

pROLOGUE

Brigid heard voices above her. She felt groggy and her mind was having a hard time focusing. The Cythraul Lord had been carrying her. What happened? She heard the words ‘I love you’ and she opened her eyes. Llyr and Rebecca were sitting beside her, kissing. She shut her eyes hard, wanting the image out of her head. *Why did he choose her?* She kept her eyes shut as she heard them separate.

“That was unexpected,” Llyr said.

“Yeah, it was,” Rebecca replied. “Something we’ll need to get used to.”

Brigid stopped listening to them, focusing inward. She had tried so hard to make Llyr love her, but he had chosen an alien. The fact that they were soul linked hadn’t helped her efforts, but in the end it was still his choice. She heard Llyr get up and leave the room.

“Well, you were right about his going after what he wants. I’m glad he did because I want it too,” Rebecca said to her.

Brigid moaned, not wanting to talk with Rebecca right now. After a moment, Rebecca got up. Brigid opened her eyes and found Rebecca looking out a hole in the wall. Brigid couldn’t remember much. The Cythraul Lord had thrown her against the wall of the tower and knocked her out. She sat up and was surprised that she didn’t have any broken bones. Rebecca must have healed her some before she had woken up.

She stood up and pulled out her knife, sneaking up behind Rebecca. *One thrust could end all my problems.* Brigid couldn’t make herself kill Rebecca. She had been a friend, one of the only friends Brigid had ever had. She raised up her arm and hit Rebecca across the back of the head with the hilt of the knife.

“I told you that you shouldn’t have trusted me.” Brigid pulled out Llyr’s medallion and held her finger on the gem in the center. It hadn’t taken her long to figure out how to use the medallion. Aldri wizards always kept things the same.

Daire Loegaire’s face was projected in front of her. “Report.”

“I have the girl and I’m alone. If you want her, you need to get her now.”

“We’re opening a portal at your location.”

There was a flash of light and an area beside her now led to a gateway chamber back on her world. Daire stepped through, followed by a few soldiers. “Pick up the girl and help Brigid.”

A soldier ran up, putting an arm under her arms and helped her through the portal, setting her down in a chair in a large room with glowing lines of crushed gems flowing into the portal.

She repressed a flinch as the guard carrying Rebecca dropped her onto the floor and began to roughly tie her up. Guilt filled Brigid as she watched the soldier. Rebecca had been a friend, but this is what was best for her people. She had to serve her people, right?

“Are you all right?” An Aldri said to her.

Brigid looked up at him. “What?”

“Do you need any healing?”

“I’m not sure,” Brigid said, moving and stretching her body. “I feel stiff, but nothing is hurting.”

“Hmmm.” The Healer made circles with his wand above her head and she felt magic flow into her. “The injuries you had have already been healed. The stiffness will go away as you begin to move around.” The Healer walked away.

“Aren’t you going to help her?” Brigid asked, pointing at Rebecca.

The Healer looked at Rebecca, disgust coming onto his features. “Why would I help that?”

Brigid stared for a moment before nodding. She looked at Rebecca’s unconscious form. She would have helped an enemy. In fact, that is what led to this whole mess. Not knowing who Llyr was, Rebecca had healed him and had unintentionally soul linked them. This had led Brigid to come to Earth, where she was the last survivor in an attempt to kill all life on the planet, which Rebecca had stopped.

Guilt once again filled Brigid as she thought of the kindness Rebecca had shown her despite the fact that Brigid had tried to kill her several times.

Daire stepped through the portal, looking very pleased with himself.

“Where’s Llyr?” Brigid asked as the portal shut. “I thought you needed to capture him as well.”

“I was supposed to capture him, but an opportunity to kill the dragon was too good to pass up,” Daire answered. “I made sure that I threw my brother far enough away from the tower so he wouldn’t be killed in the blast.”

“Couldn’t you have done both?”

Daire shook his head. “My brother was an able warrior when he left us a year ago. Now he is a real danger to any who would face him, especially with that sword. By the time I subdued him, the dragon would have come to see what was happening. Did you wish to face an angry dragon?”

“No.”

“Neither did I.” Daire walked over to Rebecca. “Is there anything I need to know about her?”

“She is very powerful and dangerous,” Brigid said. “She fought off that Cythraul Lord, though I’m not sure how it was defeated. It knocked me out before the end.”

“Cythraul Lords tend to rely on brute force,” Daire commented. “There is no finesse in what they do. An untrained simpleton could defeat them if they had enough power. I believe that is the case with this human. She will be easy to keep contain.”

“Don’t underestimate her,” Brigid said. “She has abilities that you’ve never experienced before. Be careful how you shield her. She can drain magic from sealed spells.”

Daire stared at her. “Like my grandfather’s sword?”

“Very similar.”

“Interesting,” Daire said. “We will double seal our spells.”

“I don’t know if that will be enough.”

“I think we will be able to handle this inexperienced girl. You’ve given us the information. Is there anything else you wish to add?”

Brigid studied Rebecca and noticed she had her backpack on. “I claim right of capture.”

“What?”

Brigid stood up and walked over to Rebecca. “I captured this magic user. I claim my right to take an item as my own.” She bent over and, making a show, roughly took the pack from Rebecca.

Daire was looking at her suspiciously, but nodded after a moment. “That is your right and I will not deny it. What’s so special about that pack?”

Brigid considered lying about it, but decided not to. “It has been enchanted by the dragon to hold more than it appears. It will be of great value to me in any future missions.”

“Open it for me.”

Brigid opened that pack and had to suppress a smile as she looked in and saw the box with the dress Rebecca had bought her inside. She held it open for Daire to see. He only looked inside for a few moments before nodding.

“This is excellent work,” Daire said. “I will want to study it some time, but you can keep it for now.”

“Thank you.”

“Let’s stop standing around here,” Daire said. “I don’t want her to wake before we have her in a proper holding cell. Soldier, pick up the human. Brigid, your mother wishes to see you in her office. Do you need help getting there?”

“No, I’m feeling a bit better already. I think the walk will do me good.”



Chapter One

Rebecca moaned as she woke up. Her whole body was aching and her neck muscles screamed as she lifted her head. She tried to move her right hand to massage her neck but it wouldn’t budge. Both of her hands were held above her head and secured to a wall, seated on the floor. She opened her eyes, but could see nothing in the darkness. She tried to yank her arms out and received pain for her efforts.

Her breathing grew heavy as she realized that she was trapped here. She closed her eyes and calmed herself. She opened them again even though it was pitch black. There had to be a logical explanation for where she was.

“Llyr!” Rebecca called out. “Havaar!...Anyone!” She listened, but heard no sound. *What was the last thing I was doing?*

They had been fighting the Cythraul Lord in some strange tower. Havaar broke through the wall and dragged the thing out. Natalie had been hurt and Rebecca healed her. Havaar and Llyr had shown up and Havaar took Natalie while Llyr helped Rebecca. She checked on Brigid and healed her. Llyr then professed his love and kissed her. Rebecca couldn’t help but smile at the memory. Then he had left to help Havaar and Rebecca couldn’t remember anything after that.

*Llyr?* Rebecca sent her thoughts along the soul link. *Llyr!* He didn’t answer and she concentrated on the soul link. It felt stretched and she could feel that he was alive, but it was like he was far away. So far away, that it was all she could feel. She could feel no emotions, no thoughts, or anything else. The panic in her began to rise again.

*Calm down,* Rebecca told herself. *There are other ways out of this.* She reached out to magic and found nothing. There was no magic in her reserves and no magic around her. She felt out away from her and found a sense of magic beyond her reach, but it did not flow in around her. Something was holding it back and no matter how she reached with her magical senses, she couldn’t grasp it. It was as if she had no strength.

*What is going on?* *I’ve always been able to touch spells with my magic.* The emptiness of her reserves began to intrude itself on her mind. What if she had always used magic, even a little, to extend her ability to draw in magic? That would mean that if her reserves were empty, she would have to be in direct contact with the magical energy to absorb it.

She started to breathe faster as she realized she was as helpless as a baby. Whoever had taken her had removed all chances she had of escaping. Who would do this to her? Why would they do this to her?

She was getting frantic and beginning to hyperventilate. She forced herself to take a large breath and hold it. After a few seconds, she let it out and took several quick breaths before holding it again. She let it out again and took slow breaths this time. The panic was still there, but she was beginning to keep it from overwhelming her.

*Rebecca, you can handle this. There is one thing you have control over and that is how you react to this situation. Keep control of yourself and things will be better.* The panic began to recede and she was able to breathe normally. *Now, think who would do this to you. The government couldn’t keep magic from me, so it would have to be someone who knows magic. Llyr said his brother wanted to capture me. Oh no, oh no! I’ve been taken by the Aldri!*

She opened her eyes again and moved her head around, looking for any source of light. There was nothing. *Why would they put me here? Why am I alone in the dark?*

The panic began to rise again within her, but she took slow breaths, forcing herself to relax. Panic would do nothing but make her situation worse. If she was panicked, she couldn’t think clearly and if she couldn’t think, she was easy to control.

*That’s what they’re doing. I can’t remember why they wanted to capture me, but whatever it is will be easier for them if I’m struggling to keep myself under control.* Even with this realization, she could feel part of herself wanting to freak out, to lose control. It wasn’t only a fight against them, but against herself, against the base instincts that are within every human.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. It was an effort not to scream out, the darkness seemed to be closing in on her, as if it were a tangible thing, pressing against her, making it hard to breathe, pushing her to lash out and thrust the darkness away.

*Oh, how can I beat this? How long until I lose all control?* She couldn’t believe how fast this was happening. She had no idea how long she had been awake, but she already was about to break. What would happen when the Aldri came and started to torture her? She couldn’t allow it to happen. *There has to be something that will help me, something I’ve learned.*

She let out a long breath and started whispering. “The key to being a successful wizard is maintaining complete control over body and mind.” That is what Havaar had told her during training multiple times. If you can’t control yourself, how could you expect to control magic? *Where did we start with the training?*

There had been weeks of conditioning and meditation before he had begun to teach her how to use magic. *I need to find the center of my magic, the magic that resides within me.*

She turned her mind inward and began to meditate like when she had first met the dragon. She found her core and there was a small bit of magic, not enough to do anything, but enough to help calm her. The panic began to fade, but didn’t go away. She could feel it lurking in the back of her mind. She retreated into her core.

*I need to figure out what I’m going to do whenever anybody shows up. I wonder where I am, where the Aldri have taken me. Africa? South America? It must be far from England if I can only feel that Llyr is alive. Unless they found a way to block the soul link, but then how am I still feeling that he is alive? What if it’s not even the Aldri who have taken me? What if there was another Cythraul? Of course, they would just destroy my soul and consume the dark magic. What if it’s goblins or some other creature I don’t know?*

The panic was beginning to break through her resistance. She forced herself to stop thinking and focused on her core. There was a sound at the end of the room that made her open her eyes.

A door a few feet away from her opened, allowing light into the room. She closed her eyes and turned her head as her eyes were struck by the sudden brightness. The sound of someone walking into her cell and setting something down made her try to open her eyes, but it hurt too much.

She felt something being pushed into her mouth and she whipped her head away. The object followed and she began to shake her head from side to side. She received a smack on her cheek and felt a wet substance along with the sting. Whoever was in the cell started to berate her in a language she didn’t understand.

She forced her eyes open, allowing them time to adjust to the light despite the pain. There was a fuzzy figure standing in front of her. As her eyes adapted, she saw a goblin standing in front of her with a spoon held out toward her. The goblin glanced behind it, fear evident on its face. It looked back to her and spoke, shoving the spoon at her mouth.

She opened her mouth and the goblin shoved a bitter, pasty substance into it. Her first reaction was to gag and she spit out the horrible tasting paste. The goblin slapped her with the spoon and rattled off at her. It looked back with fear again and then scooped out more of the paste from a bucket on the floor.

Rebecca forced herself to swallow the next bite and the goblin nodded and fed her more. As she was being spoon fed, she studied the cell she was in. It was about five feet tall, four feet wide, and eight feet long. She wouldn’t have been able to stand up straight. She could feel the spell that was keeping magic out of the room. She caught glimpses of the door as the goblin turned to refill the spoon. There was only a blank wall.

The goblin kept feeding her and her stomach began to hurt. Whatever the paste was, it her didn’t agree with her stomach. As the goblin shoved more and more into her, she began to wonder if she would be able to hold it. The goblin then stopped and dropped the spoon in the bucket and walked out of the cell without a word, closing the door, leaving her in darkness.

Now that she knew that she was in a room that was little more than a closet, the weight of the darkness pushed in on her even more. She spent more time calming herself and, despite how uncomfortable she was, fell asleep.

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Llyr opened his eyes, unsure where he was. The faint light in the room came from a source to his right. He turned his head and found the seamstress ghost sitting and working with a needle and thread on a piece of cloth. She looked up and saw that he was awake.

“You know, my time is as precious as yours. Yet, whenever one of you decides to be lazy and sleep for days at a time, I’m the one who is stuck watching over you. It’s ridiculous how idle you young people are, unless you’re making trouble.”

Llyr’s mind was having trouble remembering what had happened and grasped at a part of what the seamstress had said. “Days? How many days?”

“You’ve been sleeping here ever since Natalie dragged you back here. That was five days ago.”

Llyr shook his head and tried to sit up. His body groaned and he fell back onto the pillow. He felt so weak. Why did he feel so weak? “Do you know what happened? Why am I like this?”

“Natalie said something about the Aldri. That they took Rebecca and killed the Master.”

“Oh no,” Llyr moaned as his last memories came to the surface. His brother had taken Rebecca and sent him flying out of the broken section of the tower. Natalie had caught him and then a spike of energy shot through the tower, causing it to collapse. Havaar had been in the chambers beneath the tower and all of that stone would have crashed through right on top of him.

Llyr felt along the soul link and could feel that Rebecca was alive, but very far away. *Rebecca!* He shouted across the link, but nothing came back. They were too far apart and he began to feel the pull of magic on him to go to her.

He forced himself to sit up. “I need to talk to Natalie. We need to find a way to rescue Rebecca.”

“You’re not going anywhere in your condition.”

“I don’t have time to be weak,” Llyr growled at the ghost. “Every minute that Rebecca is a prisoner of my brother is a minute more they will be torturing her. I will not sit here and allow that to happen.”

The ghost glared at him and floated out of the room. Llyr tried to stand, but his legs gave way and he fell to the floor. Frustration grew within him as he pulled himself up, determined to stand. He put his weight on his arms, leaning on the bed for support. His arms shook with the strain as he tried to get his legs under him. He moved to the edge of the bed and looked at the door, preparing to take his weight off the bed. He took a step and his legs collapsed again, depositing him on the floor.

He groaned as he struggled to get back to the bed. The seamstress floated back through the door and looked down at him. “Having trouble?”

Llyr didn’t answer her, dragging himself along the floor toward the bed. The door behind him opened. He looked back and found one of the guard golems standing in the doorway without its weapons.

“I brought you some help,” the seamstress said.

“I don’t need help.”

“Really? How are you going to get down to see Natalie then?”

Llyr didn’t answer her, grabbing the edge of the bed to pull himself up.

“Are you going to tumble down the stairs? Fall down the wind lift, hoping it catches you before you become a mess at the bottom?”

Llyr refused to answer her, standing once again with his weight supported against the bed.

“Well, if that is what you want to do to, I won’t stop you. I will make sure that my laughter is heard throughout the entire complex. It will be good to laugh, to have some entertainment after watching you lie there for five days. Golem, return to your post.”

“NO!” Llyr shouted, glaring at the seamstress. “Golem, help me walk to see Natalie.”

“Walk! You can barely stand. You know how long it will take you to walk down the stairs, even with the help of a golem.”

“A long time. I still have some dignity left.”

“Pride is a better word for it,” the seamstress shook her head. “I’ll let them know that it will take you at least an hour to get down to them.”

The ghost left and the golem came and stood next to Llyr. Llyr grabbed hold of the golem’s arm and hobbled to the door. He grabbed the door frame and went through, not letting go until the golem had come through the door.

It was slow going through the next door and into the hall. Llyr was frustrated at how weak he was. He didn’t understand why this was happening. Did his brother place a curse on him? If he had, he would have had to prepare it before he came to capture Rebecca. Llyr shifted his vision to be able to see magic and looked at himself. There was no magic affecting him. The one thing that was different was that the line of magic that represented the soul link was very thin, almost too thin to see. *It must have something to do with how far away Rebecca is.*

Llyr stopped walking as they reached the stairs. He looked down at the steps and took a deep breath. “Golem, go down one step.”

The golem stepped down one step and stopped. Llyr kept a hold of its shoulder and moved his foot to the step and transferred his weight. It was too much for his one leg and his momentum made it so he could not keep a hold of the golem. He started to fall, but the golem caught him.

Llyr looked around and was glad that there was no one around to see his failure. “Golem, carry me to the bottom of the stairs.”

The golem carried him down the stairs and put him back on his feet. Llyr once again hobbled to the next set of stairs and had the golem carry him down again. They repeated this for the next five floors.

Llyr stopped at the next set of stairs, breathing hard. He was so tired and he had dozens of floors to go until he reached where Natalie was. He studied his helper for a moment, grateful that the seamstress had brought it. “Golem, carry me to the bottom floor.”

The golem picked him up and carried him down the flights of stairs at a much quicker pace. Llyr sat in the arms of the construct, hoping that none of the few resident ghosts came out and saw him. They reached the bottom floor without being seen.

“Golem, put me down and help me walk.” The golem placed him back on his feet and they made their way to the conference room in Havaar’s chambers.

At the far end of the room, Natalie sat at one of those amazing human devices they called a computer. All that humans had accomplished with technology still astounded Llyr. He wished he could understand it, but it eluded him.

The seamstress ghost and Lucretius, the ghost who oversaw the running of the complex, stood behind Natalie talking quietly. They looked up as Llyr entered the room.

“You made it down faster than I thought you would,” the seamstress commented.

“Yes, I did,” Llyr said as he sat down in one of the chairs in the room. “Thank you for bringing the golem.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Llyr, I’m so glad that you are awake.” Natalie got out of her chair and walked over to him. Once she got to him, she hesitated and then placed her hand on his shoulder. “How are you feeling?”

“Weak.”

“That is to be expected. Have you had anything to eat?”

“No. We need to figure out what to do about Rebecca.”

“You need to eat. Lucretius, please send for some food.”

“Of course.”

“I will tell the kitchen to send some food,” the seamstress said. “This discussion will not involve me.” She began to float up toward the ceiling, but stopped before she went through. “Llyr, pride will kill you if you allow it to control you.”

Llyr stared at her in stunned silence as she went through the ceiling. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard her call me by name.”

“Me either,” Natalie said.

“She is an interesting woman,” Lucretius commented. “The fact that she said that means she cares for you.”

“Do you know much about her?” Natalie asked.

“Yes, but her secrets are her own.”

“I don’t care to know her secrets,” Llyr said. “What I care about is what we are going to do to rescue Rebecca.”

“How do you propose we do that?” Natalie inquired. “She’s on your world.”

“Open a portal.”

“I have no idea how to open a portal to another world; and, even if I did, do you know the exact location of your world in the galaxy?”

Llyr sat back, feeling frustrated. “No, I don’t. Has there been any sign of Havaar?”

Natalie shook her head. “I spent the first day after bringing you back here trying to dig him out. I made little progress and then things started to go nuts. Whatever your brother did broke the rest of the barrier hiding magic. Things have gotten crazy out there as people and governments are having to deal with magical creatures, places hidden by magic are now in the open, and people are beginning to use magic. Havaar was preparing for this, but didn’t finish his preparations. I’m trying my best, but I don’t think it is enough. Havaar’s death is causing all of us problems.”

“I’m sorry about your people,” Llyr stated. “Don’t worry about Rebecca; she is my responsibility. It sounds like you have enough to worry about.

“Thank you,” Natalie said, standing up. “I wish you could help me, but adding an alien to this would only cause more problems. Lucretius will help you in any way he can. He knows more about the resources this place has to offer.” She walked over to him and put her hand on his shoulder, giving it a firm squeeze. “Good luck.”

Llyr put his hand on hers. “You too.”

He watched her walk out of the room and turned to Lucretius. “What are we going to do to help Rebecca?”

“First, we are going to help you be able to move around without the help of a golem.” Lucretius said. “Golem, pick him up and follow me.”

“Golem, stop,” Llyr ordered it. “It can help me walk.”

Lucretius shook his head. “You talk about rescuing Rebecca as soon as possible, yet you insist on wasting time to prove what? That you are capable? Your separation from her has weakened you to the point of being a cripple. The soul link is draining your strength and unless you accept that you have a disability, you won’t be able to save her. Swallow your pride for her sake.”

Llyr said nothing as he stared at the ghost, surprised how firm he was being.

“Golem, pick Llyr up and follow me.”

Llyr did not resist as the golem lifted him and followed behind the ghost out of the room and down the hall to the stairs.

“Do you think that Rebecca has been affected in the same way as I have?” Llyr asked as they went up the stairs.

“No, I don’t,” Lucretius replied. “The way your link with her was formed gave her all of the control. From the research I’ve been doing, this form of soul link is a variation on one that was used anciently by the Farlany.”

“The Farlany?” Llyr repeated, concerned with the news. “That can’t be. From what I was taught of the Farlany, they never would have created a soul link that would kill one of them when the other died.”

“You’re right, they wouldn’t have,” Lucretius said. “The soul link is a difficult thing to understand. Master Havaar told me to discover as much as I could about it right after you two arrived here. I’ve been studying it for over a year, including talking to contacts that the master had on other worlds. The only time that the soul link has existed between two beings of different races was when the Farlany ruled the galaxy. They used it to control their protectors, who were dragons most of the time. Since their downfall, your soul link with Rebecca is the only instance of cross-species soul linking that I could find.”

“So, that means if I die, she wouldn’t?”

“No, there are significant differences. Your soul link with Rebecca has progressed like the rest of recorded soul links since the time of the Farlany Empire. You feel what she feels, you know when she is hurting, and you can hear each other’s thoughts. The link the Farlany wizards forced onto their protectors was more one sided. The wizard could control the protector, hearing his thoughts and knowing where he was. The wizard would feel nothing from the protector. The protector would be gifted with increased strength and speed while near the wizard, and weakness when far away from the wizard. If the protector died, nothing happened to the wizard. If the wizard died, the protector would die.”

They reached the 15th floor and Lucretius turned into the walkway rather than continuing up the stairs. “As you can see, your soul link is a strange mix of the two different types. That is why I believe you are in a weakened state. Like those protectors, you are too far from your wizard.”

Llyr nodded, deep in thought. While it was a lot of information to process, it answered a few of his questions, but brought up a few that he hadn’t had before. Lucretius floated through a door and the golem stopped right by the door.

After a moment, Llyr looked up at the golem and then at the door. The golem was making no move to open it. It took a second, but Llyr finally reached over and opened the door. The golem walked through.

The room that they entered was lined with different kinds of boards, some dark and some white. Each of the boards had writing on it. The writing on the dark boards was done in chalk and the writing on the white boards had no consistent color, though most seemed to be red or black. In front of the boards were tables filled with things. Some of the tables had glass containers filled with liquids, while others had projects in various states of being built.

Llyr tried to take it all in, wondering what this room was built for. The golem walked past the tables at a steady pace, heading further down the long room to where Lucretius and another ghost were doing something with one of the tables.

The golem stopped at the table and Llyr saw that the other ghost was Socrates, who had taught them about magic when they had first arrived. The ghost was looking at the boards on the walls and mumbling to himself, frequently looking back at a book on the table. Lucretius was lining up long, silvery strips along the edge of the table. The table itself was long and wide, with a large movable section in the middle and two smaller stationary sections along the length.

“Golem, put him down and adjust the table to a 90 degree incline.” Lucretius said, looking at them. “Llyr, I need you to remove your clothes.”

The Golem put Llyr down and moved to the end of the table, grabbing the edge of the middle section and rotating it until the top was at the angle Lucretius wanted. Llyr leaned against the table.

“Before I do anything, I want to know want you are planning,” Llyr told them.

“We are going to make it so you can walk on your own,” Socrates replied, not looking away from the boards. “When the seamstress told us how weak you are, we knew that you would need some assistance to move around. Luckily, Lord Havaar has done many experiments over the years to combat the frequent disabilities that afflict humans.”

“Yes, the Master made many devices that would help those who could not walk or move,” Lucretius said. “We are not going to hook you to one of those. We are going to give you something that the Master made to enhance the strength someone already possesses.”

“I have no strength,” Llyr pointed out. “I can only take a few steps before I fall over.”

“That’s more than some people can do,” Socrates said, coming over to the table. “We could put you in one of the machines that Lord Havaar made for paralyzed people, but that would emphasize your weakness. If you are going to rescue Rebecca, your weakness must not be obvious. This device will give you the strength to at least move around on your own. We hope.”

“You hope? You don’t know if this will work?”

“The Master only made two of these. One he put into a human named Hercules. It didn’t go as he hoped it would, so he put this one away, not trusting humans with that much strength.”

“Is there nothing else that could help me?”

Lucretius and Socrates looked at each other before looking back at him. “Possibly, but this is the quickest way.” Socrates told him.

“We can wait, if you want to,” Lucretius said. “I have no idea how long it will be until we find another way. It could be months or even years. If we do this, though, you will never be able to remove it.”

“Why not?”

“Lord Havaar was never able to figure out why this device bonded to its user,” Socrates explained. “That was another reason he didn’t continue looking into it. It becomes a part of you and he didn’t like not knowing why.”

“So, this thing will enhance my strength, but I will never be able to remove it. Is it visible?”

“No, it blends in with the skin.”

“Will putting it on be painful?”

“Yes, it will,” Socrates held up one of the strips of silver. “As you can see, there are tiny pins that run the length of each strip. The way this device works is that magic is put into your muscles and the pins allow a deeper and quicker penetration. After all of the strips are in place and activated, the pain should go away.”

“I hope so,” Llyr said, taking a deep breath. “If this is the fastest way, let’s do it. The longer she is with my people, the worse it will be.” He sat on the ground and started removing his clothes.

Once he was naked, he used the table to help him get up. “Now what?”

“Move in front of the table top, facing it.” Llyr moved to the table top and stood on a metal plate they had attached to the end. He did his best not to shake from the strain of standing unsupported.

Lucretius put his hand in front of Llyr’s face and then moved it to the table. The area of the table in front of Llyr’s face sank in as soon as the ghost touched it.

“Put your face into the hole and lean against the table top.”

Llyr did as he was told, but was unable to put much of his weight into the table.

“Golem, return the table to 0 degrees.” Llyr was lifted as the table top moved.

“Llyr, we are going to begin placing the strips of moon silver on you,” Socrates told him.

“Fall asleep if you can,” Lucretius added.

Llyr closed his eyes and felt the first strip placed down the length of his back. He could feel each pin point resting against his skin. After they had laid the thickest strips down his back, they laid thinner strips down his arms and legs.

There was no way Llyr was falling asleep with all of the pin points on him. “Will you explain exactly what you are doing?”

“These first strips follow your nervous system.” Socrates explained.

“Nervous system?”

“Nerves are the paths in your body that allow your brain to send signals to each part of you. The nervous system is reinforced first to make sure that your brain can handle the unexpected sensory input which the infusion of magic will cause.”

Llyr shut his mouth. If he asked for a better explanation, he was sure he would end up more confused. He thought for a moment. “How is this going to strengthen my muscles?”

“This won’t strengthen your muscles,” Socrates said. “With a reinforced nervous system, the signals from your brain will reach your muscles faster, so you will have better reaction time.”

“So, I’ll be quicker.”

“Yes.”

“I thought you said this would make me stronger.”

“The last set of strips will do that. We will put those in place after we have secured these. Lucretius, are we ready?”

“Yes,” Lucretius replied. “Llyr, this will hurt.”

Llyr was about to ask what would hurt when they began to press on the strips, pushing the pins into his skin. He grunted at the pain and moaned as they moved down the strips, making sure that every pin had punctured his skin.

“Golem, grab me some rags from the storage closet at the end of the room.” Socrates said. Llyr could feel his blood running from the strips in thin lines. Soon the golem was back and they wiped him clean of blood.

“Llyr, we are going to stand you up because we need to be able to place strips around the front of you. The golem will help support you.” The table tilted back up and Llyr wobbled as he put his weight on his legs. The golem placed its hands under his arm pits and the two ghosts began to wrap the thinnest strips of moonsilver around his arms, legs and body.

Llyr gritted his teeth as they pressed each strip into place one by one. They wiped the blood away as they worked. Llyr was not sure how long he stood there, but he had put all of his weight on the golem by the end, his own strength long gone.

“All of the strips are in place,” Lucretius announced. Socrates picked up a wand with a glowing sapphire on the top.

“Are we done then?” Llyr asked.

“No,” Socrates answered. “We must infuse the strips with magic.”

“Will it hurt?”

“I imagine so. It will also knock you out.”

Llyr sighed. “Why didn’t you knock me out in the first place?”

“Lord Havaar found that the procedure was more successful if the subject was awake. Are you ready?”

“There’s a chance this will kill me, isn’t there?”

Socrates nodded.

Llyr took a deep breath. “Do it.”

Socrates pressed the wand into the top of the thickest strip. Llyr felt the energy rush into his body through the pins and pain spiked through his body. He welcomed the darkness that came.



CHAPTER Two

Rebecca jerked awake. She had felt something along her back and arms, but now it was gone. Had she imagined it? She grimaced as she shifted in her own filth. The only being she had seen in the days she had been here was the goblin that came once a day to feed her. At least, she thought it was once a day. If she was right, she had been here five days.

In that time, they had left her here, secured to the wall. Her wrists were scabbed over and she was sure there were trails of blood down her arms. Since they didn’t allow her to move, she had to relieve herself where she sat. Needless to say, her cell smelled horrible. The last three times the goblin had come, it brought buckets of water to throw onto her. It didn’t help with the smell for long, but she welcomed it. Even feeling a little clean was better than the alternative.

It grew harder and harder not to break as the days went by. Being trapped in a dark room and having to mess yourself was the worst of it. It was also difficult to sleep in this position, especially with the pain that spiked through her wrists when she moved them the wrong way. She was beginning to have frequent muscle cramps in her legs and arms. Since she had been here, she was sure she had only had a few hours of sleep and most of those had come on the first day before all of the aches and pains brought on by staying in the same position.

She found herself retreating into her core and focusing on the training she had received. It was the best method she had to distract herself, but that meditative state was becoming more and more difficult to achieve.

As she searched for calm, she focused on the soul link, which was connected to the core. She found that concentrating on Llyr helped her more than anything else. During her days in this cell, the soul link had been a place of peace and it had been the only way she had been able to find sleep since the first day. Today, however, it was throbbing. There was no peace in it. It felt more like Llyr was in pain.

*Did whoever capture me capture Llyr too? I never even thought of that.* The peace she had felt from the link had led her to believe that Llyr had escaped. Was he here in another cell? If that was the case, how were her captors blocking the soul link?

Her eyes popped opened at the sound of her cell being unlocked. Had it been a day already? She felt like the goblin had just been here. The door opened and she blinked her eyes stinging as they adjusted to the light. The figure that she could see through the blur wasn’t small enough to be the goblin.

The figure stepped back from the door. “Pick her up and bring her out here.” The figure said in Aldri.

A spike of fear shot through Rebecca as her captor’s identity was confirmed. Two Aldri entered the room and unlocked her restraints. They didn’t let her arms fall, but grabbed them and jerked her to her feet. She groaned as her muscles screamed in protest at the sudden change in position. They dragged her out of the cell into the hall.

The Aldri in the hall was dressed in an ornate robe and his red and black hair was braided halfway down his back. He looked at her with disgust and rubbed his nose. He touched a jewel attached to his robe below the shoulder. The jewel flashed and began to glow

“If you give us any trouble or don’t cooperate, you will be punished.” She heard him say in Aldri. The jewel’s glow began to pulse and then she heard his words English..

His face grew hard. “Do you understand me?”

Once again she heard it in both Aldri and English. “Yes,” She responded in English.

The robed Aldri tapped the jewel again and the glow faded. “She stinks.” He said in Aldri to the ones holding her up. This time she didn’t heard him repeated in English. The jewel was a translator. *They don’t know I speak Aldri.*

“Take her and clean her off,” The Aldri commanded. “I refuse to work with that smell. I’ll send a healer to make it so she can walk.”

She was then dragged through the halls. She didn’t pay attention to her surroundings as one thought occupied her mind; they didn’t know she could speak Aldri. Why else would the Aldri wizard have used the translation spell? If they had known she could speak their language, he wouldn’t have bothered. *They probably would be more careful what they say around me.*

This realization gave Rebecca some hope. If they were loose with their tongues around her because they assumed she couldn’t understand them, she might be able to find out their plans for her. She wasn’t sure how it would benefit her, but she would take any advantage she could get. It might even lead to being able to escape. She would have to be very careful and not let them know that she could understand them.

The guards took her into a room that was taken up by a large pool of water. The guards stood at the edge of the pool and looked at each other.

“We aren’t supposed to allow them in with their clothes on,” the guard holding her right arm said. “How do we get her to undress?”

“I don’t know,” the other guard said. “I’m no wizard.”

“We’ll get in trouble if we just throw her in. We’ll have to undress her ourselves.”

“Oh, I don’t like this. Let’s just cut her clothes off. It will be faster.”

“Right. I’ll take top, you take bottom.”

Rebecca had to stop herself from undressing or she would give herself away. They dropped her to the floor and pulled out knives and began to slice her clothes, not being very careful and cutting her in the process. In less than a minute, they had her naked. They picked her up by the legs and arms and threw her into the water.

She hit the cold water and struggled to get her head up. Her feet hit the bottom of the pool and she pushed herself up. She sputtered and took deep breaths as she adapted to the cold. She wiped the water from her face and opened her eyes to see the guards staring at her. The water was only waist deep and she yelped and crouched so only her head was above the water.

“See, she’s fine. Find a robe for her.” One guard walked toward some closets in the wall. The other threw a sponge into the water, splashing her face. She shook her head and glared at the guard. He pointed to the sponge and began to rub his chest then pointed at her.

She was tempted to act like she didn’t understand, but the opportunity to be clean was too much to pass up. She grabbed the sponge then hesitated. The guard nodded and turned around. The other guard walked back to the edge, dropping a gray robe on the floor and then turned around.

Rebecca watched them as she stood and started to scrub herself. The sponge was infused with some kind of smelly soap. It was a smell she was unfamiliar with, but it wasn’t bad and it was much better than smelling of your own filth.

She groaned as she moved her aching muscles for the first time in days. The sores that had developed on her bottom stung as the water and soap washed over them. The pain was so intense that she couldn’t keep tears from leaking from her eyes. Her movements were slow since the stiffness in her limbs radiated pain with each motion.

The door to the room opened and another Aldri entered. She put her arm across her breasts. This Aldri was dressed in robes that were lighter in color than the wizard’s. His hair was in a small braid that hung to his shoulders. The two guards gave him a small bow. He nodded and looked at her, disgust coming onto his face before he turned around. “I was hoping to avoid seeing her naked. It’s so disgusting. Get her out and clothe her. The wizards are growing impatient.”

“Do you have a translation jewel?”

“Do I look like a wizard?”

The guard sighed and turned around. He pointed at her and then at the robe sitting on the floor, then repeated the motions.

Rebecca kept her hand over her chest as she nodded and the guard turned back around. She lowered herself into the cold water to rinse off the soap and then moved toward the edge. When she reached it, she stood. She looked around for a towel, but there was none. She shook off as much water as she could, moaning at the pain. She picked up the robe and pulled it over her head, having to pull it down as the fabric clung to her wet skin.

One of the guards glanced over at her. “She’s dressed.”

They all looked at her and the robed Aldri walked around her, studying her. “Did you notice what her injuries were?”

“Her wrists are quite damaged and there are open sores on her backside. From all the moaning she was doing, I believe she is very sore and stiff. Are you going to heal her?”

“Yes.”

The guards looked at each other, surprised. “Why? Wouldn’t that defeat the purpose of keeping her in the cell?”

“The purpose was to weaken her resolve. The wizards want her able to move without trouble.” The Aldri reached into his robe and pulled out a small bottle. He studied her for a moment. “I wish I didn’t have to use this. It’s a waste to give it to her.” He held her gaze and mimed tipping the bottle to his mouth before handing it to her.

She hesitated, holding the bottle in her hands. She could feel the magic in the liquid inside the bottle and wanted to pull it into her, but the Aldri said this would heal her injuries. She had a lot of pain and would be glad to be rid of it.

Her cheek stung as the Aldri slapped her. She glared at him and he pointed at the bottle and then to her mouth. She could taste blood in her mouth as the slap had made her teeth cut the inside of her cheek. Still glaring at the Aldri, she pulled the cork out of the bottle and downed the liquid.

It tasted very bitter and stung the cut. The pain soon began to fade as she felt magic rush through her body into the areas that had been injured. She gasped as the pain in her wrists and backside flared as the magic forced the skin to heal quickly. Not all the magic from the potion went to her injuries. A small amount of magic flowed into her core.

The robed Aldri grabbed the now empty bottle from her. “The wizards are waiting for her in the observation room at the end of hall.” He then left the room.

The guards stared at the door for a moment before looking at each other. “I don’t know who I like less, the healers or the wizards.”

“They’re all about the same to me.” The guard put his hand on Rebecca’s back and gave her a push toward the door. The first guard opened it and walked in front of her while the other followed behind.

As she exited, she looked up and down the hall. It was bare stone with thick, wooden doors spaced along the corridor. Most of the doors had hinged cut outs at eye level, with strong, metal locks keeping them closed. The hall was lit by round globes secured to the walls just above her head. The light that shone from them was like the lights that were in Havaar’s school.

As she followed the guard, she reached out with her magic toward the globes and found a barrier around them. This barrier was like the one that surrounded her cell and the hall. She latched onto it and pulled at the magic that kept the barrier in place. It resisted her pull, like it was stuck in place. She yanked at it and the magic flew into her. The light flickered as the barrier disappeared and she could feel the magic from the globe.

The guards didn’t react to the flickering light. She now had more magic than before, but not enough to escape with. She didn’t dare pull the magic from the globe because the guards would notice if the light were suddenly gone. There were many lights along the hall as they walked, barriers placed around each one. She pulled the magic from each barrier as they passed it.

By the time they reached their destination, Rebecca had pulled a moderate amount of magic into her core. The guard led her through a large double door, into a room with a high ceiling and a balcony, set off above the floor, lined with seats. The room had a half dozen guards with long weapons standing around the room and there were two robed Aldri conversing in the center. One had a long braid down his back, past the waist, and the other’s braid stopped just below mid back.

They looked at her and she recognized the one that had told the guards to clean her up. “Did she give you any trouble?”

“No.”

“Assume your posts.” The guards gave the wizards deep bows and then walked to stand along the wall with the other guards.

The Aldri tapped the jewel on his chest. “We will give you some magic and then you will do what we tell you to do with it. Do you understand?”

Rebecca waited until the translation finished. “Yes, I understand.”

The Aldri nodded and pulled a bottle from his robes. He uncorked it and a small amount of magic spilled from it. Rebecca breathed in and the magic flowed into her.

“Create a small flame for us.”

Rebecca looked him in the eyes. “No.”

The Aldri slapped her, leaving a red hand print on her cheek. “Create a small flame for us.”

“No.” Rebecca blocked the next slap and stepped back.

The guards along the wall began to move toward her, but stopped when the other robed Aldri held up his hand.

The Aldri who had been talking to her tapped the jewel. “May I punish her?”

“No.” The Aldri walked around her, studying her. “She is not ready for this. She needs more time.”

“If you would allow me to help with the breaking process, she will be ready sooner.”

“I wish I could, but the Archwizard’s instructions are very clear. She is to be in good health so that we may study all aspects of her magic.”

“Nothing will change if you don’t let me do more to break her.”

The Aldri nodded. “I agree. We will put her back in her cell, for ten days this time. Feed her only every other day. That will keep her healthy enough, but will weaken her resolve.”

“Thank you. I will make sure it happens.”

“Remember to drain her of magic.”

Rebecca wasn’t going to go back into that cell. It was clear that these Aldri had no idea what she was capable of and now she was going to show them. “You know, you really shouldn’t reveal your plans to your prisoner.” She said in Aldri.

The two Aldri stared at her and she moved. She threw her hands forward, throwing them across the room into the wall. They hit the wall and fell to the floor, neither moving. She whipped her magic about in thick strands of energy, knocking over the guards before they started to move.

She reached out with what remained of the magic she had and pulled the magic from the barrier that encompassed the room. As it disappeared, magical energy poured in the room, allowing her to fill her reserve.

She blasted the door and ran into the hall, destroying the barrier that kept the magic out. She ran down the hall, away from the area they had brought her from. She turned a corner and there were two Aldri standing beside a door. She knocked them out and threw the door off of its hinges. She entered a larger room that had doors to her right and left and a solid wall in front of her. She heard shouting and footsteps from the doorway on her left. She raised a section of earth in the doorway, blocking the entrance to the room.

*That should keep them out for a bit,* she thought to herself. *If I keep going through the building, I’ll run into more Aldri and will end up killing some.* She was afraid that she had killed the two wizards, but she couldn’t worry about that right now. She wouldn’t allow them to use her as some guinea pig, but she was going to avoid fighting. She wasn’t sure how well she would do when she had to fight the Aldri wizards.

*Well, if I can’t go through the halls, I need to get outside.* She punched at the solid wall, breaking a hole in it. It led outside and she ran out. She stopped and stared as she looked at the sky. It was a swirling mass of clouds colored black, purple, red, and every other color as it never stood still. Lightning, streams of fire, and even jets of water shot down from the clouds, impacting on a barrier far above her. In the distance, above more buildings, a tornado of flame spun its way on top of the barrier.

Rebecca shook herself from her shock and ran down a sloping hill to a wall that ran around the compound surrounding the building. Spikes lined the top of the wall and she could feel the magic that was infused into it.

“Stop!” a voice yelled out behind her. She ignored it and drained the magic out of the wall and ripped down the section in front of her. She hurried through and raised her own wall in its place. The wall had been built only a few feet from the edge of an elevated area, with a drop of about twenty feet. Below her she could see a small road that led to some buildings in the distance. The prison and other buildings were surrounded by another wall. Atop that wall shone bright crystals, magic pulsing from them. *Those must keep the barrier in place. Otherwise, this place would have been destroyed long ago.*

“Get through that wall, now! Before she escapes!”

Rebecca threw her hands out, creating a barrier shaped like a slide. She jumped onto it and slid down it to the road. She took a tumble at the bottom because she was going fast. As soon as she was on her feet, she reabsorbed the magic from the slide, making it disappear.

She looked down the road to the buildings and then at the outer wall. *If I go to those buildings, they will find me. I’m on the Aldri world and none of them will help me. If I go outside the barrier, I might get killed by that magical storm.* She studied it some more and noticed that the worst of it was overhead. *I wonder if it is attracted to the barrier.*

“She’s on the road!”

Rebecca looked up and saw several Aldri staring down at her. With no other options, she sprinted to the outer wall and broke a hole through it, replacing it after she was through. Now that she was outside of the barrier, she could feel the dark magic around her. It made her feel dirty, but she ignored the feeling and ran toward some mountains she could see nearby.

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Brigid walked idly around her mother’s mansion. This was not the home where she had grown up. Her mother had only been the Archwizard for the last ten years and had moved into this house after attaining that position. It was huge and empty. It had more rooms than any other house she had been in. She had been counting them as she wandered, but had stopped after she reached 30.

Why her mother felt the need to live in a place like this was beyond her. The walls and halls were covered in artwork of every type. It made it feel like a museum. One wing of the mansion was dedicated to throwing parties. It had a large ballroom and an equally large dining room, with its own set of kitchens and storage. It all felt so empty and lonely.

Brigid liked the home that she had grown up in, a modest house for the noble family she had been born into. Her mother had dragged her to parties and events and she had caused problems with her friend, Eilwen. She had been happy and then she had been sent to the Conclave.

Brigid shook her head, wondering why she was thinking about the past. It had been more than sixty years since that time and it was never coming back. She was now a respected Hunter and her mother was the Archwizard. Remembering the past would only make things harder.

The fact was, she was bored. She had been put on a week of rest and recovery. They wanted to make sure that she was fit and able before giving her a new assignment. She had explored the house the first day and, since no one was allowed out into the mountains because of the magical storms, she was looking for something to do.

All of the things that needed to be done around the house were done by servants and Brigid didn’t dare help them. She had done that the second day and her mother had been very upset. Crossing class boundaries was shameful and could cause their house to lose face. She rolled her eyes as she thought of the lecture she had received from her mother, given in a tone she hadn’t heard since she was twelve.

She had written out a detailed report of what had happened on Earth and given it to the wizards, though she doubted they even read it. They seemed to think that handling the humans would be easy and she knew they were in for a big surprise. Maybe if she could talk to her mother about it.

A servant was walking down the hall and stopped in front of her, bowing. “The Archwizard wishes to see you in the front hall. You are instructed to bring your Hunter’s kit.”

Brigid stared at him in surprise. “Thank you. Please tell the Archwizard I will be there as soon as I can.” The servant bowed again and walked away. Brigid walked briskly into the room that she had been given.

Why would her mother want her to bring her Hunter’s kit? There were no threats in this area of the world. Were they going somewhere threatening? It was better not to question why. She would find out soon enough.

She entered the entry hall, still securing her sword to her belt. Her mother was there, her robes an elegant design of gold, silver, and purple. Her staff was a smooth black and white wood topped by a large emerald. Her hair was done in an elaborate set of braids that almost reached the floor. As Brigid walked toward her mother, she shifted her vision to be able to see magic. The amount of enchantments and protection spells around her mother almost blinded her, but she could never resist the urge to look at it.

“Ah, you are here,” her mother said. “The coach is waiting.”

Outside, a large carriage sat with a small squad of guards around it. They entered the carriage and it was moving before they were settled into their seats.

Brigid placed her sword on the floor next to her seat, securing it with a leather strap that was connected to the floor. “Where are we going?”

The Archwizard looked up from some papers she was reading. “We are going to see your friend, the human.”

“Why?”

“Today is the first day they are going to attempt to study the way she uses magic. In fact, they should have already begun. I want to see how it is going.”

“Why am I here? You don’t need me to research magic.”

“You are here because the first attempt to break her has not been as effective as we wished. I hope seeing you might aid in that process. She still doesn’t know that you were the one to capture her.”

Brigid felt guilt trying to make its way to the surface, but she pushed it back down, revealing nothing on her face. “How did you attempt to break her? Torture? Starvation?”

“No physical torture beyond leaving her in a cell without being able to move. We have been feeding her once a day since magic use requires that the user have some strength. At first it seemed to be working, but she was able to control herself and keep calm through the days of her isolation.”

“Is it wise to be jumping ahead before she is broken?”

“No, but we have no time.” The Archwizard put the papers in a pocket beside her. “This is another reason I’m bringing you along. I’m hoping you might have some insight into how to break her.”

Brigid sighed. “I put everything I could think of into my report. Have you read it?”

“I haven’t had the time.”

“I hope whatever wizard you put in charge of her took the time to read it.”

“I’m sure he did.”

*I doubt it.* Brigid thought. Her mother’s attitude was prevalent among all the Aldri wizards. It was very annoying not to be taken seriously when returning from a mission. She wished that she could say that this was the only time that this had happened, but it was the norm. She was sure that most of the reports which she had turned in were never read. “You do understand she is dangerous, right?”

The Archwizard smiled. “We can handle a novice magic user.”

“That’s what Overwizard Aaden thought.”

“I won’t make the same mistakes as Aaden.”

“I hope not.” Brigid leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. She was sick of talking, but expected her mother to demand her attention. To her surprise, she heard the rustle of paper indicating that her mother had pulled out whatever she had been studying before.

Brigid’s annoyance grew. Despite being asked to come along, it was clear that her opinion didn’t matter to her mother. This was a common annoyance for her. The wizards who often sent the Hunters out on missions didn’t seem to care about what was found. Too many times Brigid had seen more die then was needful because her advice went unheeded. After a short journey, the carriage came to a stop and one of the guards opened the door.

Brigid grabbed her sword and got out of the carriage. She wasn’t expecting the chaos she stepped into. There were people running about everywhere, shouting.

“We need a healer inside! We have injured!”

“She is heading east toward the mountains! Assemble a group to pursue her!”

Brigid looked back at her mother, who looked as surprised as she was. People began to notice her and stopped, staring at her with fear on their faces. The noise in the area died as everyone realized the Archwizard was present.

After a moment, an armored soldier rushed forward and knelt. “Archwizard, we did not know you were coming.”

“What is going on here, Captain?”

“The…the…the human has escaped.”

Brigid shifted her vision and saw that the east side of the building had the magical energy that Rebecca used all around it. The trail of magic led to the wall, where a section of the wall was different and saturated with the magic.

The Archwizard’s face hardened. “Where is Wizard Mervyn?”

“Wizard Mervyn is dead. He was found in the test chamber. He was thrown against the wall quite hard.”

“And his Underwizard?”

“Alive, but injured. The healers are tending him.”

“Take me to him.”

“Of course.” The Captain leaped up and hurried toward the building. “Keep getting ready! We have to go after her as soon as possible.”

“Brigid, what do you see?” The Archwizard asked.

“She ripped down a section of the eastern wall,” Brigid answered. “She then raised a section of earth to block the path.”

They followed the Captain into the building and through the halls until they reached the medical ward. The local healer was standing over an Aldri whose face had a large bruise and a broken nose.

The Healer looked up and flinched before bowing. “Archwizard.”

“How is he?”

“The force with which he was thrown against the wall broke most of the bones in his body. The fact that he is still alive is amazing.”

“How long until he can tell us what happened?”

“I have to keep him in a coma until I reconstruct each of the bones. If I wake him too soon, the pain he is in cause him to go into shock he would most likely die. It will be a minimum of three weeks until he ready wake up.”

“I don’t have several weeks,” the Archwizard said. “Captain, send a message to Overwizard Daire that I need a memory extraction.”

“You can’t do that,” the Healer protested. “A memory extraction will kill him.”

“Then he will die in the service of his people.”

“His family will be very upset. This could threaten your alliance with them.”

“I will deal with Overwizard Aodh. Prepare your patient for the extraction.”

The Archwizard turned to the Captain. “Take me to the room where this all happened.”

They walked through the halls in silence, the Captain’s anxiety becoming more evident with each passing moment. He would turn his head and open his mouth, only to close it again after a look at the Archwizard. Brigid saw this happen several times and had to control her laughter each time it happened. The Captain had good reason to fear her mother and she didn’t want to draw her mother’s ire by breaking the tension that kept the Captain off guard.

As they walked through the halls, a part of the wall was broken open, leading into another room. As she looked closer, the wall was in a door frame. Confused, she changed her vision and saw the wall had been raised by Rebecca, blocking the doorway. The guards must have broken through to follow her.

She changed her vision back to normal and had to rush to catch up to the other two. Her mother looked at her when she caught up. Brigid opened her mouth, but the Archwizard’s stare hardened and she kept silent.

They came to a doorway that had its door blasted off the hinges, pieces of wood scattered around the hall. In the large room, several bodies had been covered with blankets, but the room showed no other signs of a struggle.

“Do you have any idea what happened here?” the Archwizard asked.

“One guard who was on duty was not knocked unconscious,” the Captain responded. “He said they brought the human in and gave her some magic. They attempted to get her to create a small flame, but she refused. After several attempts, Wizard Mervyn decided she needed more time in her cell. It was then that she spoke Aldri and attacked, pushing the wizards into the wall and lashing out at the guards in the room with some sort of magical whips. She then blasted the door and ran out.”

“They were supposed to take precautions,” the Archwizard said, scanning the room. “Why weren’t the barriers put in place?”

“Wizard Mervyn put the barriers up himself, Archwizard.”

“This room is full of magic. Brigid, can you tell if there were any barriers?”

“There were barriers around this room,” Brigid confirmed. “I can see traces of them. However, Rebecca pulled the magic out of them.”

“Rebecca?” the Captain asked.

“Excuse the Hunter,” the Archwizard said. “She has some familiarity with the human. The amount of magic given to her wouldn’t have been enough to do what she did.”

“Then she got more magic elsewhere,” Brigid told her. “I told the wizards she was dangerous, but they brushed me off. I doubt Wizard Mervyn read my report or he would have been better prepared.”

“Did you mention that she speaks Aldri in this report?”

“Yes.”

Her mother took a deep breath and looked around the room again. A soldier ran into the room and spoke to the Captain. “Our hunting party is ready to leave, but we have to wait for a tracker.”

“Where is your assigned tracker?” the Archwizard inquired.

The Captain pointed at one of the covered bodies.

“And you have no hunter assigned here?”

The Captain shook his head.

“Brigid, you will lead the hunting party and capture this human. This is a minor setback and I won’t have it disrupting my timetable.”

“As you command.”

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Rebecca stopped to catch her breath as the incline leveled out a little. She had been running for a fair amount of time. She was so grateful for the training that Havaar had put them through. A year ago she would have been worn-out after the first ten minutes. She looked back across the blasted terrain. It looked like it may have once been covered in vegetation, but most of that was now dead and what remained was yellow and dying. She noticed a large group of figures in the distance, moving towards her.

She looked down at the way she had come. *There is no way they could follow my path at that speed. The heavy wind is obscuring most of my tracks. How are they following me?* There was no doubt in her mind that they were following the route she had taken. She watched as the group snaked along her route, following her exact movements.

*How could they be following me so precisely? They must have a very skilled tracker, someone to hunt me.* She closed her eyes as it came to her. *They have a Hunter leading them. Llyr said that magic users leave a trail of magic behind, especially after using large amounts.* How could she obscure her trail? There was magic all round her, but her magic was unique and would be easy to follow. There had to be a way to get rid of her trail.

She reached out, feeling the magic around her. She flinched and withdrew as she touched a pocket of dark magic. She became aware of the dark energy moving about in small amounts. They seemed to be attracted to each other, combining into larger pieces. All were moving toward a huge mass a short distance from her. She took a deep breath and reached out again, staying away from the dark magic.

She could sense her trail, but it would not respond to her efforts to draw it in. It was similar to water on concrete. You could see that water had been there, but there was no way to soak up all the moisture. The only way to hide the trail that a stream of water left was to spray water on the rest of the concrete.

Thinking of water reminded her how thirsty she was. She didn’t know when she would find any and she really needed a drink. She didn’t want to use up her magic reserves because she didn’t want to draw in any of the dark magic, but she needed a drink. She put her hand together like she was trying to cover a ball inside, leaving a small opening between her top thumb and index finger, and filled the space with magic and created water.

She sucked the water out of her hands, some of it spilling onto the ground. She wiped the moisture clinging to her hands on her face, enjoying the coolness. She looked up and the group of Aldri had covered at least half the distance she had put between them. She needed to do something to hide her trail. She needed to wet the concrete.

Creating that small handful of water had taken a good portion of her reserve, but she thought she had enough to do what she needed to do. She raised her hands above her head and began to pour most of her magic into the area between her hands. She took a deep breath and spun the energy with her hands, pushing out with her magical strength, sending a mighty gust of wind and energy all around her.

As she felt about her, all she could feel was her magic and the dark magic. She smiled and continued up the mountain.

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Brigid stopped as she saw and felt the rush of wind and energy blow past her. She started laughing. *Clever.*

“Why are you laughing? Why have you stopped?” The Soldier in charge asked.

Brigid looked at him. “The human has obscured her trail. I have nothing to follow.”

“How?”

“She filled this area with her magic. All I can see here is her magic and dark magic. By the time her magic dissipates, the trail will be gone.”

“Do you have any idea which direction the magic came from?”

“The surge came from up there. I’m guessing she saw us from up on the mountain and decided to make it harder to find her.”

The Soldier punched his hand. “How would she know to do this? I’ve served with Hunters before and this has never happened.”

Brigid smiled. “She is soul linked to a Hunter. She has more insight into a Hunter’s abilities than any magic user you will meet.”

“We can still catch her. Double time up the mountain!”

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Rebecca hurried up onto the ledge. The climb had become steeper and more dangerous, but she couldn’t stop. She sat on the ledge and looked down at the place where she had sent out her magic.

The Aldri had reached the place, but were now spreading out and looking all around for her. Her plan had worked and now they didn’t have a trail to follow, but if she stayed here they would find her. She had to keep moving.

She got up and noticed a cave in the mountain. Did she dare go inside? She shook her head, moving to side of the opening. Most caves ended and would be a waste of her time. She didn’t want to come back out and find that the Aldri were right here. As she passed by the mouth of the cave, she felt the air moving through. Maybe it was not so shallow.

There was no telling if the cave led to anywhere, but she was sick of climbing this mountain. If there was a way through the mountain, she would take it. Maybe quick look inside wouldn’t take too long and it might save her a lot of scrapes and bruises.

There was no light beyond the entrance and she could not tell how far back the cave went. There was, however, a pocket of clean magic and she absorbed it. After getting another drink, she created a ball of light in her palm.

The cave was long and she couldn’t see the back wall. She walked in and after a few minutes came to a point where it branched into two paths. She looked back toward the entrance, which was now only a dim light in the distance. Did she continue farther in or go back to climbing the mountain? There were almost no places of dark magic in here, giving her a continuous supply of energy.

She nodded to herself. She didn’t want to see what effect dark magic would have on her if she absorbed it. She hoped that these paths led somewhere. She sent magic down each path to hide which one she would take. She chose right and began walking farther into the mountain.

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Brigid stood at the mouth of cave with the Soldier swearing beside her. “Doing that isn’t helping the situation.”

“You’re sure she went in here?”

“Yes, I am.”

“Then we’ve lost her. I didn’t bring the right equipment to go into these caves. Without the right tools, we won’t be able move beyond the first junctions.”

“Do you want to tell the Archwizard we failed to find her?”

The Soldier resumed his swearing.

Brigid smiled and entertained a traitorous thought. *Keep going, Rebecca.*