days.

"What's going on? Did the beast army arrive?"

Still hesitant, Rebya only answered after a moment.

"Yes. Ellie, Katrine, and a strange man are leading the Mages and mortals in the valley to defend. Gorra and Ferdie are fighting. Or something."

Raising his eyebrow, John looked up at the darkened sky above them. He could see a few stars here and there and the faint sounds of battle drifted into his ears.

"Sounds like quite the time. Let's move onto the last stage of the plan. It's time to save the world."

CHAPTER 47

The fight had been raging all day and well into the night, and Ellie was starting to think that all their efforts were going to prove fruitless. There was no end to the beasts, and they threw themselves forward with regard for life. She had lost count of the number of beasts she had slain, but no matter how many she killed, more sprang up behind them. Her leather armor was slick with blood and her hands were starting to turn black from the lightning she had been throwing. Hearing heavy breathing all around her, she looked up and realized she was practically alone and that the breathing was hers.

A huge leopard, spotting her by herself, snarled and pounced toward her, forcing her to duck and scramble to the side. If she had more energy, she would have turned one of the neat cartwheels that her new strength had made so easy, but right now, it was all she could do to get back to a standing position after bending over. Hearing the scratch of paws on stone, she knew that the beast was coming back and quickly turned, a splutter of lightning appearing in her hand. Though it was barely more than a trickle, even that was sufficient to kill a creature when applied directly to the brain. Which is exactly what Ellie did, shoving her fingers through the beast's eye while her other hand warded off its fangs.

Shrieking as it died, the leopard nearly crushed her, but she heaved it off to the side and collapsed on top of it. All across the battlefield, similar fights were taking place between the defenders of the valley and the beasts that tried to destroy them. Gritting her teeth, Ellie rolled over and scanned the sky, looking for Sigvald. Her familiar was just as drained as she was, but he was still flying, dealing with the flying legendary beasts as best he could.

Catching sight of two bodies across the field, Ellie felt her ribs twinge where they had been broken. Two of the sage beasts had fallen to her hand, but the price had been some broken ribs and nearly losing an eye. The cut on her face had stopped bleeding, but it was still open, extending from the bottom of her right ear across her cheekbone and her right eye, ending somewhere in her hairline. For a moment, she felt like crying as the realization that the wound would probably scar, leaving her marred, but there simply wasn't time. More beasts were streaming up the mountain, and she could hear the angry snorts of a herd of boar beasts headed her way.

On a nearby mountain there was a furious battle raging between the main portion of the beast army. Katrine was unleashing razorwinds with every swipe of her hands, conducting a deadly symphony of death, while beside her, the newcomer Ellie had never seen before was taking a variety of wands out of a series of holsters and using them to explode any beasts who got too close. The two of them worked in perfect concert, and the dead piled up around them far exceeded the numbers anywhere else in the mountain range.

Three sage beast corpses, including Torik's, lay in pieces at the bottom of the pile, torn apart by the two fighters and the tiny bird that zipped around above them. Even they were starting to lose ground, however, and Ellie could tell that the fight was about to be over. Either a new miracle would manifest itself, or the end would have arrived. Ellie tried to summon more lightning but got nothing at all. Not even a spark. Biting her lip, she grabbed her dagger and leaned against the giant leopard's corpse, conserving her strength for the last fight.

"If you're going to make an appearance, now would be the time," she muttered under her breath.

A jolt ran through her, and Ellie felt something ignite in her heart, causing energy to pour throughout her body, nourishing her tired muscles and washing away her fatigue. At first she didn't know what it was, but then her eyes caught the blue glow reflecting off the blade of her dagger. Springing to her feet, she suddenly felt a strange sense of connection to the world around her. The boar beasts were nearly on her, their snorting noses wrinkled with fury as they bared their sharp tusks, but the energy in her was more than enough to give her a second wind.

Dodging to the side, she slashed out with her dagger, using it to channel the lightning that burst from her hand. A blade of pure white light ripped through the lead boar, sending his corpse tumbling to the side in two pieces, filling the air with ozone. Letting out an excited shout, Ellie tore through the rest of the pack of boars, her heart on fire and her eyes blazing with a bright blue. The same thing was happening all across the battlefield as thousands of defenders sprang into action, their energy miraculously restored.

When the phenomenon swept over the mountains, Haver and Eva were fighting back to back, desperately trying to hold the main pass into the valley. Though the defenses were strongest here, the beasts were only

moments away from overrunning the position when both Haver and Eva found their strength returning. Letting out a long howl, Haver dashed forward, his wolf tooth club crushing beast skulls to the right and left. A moment later there was an answering howl, and close to a thousand wolves poured out of the forests, their eyes glowing with the same bright blue that Haver's eyes showed.

He had forbidden them from joining the battle, fearing that they would be killed by the beasts, but now they couldn't help it. In groups of five, they tore the beasts in their way apart, their bodies growing bigger and stronger as mana surged through them. Behind Haver, Eva took the chance to call the members of the Eclesia to the front and they reformed the battle line. Even those who had been desperately wounded were standing up, their wounds healing as they staggered forward. By the time they reached the battle line, they were completely fine and filled with an endless amount of energy.

It only took a moment for the wave of bright blue light to fill the battlefield, and immediately the situation stabilized. There were still bloody fights happening all across the mountain range, but this time the defenders were the ones with the advantage. Even Katrine had begun to glow with blue light, earning her a strange look from her companion, who had no idea what was going on.

"Are you okay?" Cavvod asked, his brow furrowed.

"Never better," Katrine said, her grin savage. "Just like him to wait until the end to pull out the big guns. Come on, we're retreating."

"Now? Shouldn't we kill some more of them?"

"Nah, leave it to John. Our goal now is to prevent as many casualties as possible."

"What about that?"

Looking where Cavvod was pointing, Katrine could only shrug. The great plains had been turned into an unrecognizable mess of canyons and deep gorges by the struggle of two titanic beasts. Ferdie and Gorra were still fighting, just as they had been for the last twenty hours. Both of them were fighting with pure force, smashing into each other and trading blows without regard for anything around them. Their wounds healed almost as soon as they were formed and their attacks that missed carved the earth apart. No one had been able to get anywhere close to them, and a large

portion of the beast army had been forced to go around their fight, resulting in the disordered attack that had allowed the defenders to hold on until now.

"Come on. Ferdie is John's problem, so let him be."

"Someone owns that creature?" Cavvod said, pointing at the fifty-foot-tall bull who was currently trying to drive Gorra into the ground with repeated headbutts.

"Uh, yeah. You've met John, right?"

"Sure, but he didn't look that scary when I met him."

"He must have been in a good mood. You're lucky, because he's—"

"I'm what?"

"The best big brother a lady could have," Katrine said smoothly, turning around and holding her arms out to hug John. "John! So good to see you."

Blocking her face with his hand, John pushed her back, not letting Katrine reach him. Smiling at Cavvod, he offered the young man a handshake.

"Thanks for your help. I owe you one."

"No you don't," Cavvod said, with a wave of his hand. "You're all paid up. Katrine does though."

Pouting, Katrine wanted to say something, but before she could a lightning-covered figure shot over, barreling into John. Seeing that Cavvod had drawn two of his wands, Katrine hurried to push them down.

"Whoa there. You can't afford to make a mistake like that."

In John's arms, Ellie's shining blue eyes leaked big tears that ran down his chest, leaving glowing streaks behind. Holding her tight, John didn't say anything at all. Waving to Katrine and Cavvod, he began to lead the retreat into the valley. At the same time, a wave of mana shot out from him, sinking deep into the mountains, causing them to shake as a million plants shot up into the air. Each looked like a twisted root and carried a single bud on its top. One by one, the buds began to open and the roots started to unravel, forming vaguely humanoid figures that swung their flowers back and forth as they began to search for the beasts that were chasing the retreating defenders.

All of the men and women with glowing blue eyes had gotten the message from John at the same time and begun coordinating together to pull back into the valley, and the explosive growth of the roots that Rebya had spread out quickly transformed the mountains around the valley into an impassable wall of knotted roots that tangled themselves around any beast

they could find. It didn't take long for the beasts to realize that entering the strange forest that had sprung up was tantamount to suicide, but their path to retreat was currently occupied by two monsters who were trying to murder each other without regard for the fallout.

Once the retreat was complete, a solemn silence fell over the valley, and those whose eyes glowed blue began to gather together, causing the night to light up as if it were the middle of the day. Feeling Ellie's tears still dripping onto his chest, John lifted her head to look down at her. A great sorrow filled her eyes, causing him to grow concerned.

"What's the matter?"

"Will I die soon? It's not fair that I have to leave you."

"Ellie, what are you talking about?" John asked, confused.

"Blue-eyed ascension," Ellie replied, pushing away from him.

Stunned, John looked around and saw that there were thousands of people staring at him, their faces filled with pride that they had been chosen and the sorrow of having to leave those they loved. Coughing lightly, John snapped his fingers and the blue flame that had ignited in Ellie's heart streamed out of her eyes, joining together with a thousand other flames to form a dancing tongue of fire that hovered above his hand. Realizing she wasn't going to die and had been crying over nothing, Ellie was equal parts ecstatic and furious. With a stomp, she spun around, turning her face away from John, even as all the people who were watching broke out in a murmur.

"All hail the Eternal Flame!"

The shout rang out in the valley, picked up by person after person until the whole valley shook with the cry. The first people to kneel were those who had carried the flame, but soon everyone who could see the flame joined them. Feeling the flame stirring, John grabbed Ellie's waist and the two of them shot up into the air, the blue flame flying above them. Like a match in a dark cavern, the blue fire cast bright light across the valley, bringing warmth and comfort wherever it fell. Fear melted away and the darkness was banished.

Reaching up, John plucked a piece of the flame away, using mana to form it into an ornate ring that looked like lightning and fire entwined. Holding Ellie close once again, he held up the ring between them, a faint smile on his face. She still had her face turned away, but the blush on her cheeks couldn't be hidden as he spoke softly in a voice only for her to hear.

“Marry me, Ellie. Let’s be together forever.”

The story will continue in Preservation.

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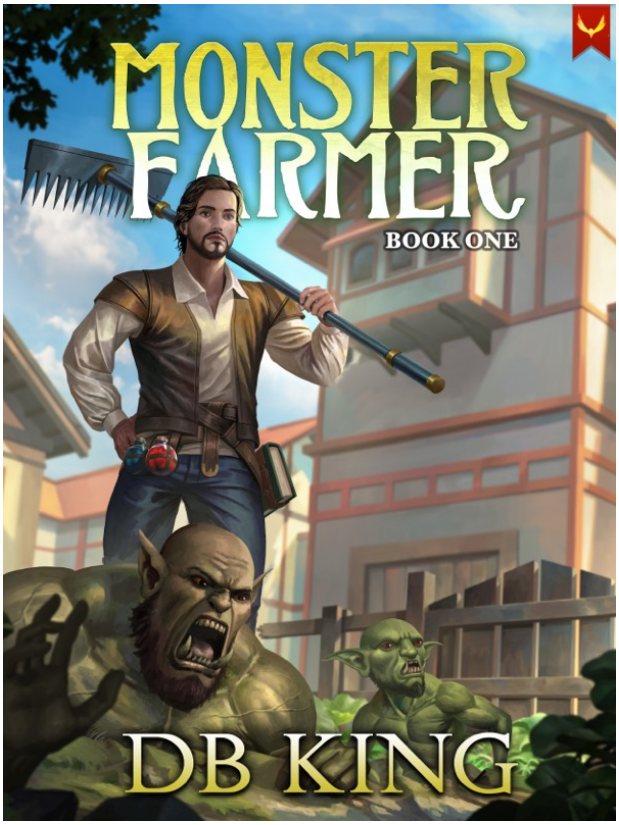

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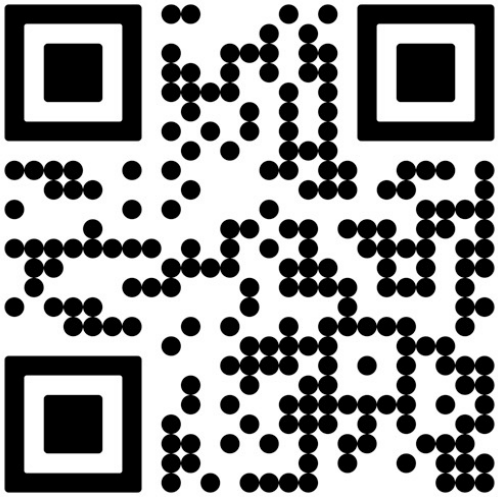

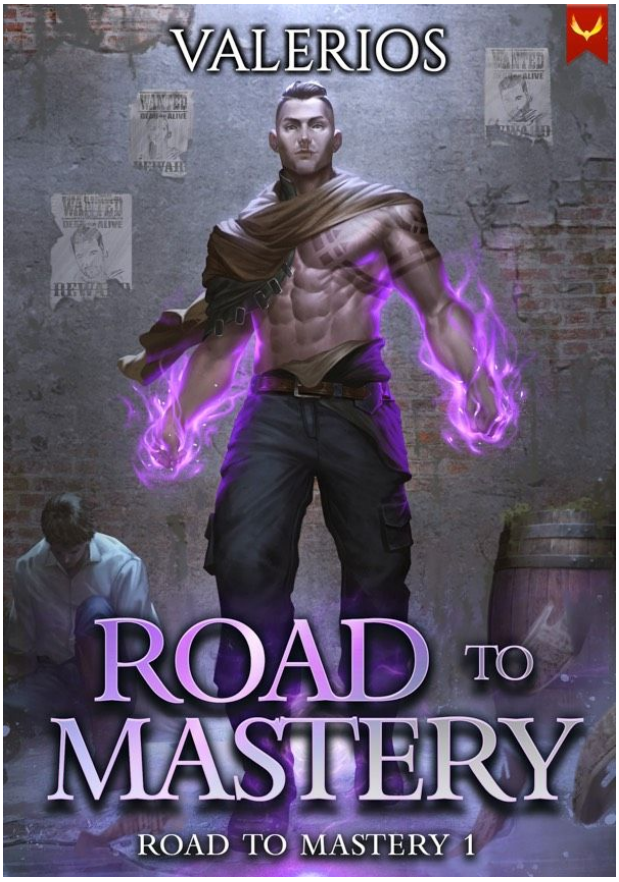

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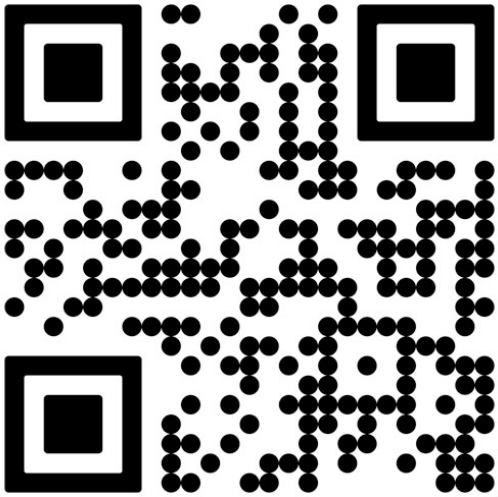

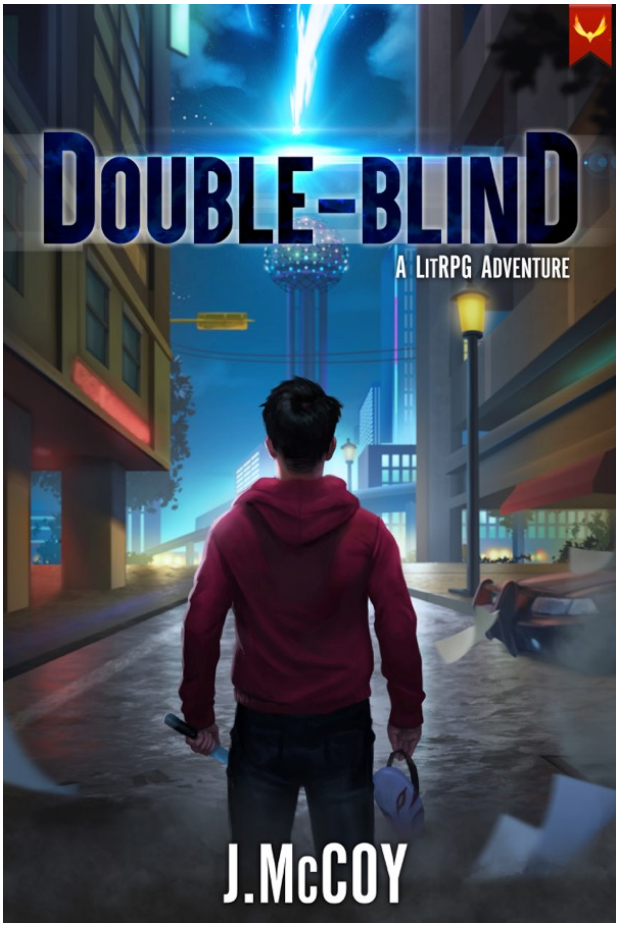

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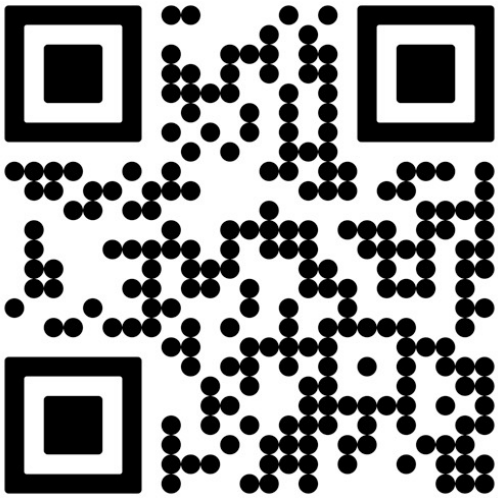

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