

Descendent

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PROLOGUE

The dragon shot out of the entrance to his lair. He adjusted his flight trajectory and sped south across the rolling green hills. He was flying so fast that many of the people, hard at work in the fields, did not notice him as he rushed above the landscape. Within minutes, he could see his destination; a piece of ground not unlike the rest of the green fields around it. Most of the year, this place was no different from anywhere else. Today, however, was the summer solstice and this piece of ground was centered on the conflux of the two strongest magical currents that flowed through space around Earth.

A man was standing where the magic was centered. He was older, his white hair and beard well kept. He watched as the dragon landed on the ground in front of him, then bowed. “My lord, it is good to see you.”

The dragon nodded. “What are you doing here?”

“Preparing.”

The dragon waited for more but the old man said nothing. “What

are you preparing?”

“I’m going to cast a spell.”

The dragon sighed. “We are beyond such childish games. Tell me specifically what spell you are preparing to cast.”

“Why should I tell you?” the old man said caustically. “You’ve always told me you don’t interfere.”

“Ah, I see,” the dragon said. “You’re angry with me because I didn’t come and help at Camlann.”

“Of course I’m angry,” the old man replied. “You could have turned the tide of the battle. Instead, the sword is once again with the Lady of the Lake and Arthur is in a deep, healing sleep on Avalon. Arthur’s vassals continue to fight Mordred’s forces and are beginning to turn on each other. Everything that Arthur and I worked for is crumbling before my eyes and there is nothing I can do to stop it.”

“My duty is to protect this world from the Aldri, not to force the development of civilization down a path of my choosing,” the dragon replied.

“Your very presence on this world changes the path civilization is taking,” the old man countered. “How is that not interference?”

“It is passive,” the dragon said. “I cannot change the consequences of my presence but I can control how active I am in using my power and influence to affect the development of this world.”

“Then there is no need to worry about what spell I’m casting,” the old man said. “What I am doing will in no way affect your task.”

“The only reason to cast your spell at this location at this time of year is to access the conflux of magical currents. Any spell that requires that much energy can potentially interfere with my mission,” the dragon told him.

“Believe me when I say you will not even notice what I’m going to do.”

“I will be the judge of that,” the dragon said.

The old man turned away from the dragon and walked for a moment. He then turned back to him, “From here, I will take away mankind’s ability to use magic.”

“That is not possible,” the dragon said. “You cannot take away what is born in every human. Magic is a part of your existence, as much a part as water is. Without it, mankind will die.”

The old man shook his head. “I did not say I was going to take magic away from humans, merely the ability to use it.”

“Why?”

“Because humans cannot be trusted with that much power,” the old man explained. “Every major disaster caused by humans has been because of magic. Mankind will always misuse power.”

“What about the great things that have been done with magic?” the dragon asked. “How much knowledge has been gained with the aid of magic? How many have been healed who would have died? The great buildings that have been constructed? This was all done with the aid of magic. What you and Arthur accomplished...”

“Arthur is gone!” the old man said, cutting the dragon off. “Because of a magic user! Everything that we accomplished is undone because of one magic user. I will not allow it to happen again.”

“Removing mankind’s ability to use magic will not change what is in their hearts,” the dragon told him. “You will still have great tragedies caused by men.”

“Without magic, they will not be as large,” the old man said.

“You are approaching this the wrong way. Taking away the tools people use to destroy does not change the desire. Unless you change the heart, they will find another way. You will force mankind down the road of technology, which can be just as powerful as magic.”

The old man locked eyes with the dragon. “By the time technology is as powerful as magic maybe humans will have learned self-control.”

“Do you really believe that?”

“It is my hope,” the old man said.

The dragon sighed. “You realize that you will be ripped apart by the magic before you finish casting the spell? Not even I could channel the whole of the conflux; that is what you will need to do to cast this spell.”

“I will have a harness,” the old man said, looking to the west.

The dragon turned just as the head of a giant, holding two large stones on his shoulders, came into view. More giants came into view, each carrying stones.

“Here, I will build a conductor that will allow me to control the flow of the conflux,” the old man explained. “Within the moon stone structure, I will be able to cast my spell.”

“You will still be dead when you release the spell,” the dragon said. “Even with the conductor, you will need ten to twenty wizards assisting you in order to survive.”

“I will survive long enough to cast the spell,” the old man said. “After that, I have no desire to remain alive.”

The dragon stared at the old man, not saying a word. Soon, the first giant reached them. The old man held up his hand, causing the giant to stop. “Well, my lord, are you going to allow me to cast the spell or are you going to kill me?”

The dragon walked several hundred feet away before turning and settling on the ground, watching him. The old man nodded, feeling both relief and disappointment. He turned to the giants. “Place the stones in the holes I make.” The giants nodded, waiting.

The old man began to use magic to dig holes in the ground, each large enough for one of the stones. Once all of the holes were filled, forming two concentric circles, he took the remaining stones and laid them across the standing stones.

The giants left after he was done and the old man stood in the middle of the inner ring. The dragon was still sitting where he had settled, watching.

The old man took a deep breath. This is it, he thought. He threw out his hands, magic streaming into the stones. They began to glow. He put his hands down, the glow of the stones beginning to dim and held his breath. Is this not going to work? A pulse then went through the stones as they began to draw on the magic within the conflux and they started to glow brighter than before. He closed his eyes and began to pull the magic out of the stones. As it filled him, he felt the power of the conflux surging as it tried to rush into him. He reduced the power of the stream of magic from the stone. Once he was comfortable with the flow of magic, he brought his hands up in front of him, the earth before him rising. He then rotated his hands, palms facing each other, and a ball formed at the top of the mound of earth. He stuck his hands into the ball and sent magic into the planet, feeling the shape of the land that formed the crust of the Earth, the water that covered its surface and all the different forms of life that relied on its resources.

As he withdrew his hands from the ball, portions of it began to rise, showing each of the world's continents. He opened his eyes, looking into the globe as water began to fill where the oceans, lakes and rivers would be. His hands hovered over the globe, allowing the magic to replicate every living thing on Earth on the surface of his model.

Once the model globe was complete, the old man began to wave his arms in opposite circles, pulling the globe in two different directions. The sweat that was merely beads moments before began to stream down his face as the exertion of controlling the flow from the conflux and casting the spell began to take its toll. He grimaced as the sweat stung his eyes but he dared not wipe it away lest he interrupt the spell, which could be disastrous. After a time, the model began to expand and stretch. As it pulled apart, new earth formed and prevented any tearing until he had two identical globes connected by a single point. Magic streamed around each globe, covering them in a light fog. Once each world was covered, he put a barrier between the fog of magic and the globe on his left. Holding the barrier in place with one hand, he began to pull life forms off the left globe and put them on the right. Once all the forms representing magical life were removed from the left model, he pushed his hand forward, expanding the barrier between the two globes.

The old man stood still, his hands still maintaining the barriers. He

took a deep breath and relaxed a little, preparing his body and mind for the next, most difficult step of his spell. He needed all of the power of the conflux to cover the actual world with his barrier and he might burn up before he could complete it. Whether he was successful or not, he would be dead. With one last breath, he drew deeply on the magic from the stones; the glow intensified. The glow continued to brighten as he drew more and more magic from the conflux into the stones and then into himself.

He was burning. The amount of magic he was now holding would soon destroy him. Everything blurred as he drew in more and more energy. Unable to see but able to feel everything through magic, the old man threw his hands outwards and the magic burst from the confines of the stone and covered the world.

The dragon watched as the world shuddered from the barriers being thrown into place, successfully separating humans from the world of magic. *I can't believe he did it*, the dragon thought. He had been sure the old man would die before he was able to finish the casting. The dragon walked over to the destroyed structure. A few of the stones were still standing and intact but most of them had disintegrated as the spell was released. There was no sign of the old man or his body. Releasing the magic had torn his body apart, spreading his essence throughout the barrier he had just created.

The dragon shook his head, not knowing the consequences of this action. Maybe he should have just killed the old man but it had not felt right. The one good thing about this was that he would be able to observe the growth of a technological race from almost the beginning. It should make for some interesting research... if the spell lasted that long.

CHAPTER ONE

Rebecca flung open the door, entering the soup kitchen. "Sorry for being late," she said to Dave, who ran the kitchen. "It's been a hectic day."

"It's okay," Dave said, not looking up from his paperwork. "You're on the line today."

Rebecca took off her sunglasses, putting them and her purse in a locker. She grabbed an apron and while putting it on, she made her way to the food line. She touched Stacy's shoulder. "I can take this side."

"Oh, thank goodness you're here," Stacy said. "We're swamped."

A long line of homeless people snaked around the dining hall and out the door. *I hope we have enough food*, Rebecca thought. She scooped up a pile of mashed potatoes and put it on the tray of the man in front of her, smiling while looking him in the eye. His face blanched and he looked away, moving quickly down the line.

Confused, Rebecca looked at Stacy, whose smile disappeared when their eyes met. Stacy then whispered "You forgot your contacts."

Rebecca felt the blood drain from her face as she spun around and fled to the mirror in the back. Her reflection showed her eyes, red around the irises instead of white, narrow pupils shot with gold veins.

She ran to her locker flinging it open. "Where are they?" She mumbled as she rummaged through her purse, then dumped its contents onto the floor..

"Rebecca, what are you doing?" Dave said, coming up behind her. "We need you..." His voice trailed off as she looked up at him. "Jake!" he yelled. "Get on the food line; Rebecca will wash."

"What! I was on the line yesterday."

"Just do it," Dave responded. "We have a situation."

"Fine, fine."

Rebecca slapped the floor. "My contacts are at home. I'm so sorry, I never forget..."

Dave touched her shoulder. "It's okay," he said. "We all forget things sometimes. Clean up your stuff and we'll have you wash the dishes."

Rebecca put everything back in her purse, stuffed it back into the locker, and walked to the dishwashing sink. She grabbed the high pressure sprayer and proceeded to spray food off the various dishes and set them into a large, pegged tray. Once the tray was full, she slid it into the washer and pulled down the metal doors, which started the wash cycle.

How could I forget my contacts? She moved her hand to her pocket and felt the necklace she had been studying before work. She had planned to leave it at home but shoved it in her pocket as she hurried out the door. *If James hadn't complicated things, I wouldn't be so flustered.*

"Did you really forget your contacts?" a male voice said behind her.

Rebecca turned to look at James. His smile grew wider at the sight of her eyes. "You should toss out those contacts. You look better this way."

Rebecca's hand balled into a fist. "I should.....get back to work." She spun away and grabbed the sprayer. "This is all your fault."

"My fault?" James asked. "How is it my fault?"

"Don't you act innocent," Rebecca said as she slammed dishes into the tray. "You and your 'I want to change our relationship.' You know I have no desire to become involved in a serious relationship right now. I don't have time."

"Should I have just let it lie?" James inquired. "We've always told each other what we were feeling. Should I have kept holding it in, not telling you how I felt?" He paused, waiting for her to reply.

Rebecca grabbed a large pan, the strong stream of water ringing

against the metal. Frustration raged in her but she didn't feel ready to answer his question.

"Where's the necklace I gave you?" James said when she stopped spraying the pan.

The weight in her pocket seemed to double. "It's in a safe place," she said after a moment.

She gasped when she felt his hand brush the back of her neck. "You're not wearing it," he said. "Did you leave it at home?"

Rebecca ignored the question, reaching for another pan. She jumped when he touched her on the hip. She spun, pushing his hand away.

His grin took up his whole face. "It's in your pocket, isn't it? You've been thinking about what I said."

Her face grew hot. "What else would I be thinking about?"

"Tell me what..."

"James, the garbage is starting to overflow," Dave said, patting him. "I know you two are best friends, but talking doesn't get the work done."

"I'll empty the trash cans right away," James told Dave. He looked back at Rebecca as he turned, giving her a 'we'll talk later' look.

Rebecca turned back to the dishes, her mind racing. Why couldn't he be happy with the way things were? Why did he want to complicate things? They had been best friends since before high school and now she felt that if she didn't give into to his desires, she would lose him.

What scared her most, though, was that there was a growing part of her that wanted the change that James desired.

Rebecca didn't want to think about it anymore. She concentrated on the pattern of her work: spraying the dishes, filling up the tray, putting it in the washer and pulling out of the washer. She got into a rhythm and was surprised when there were no more dishes. She looked out into the dining hall and saw that there were only a couple of people still eating and the other volunteers were cleaning up.

James came up beside her, setting down a large stack of serving pans. "Have you been thinking about what I said?"

"No," Rebecca replied, grabbing one of the pans.

"Rebecca, you can't avoid this issue forever."

"But I can avoid it right now." Rebecca looked out at the dirty dining hall. "We have to clean up."

"You know, I'm beginning to wonder if you even want to be friends anymore," James said as he walked away.

Rebecca stared after him, mouth open. *Did he really just say that?* Guilt was quickly replaced with anger. *He's trying to manipulate me. How dare he?* Rebecca slammed a rinsed pan into the tray.

"Easy on those," Dave said as he walked past carrying a bag of

food. "They aren't cheap."

"Sorry," Rebecca muttered, ashamed at her reaction. James had completely unhinged her. She took a deep breath, settling her nerves. *He's just following his emotions. I can't do the same thing.*

She got back to work, trying to find the rhythm she had before but she could not keep the thoughts away.

Why was this so important to James? Why was he willing to ruin their friendship? The more she thought about it, the more she realized that something else must be going on. She thought back to his words and realized that he must have been hiding his feelings for some time. What had changed? What had happened that was so important that he wanted to change their relationship *now*?

The crew finished cleaning up the kitchen and dining hall. Rebecca grabbed her purse and darted out the door, not wanting another confrontation with James. She needed to think through her confusion before she faced him again. She stopped at the door of her car, leaning on it as she let out a big sigh of relief.

After a moment, she opened her purse to retrieve her keys. She yelled as someone grabbed her. She spun about, her purse smacking James across the face.

He stumbled back, clutching his face. Rebecca gasped, dropped her purse and rushed over to him.

"James, are you okay? I'm so sorry."

He smiled. "I guess I deserved that, not letting you know I was behind you."

Rebecca started to shake her head but stopped. "Yes, you did deserve that. I'm still sorry."

"No problem. Listen, I know you don't want to talk to me right now, but can I get a ride home? I just missed the bus and I don't want to wait for the next one."

Rebecca stared at him for a moment. "Yeah, of course."

* * *

Llyr meditated in the preparation room. In a few moments he would begin his final test to attain the rank of Hunter. The test consisted of hunting down a magic user and killing him. This would take place in an arena prepared for him: Llyr had no idea how the arena would be laid out, if there were additional enemies, what race the magic user was, or how long the magic user would have to prepare defenses. This trial was a test, not only of his tracking and combat abilities, but also of his ability to react to unexpected situations.

He was not the only one being tested. Out of the 15 initiates that began training with him, 8 had survived. All 8 would be tested, each having a separate arena prepared for them. The Masters in charge of the arenas

had only one goal; to make sure those not worthy of the title of Hunter died.

A light knock at the door drew Llyr's out of his meditation and he opened his eyes, looking at the Hunter's wolf-head symbol mounted on the wall with a magic's user staff in its mouth. "Enter," he said after a moment.

"Daire," he said in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here?" Daire repeated. "I haven't seen you in eleven years and that's the greeting I get?"

"I was expecting Father," Llyr said.

"An emergency session of the Convocation was called," Daire replied. "Attendance was mandatory."

"Of course it was," Llyr said with a shake of his head.

Daire frowned. "I just came from the Convocation Dome. Father asked me to give you his sincere regrets that he could not be here."

"Sincere regrets? Father has never had any 'sincere regrets' when it came to me."

Daire studied him. "You've managed to deceive Father, but you were never able to hide things from me. Father has had nothing but praise for you since I left. He said you changed, that you were honoring our traditions and adding status to the family. It was all a lie, wasn't it?"

Llyr took a breath. "I did what was necessary to survive."

"Survive?" Daire asked. "What did you have to survive?"

Llyr laughed, though he felt no humor. "I had to survive Father. You never noticed the looks of disappointment he gave me. He never did anything permanent to me because of you always stood up for me. The day you left, I noticed Father watching me, a look of waiting in his eyes."

"Waiting for what?" Daire said after a few moments of silence.

"For me to mess up," Llyr explained. "For me to do something that he could turn me over to the Watchers for."

"Father would never do that," Daire said.

"Who do you think turned Mother over to the Watchers?" Llyr told him. "The day the Watchers took Mother, she told me to be more careful with the way I acted. To hide my true nature. The day you left, I realized what she meant and I was scared. Since that day I have been a good son, a son Father could be proud of."

Daire chuckled. "No wonder the reports from your indoctrination teachers were less than perfect."

Llyr gave him a sharp look. "How do you know about that?"

"My position as assistant to Overwizard Aedan gives me access to such things. Most of your teachers spoke very highly of you but the indoctrination teachers mentioned a lack of enthusiasm and commitment. You were able to repeat all the necessary sayings but the conviction was never there."

"Those teachers were trained to spot such," Llyr said. "Luckily, it never went beyond that."

"Oh, you had the Watchers attention for a short time," Daire said. "But you never gave them reason to take action. Lack of interest is common in the young but can lead to more dangerous paths."

Llyr snorted. "As I said, I did what I had to. So, what was this important meeting about that Father had to attend?"

"I don't know," Daire said. "Like you, I only know what they choose to tell me."

"Given your position, you find out a lot more than me."

Daire nodded. "True, but I am as much in the dark this time as you are. In fact, if it weren't for the fact that one of your family had to be here, I doubt I would even know the meeting was taking place."

Llyr shook his head. "Does it ever seem to you that we will drown in our secrets?"

Daire frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Answer one question for me," Llyr said, looking up at an area of the wall where a window had been filled in. "My training has been off world for the last two years. Since I've been back, every window I've seen has been blocked. Since they dragged me back home a couple of days ago, every walkway is enclosed and all travel is in enclosed vehicles. We live on a beautiful world, Daire. Why can't I see it?"

A quick knock came at the door before Daire could answer. Two older men entered the room. "The time has come, Initiate Llyr. Remove your shirt and kneel before us."

Llyr kept his gaze on his brother for a few seconds before he removed his shirt, placing on the floor next to his weapons. He then knelt before the two older Aldri.

"Initiate Llyr, you claim to be of the family Loegaire," one of the men stated.

"I do," Llyr said.

"Is there any here who stands as a witness to this claim?"

"I, Wizard Daire Loegaire, witness that Initiate Llyr is of the family Loegaire."

"Wizard Loegaire, remove your robe that we may verify your witness."

Daire removed his robe, kneeling next to his brother. The other man walked behind them, studying their lines of ancestry. Small red marks, each separated by two finger widths, ran in two parallel lines from the top of the head to the bottom of the heel. The hair that grew out of the marks was red instead of black. The shape of the marks was inherited from their parents, one line from the mother and one from the father.

"Highest, the lines of ancestry are similar. Initiate Llyr is of the

family Loegaire.”

“Rise, Initiate,” said the Highest. “You are a true son of a noble family. Today you will rise to join the ranks of the Hunters or die trying. Don your armor and take up your weapons, for now is the time of your trial.”

Llyr put his shirt back on, along with a light shirt of strong chain mail. He then put on a leather vest to muffle the sound of the armor. He strapped on his sword belt, his sword hanging on his left hip, then secured the leather straps that held his throwing knives on his thighs.

“I am prepared to face the trial, Highest,” Llyr stated.

The Highest opened the door and led the way out. Llyr followed him, with the Chronicler behind him.

The long hall leading to the arena was dim, faint lights set twenty feet apart. As in the meditation room, every window was now part of the solid wall. Llyr’s instructors had called this the Walk of Thought. They had encouraged the initiates to clear their minds and focus, using the time to prepare the mind for battle.

The conversation with Daire made such silent thought impossible. There were so many questions he had but could not ask because of the time constraint. When had Daire become an assistant to an Overwizard? When had he gotten back? Would he have answered the question Llyr had asked?

Llyr felt bad about the way he talked to his brother about their father. Father had made it to a few of the Hunter trials since he had begun his training and had seemed truly proud of Llyr’s accomplishments. That is where Llyr had a problem.

His Father’s pride in his accomplishments never seemed to extend to him. His Father would give quick praise followed by an extended lecture on how he could have done better, always for the glory of family Loegaire. Nothing was about Llyr, only about the family. Some, like Daire, would say that was the way Father showed his love but Llyr knew that wasn’t true. If Llyr had not shown the ability to track magic, he never would have been admitted to the Hunter Conclave. He would have taken a path into some lesser field that would not have brought prestige to the Family. Father was proud of the prestige that Llyr was giving the Family, not that it was Llyr who earned it. Llyr supposed this was why he would always have a problem with his Father.

The Highest stopped in front of a door with the Hunter symbol carved into it. Llyr realized that they had reached the end of the corridor and tried to focus on the trial ahead.

“Beyond this door, Initiate, is your trial,” the Highest explained. “In here you will find a magic user, who has been preparing for your arrival. Use your abilities to hunt him and kill him. Should you succeed, you will join the ranks of the Hunters and be sent to servant worlds to protect the

Aldri from magical threats. Should you fail, your body will be returned to your family. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Highest,” Llyr said.

“You are allowed one question,” the Highest said.

Llyr thought for a short moment and then asked. “What race is the magic user?”

“Orc,” the Highest stated. He then tapped on the door and it swung open. “Enter, Initiate.”

Llyr took a deep breath and entered the arena.

CHAPTER TWO

Rebecca did not say anything as she started the car and pulled out of the parking lot. In fact, she wasn't going to say anything at all if she could help it. Considering how forward James had been at the soup kitchen, she didn't think he would allow a silent drive home.

"We need to talk," James said almost as soon as they pulled out of the parking lot.

"I don't want to talk."

"Fine; then listen." James sighed and looked out the window for a moment before continuing. "I'm planning on joining the Army."

"What?!" Rebecca yelped, her head jerking as she wanted to stare at James but knew she had to keep her eyes on the road. "Why?...When?"

"After graduation at the end of the school year," James said. "As for why; because I will receive valuable training and experience, plus it will pay for school."

"Are those the only reasons?"

James shook his head. “No, I feel I can do some good there.”

“How can you say that? How is being a slave to a politician’s agenda going to help you do good?”

James chuckled. “Politician’s agendas dictate most of what goes on in our government. Even though the Army goes where it is pointed, it doesn’t mean it can’t do good things where it’s at. Many soldiers have done good, helping people. The Army needs more good people, people who will try to make a difference where they are. I feel I can do the most good in the Army.”

Rebecca braked at a red light. “Is this what brought on the ‘taking our relationship to a higher level?’”

“I would be lying if I said it didn’t contribute. I care for you, Rebecca, and I want to be more for you than I am. I know what your goals are and realize it will hard but you’re worth the effort.”

The light turned green and Rebecca switched her foot to the gas. “If you know what my goals are, then why are you putting me in this situation?”

“Because being friends isn’t enough for me anymore.”

“I don’t want to be involved in a romantic relationship until I’m done with school. They’re too distracting.”

James sighed. “I’m not asking you to put your life on hold for me. I love how committed you are to your goals and putting that aside would be like turning a part of yourself off. I would not ask that of you.”

“Look, after graduation, I will enlist and be sent to who knows where,” James continued. “You will go to college. There, boys will pursue you, possibly quite aggressively. This way, you can tell those annoyances that you have a boyfriend; that will put off most boys. After I get out of the Army, I’ll have a way to pay for my schooling. If we decide to continue our relationship at that time, I won’t be expecting you to support me.”

Rebecca glanced over at him. “You’ve certainly put a lot of thought into this, haven’t you?”

James smiled. “You know me; I like to have things planned out. So, what do you think?”

“I don’t know, James. It’s our senior year; there are so many things that I plan to do, to improve my chances of getting into a top school.”

“Okay, how about you meet me halfway?”

“Halfway? How?”

“Go on a date with me.”

“A date?”

“Yes, a date. You know, me and you, alone, discussing feelings that we have been hiding.”

Rebecca’s lips thinned. “Just one date?”

“One date and then we’ll decide where to go from there. Deal?”

Rebecca didn't answer, keeping her eyes on the road. They were coming up to a red light and she started to ease on the brake. The light turned green and she hit the gas. "Okay, I'll meet you..."

There was the sound of a horn and the car was suddenly spinning, only to stop at the sound of a crunch. Rebecca was shaken up, her head spinning.

What happened? Her eyes couldn't seem to focus and she lifted her right hand to her head. At least she tried. *My arm is stuck; what is going on?*

Her vision came into focus and she could see the white cloth in front of her. *The airbag. We must have gotten hit.*

She lifted her left arm and pushed the airbag away. "James, are you alright?"

When no response came, she looked over to where he was sitting. He was tilted toward her, his eyes open but glazed. There was glass everywhere and a large gash on his head, spilling blood.

"Rebecca," he said in a drowsy voice. "will you go on a date with me?" His eyes started to flutter shut.

"James!" Rebecca struggled but the steering wheel had her trapped. "Don't fall asleep, James. Don't you dare fall asleep." She reached across her body with her left arm but could barely touch him with her fingertip.

"I'm...sorry." James' head slumped.

"James! James!" Rebecca struggled more, trying to wiggle free so she could reach him. Tears began to leak from her eyes and she began to push the steering wheel with her free arm.

A sudden warmth swept through her into her arm and the wheel started to move, the metal and plastic cracking and groaning in protest, freeing her legs and other arm. She didn't begin to wonder why the wheel moved but twisted, taking James' face in her hands.

"James, wake up. You know that you can't fall asleep when you have a concussion. Wake up!" She shook him but he didn't respond. She then slapped him to try and get a reaction but he just sat there, his head a dead weight.

"Hello, is anyone alive in there?" a voice called from outside.

"Help!" Rebecca screamed. "Help! My friend is hurt!"

She put her head against his, the tears now flowing. "James, please wake up. You can't die. You can't leave me like this."

* * *

Llyr stopped as the door shut behind him. He was in a small hallway, wide enough for only one person to walk down. At the end of the hall, there was a shimmering field. Once he walked through that field, he would not be able to leave the arena until the Orc magic user was dead.

Llyr thought back to his studies, prepping his weapons as he

thought. *Orc magic users are mostly shamans and holy men.* He adjusted the angle of the throwing knives on his legs to give a quicker throw. *Magic users of this type rely on magic that changes the environment around them, using plants and earth to create traps and minions.* He loosened his sword in its scabbard. *Shamans are also adept at creating totems that increase the strength or speed of allies or decrease opponents abilities.* All of his armor was well secured. He pulled on a mask that was connected to his leather vest, leaving only his eyes visible. *Orc holy men tend to focus their magic on healing and minion creation.* He started toward the barrier, knowing that waiting too long would cause the arena Masters to force him through. *It is rare to find an Orc fully trained in wizarding magic, but most Orc magic users have training in minor wizarding spells.* It took a small amount of effort to push his way through the shimmering field, which solidified as soon as he was through. *Above all, remember that Orc magic users are always accompanied by an entourage of bodyguards and apprentices.*

Llyr scanned the room he had entered. It was round with two entrances across from each other. He focused inside himself and his vision changed, becoming sharper. A sparkling trail of magic ran from one entrance to the other. Someone with enchantments on them had passed through here.

The walls were made of hedges, carefully pruned and shaped. The hedges stood about fifteen feet in height, though it appeared that the top had been cut flat. About ten feet above the hedges was a dark ceiling that glistened with magic. On the other side, the Master Hunters would be observing his progress.

He glanced back at where he had entered the room and found a solid hedge, though the area where he had come from glistened like the ceiling. With the innate ability to see magic and magical trails, Llyr could tell what type of magic was being used. The glistening indicated a magic camouflage. The Hunters only allowed Aldri who were born with his ability to enter their ranks. It was necessary for the mission of the Hunters; to hunt down and eliminate enemy magic users.

Llyr looked through both of the entrances and found that the trail led straight through both of the adjoining rooms. Though he could see the magic trail, there was almost no decay of the magic, which may have given him an idea of the way the magic user was walking. Either way was as good as the other, so he followed the trail to the right.

The next several rooms were exactly the same as the first. Llyr studied each room for a few seconds before entering, crossing each quickly, making no noise. He came to a room that was rectangular, with two exits at the far end of the room in the corners. The magical trail did not go straight to an exit this time. The magic user had crisscrossed the room, spending time at each wall. As he studied the room, there were four patches that glistened in the walls; one on the left and right walls, two on the far wall.

He could not see the wall on his side of the room without entering the room, but he was sure he would find one or two more glistening spots.

The area in front of each spot had a curious absence of sticks or leaves on the ground. Someone had swept those areas, wanting to hide some activity but making it obvious instead.

Llyr took two of his throwing knives in hand and stepped into the room, throwing one at each of the glistening sections on the right and left walls. He quickly reached down to grab two more of the knives, sending them streaking across the room at the two sections on the far wall. He grabbed the last two knives as two orcs stepped out of the walls next to him. Knives caught each in the throat. Llyr crouched, hand on his sword, ready to fight any additional orcs. When none appeared, he crept to the closest corpse, retrieving one of his prized knives. They had been enchanted to streak faster than an arrow to their target as soon as they left his hand. This increased not only penetration power but also how far he could accurately throw them. Being able to purchase the enchantment on the knives was one of the few times he was glad to be in a noble family, wealthy and well connected.

As he collected the last of the knives at the far end of the room, a crack above him set him into motion. He rolled, coming to his feet, his sword arcing from its sheath, his curved, single blade meeting the Orc's straight, double-blade.

Llyr swung his sword in a tight circle, forcing the orc's blade into the hedge. He sliced upward, across the orc's neck. The orc stumbled forward, falling to the ground with its hand at its throat.

Llyr cleaned off his blade and replaced it in its sheath. He looked up at the top of the hedge, considering his options. If the orc he just killed had been armed with a bow or crossbow, he would be dead right now. *The Keepers designed this place to play off of my weaknesses.* He thought back to his training. Hunter instructors took each student aside every five days to inform them of what they needed to improve. After you were told, they would test you at random to see if you had been working on the problem. The one thing that Llyr had been warned about over and over was his tendency to rush into a fight without first observing everything. While Llyr had studied the room before he had entered, he had not checked the top of the hedges. He had seen the obvious signs of an ambush and ran into the fight, as he always did; and it had almost gotten him killed. Only luck had saved him. Llyr studied the orcs more and found that one of the orcs had a bow.

Llyr once again looked at the top of the hedge then moved over to the bow wielding orc and took its weapon, along with a quiver of arrows. They were of average make, nothing he would have picked, given a choice. Considering he only had six knives, he needed more options to strike his

target from a distance.

After retrieving the bow, he climbed up the hedge, keeping low along the top. He studied the layout of the maze and found it to be much larger than he expected. The hedges formed circular layers, starting small at the center of the maze and getting larger as it expanded outward. There were breaks in the circles to allow passage between the circular layers. At points, the circles were connected, blocking the pathways and creating dead ends. The hedges of the inner most circle glowed with magic, as did an area at the center of the maze. He noticed more shapes moving on the tops of the hedges. If he had rushed in, he would have died. Who knew what kind of traps had been set? While stealth was not his strongest ability, neither was it his weakest. He moved along the top of the hedge, keeping an eye on the magical trail as he crept along.

As he moved toward the center of the maze, Llyr began to appreciate the wisdom of his decision to rely on stealth rather than his battle skills. There were many orcs wandering about the maze and concealed in several places. Along with the orcs, there were many magical traps placed at the entrances and exits of each room. His ability to see magic allowed him to see where these traps were, though he didn't know what the traps would do.

Llyr could see that the center of the maze was a large, circular opening. Four breaks in the hedges allowed access to the center and many orcs were moving around inside, with a single orc stationed on each of the surrounding hedges. The hedges around the center glowed with magic, though nothing seemed to be happening to the orcs on top of them. As he sneaked forward, he could see a figure sitting in the middle of the room, magical energy flowing up from the floor. The magic was slightly different from what he had encountered so far but he wasn't close enough to see why.

Moving at a snail's pace, Llyr inched his way toward his target, wondering what type of magical protection the magic user had erected. He stopped as the orc on top of the hedge nearest him moved into the area directly in front of him. The orc stopped and scanned the passageway that ran from the center around the curving hedge. Llyr didn't move the whole time, tensing as the orc's gaze swept over him.

As the orc turned to walk down the hedge, Llyr took an arrow from his quiver and threw it in front of him. The orc turned at the *thunk* of the arrow hitting the hedge and, pulling his arrow tighter on his bow, walked toward the sound. As he moved off the enchanted part of the hedge, Llyr could see that the orcs boots were enchanted as well. As the orc got closer to the arrow sticking out of the hedge, Llyr shifted, sliding one of his knives from its sheath. When the orc crouched to look closer at the arrow, Llyr's arm whipped forward, sending the knife into the orc's

head. The orc balanced for a moment before falling forward onto the hedge. Llyr sprang ahead, grabbing the orc to keep it from falling into the hedge.

“Thrug, what are you doing?” a call came from the middle.

“I tripped,” Llyr responded in a deeper, guttural orc voice.

“Don’t move too far away,” the orc said. “And be quiet.”

Llyr didn’t answer, which seemed to suit the orc. He studied the orcs in the room and those on top of the hedges. Only the orcs on the hedges wore enchanted boots, and he could see that those orcs were moving very carefully.

He removed the enchanted boots from the corpse and put them on his feet. They did not fit well, being a little too big, but he suspected that they might allow him to get closer without setting off whatever magic was in the hedges. He removed the orc’s cloak as well, settling it around his shoulders and pulling up the hood. The orc was also wearing a bracelet that glowed with magic. He took that as well, slipping it onto his wrist. He was not sure how well this disguise would work but he needed a closer look at the magic in the room. He stood up, walking slowly, not only to imitate the other orcs on the hedges but also to make sure he didn’t pull his foot out of the orcish boots.

Llyr stepped onto the enchanted hedge and nothing happened. Now that he was closer, he could see that runes had been scratched into the floor of the room. The runes created some kind of barrier, though the orcs moved through it easily. He wondered what the runes were but had no way to find out. Each of the orcs was wearing a bracelet similar to the one he took off the dead orc.

He studied the magic user closer, concluding that it was a shaman. The shaman carried a staff, fetishes hanging from the tip. He was dressed in a dark robe that was covered in runes, though none seemed to be magical. He sat in the middle of the runes on the floor, eyes closed.

After a moment, the shaman opened his eyes. “Are there any more reports of the Aldri’s movements?”

One of the orcs turned around. “None. He has not killed any additional orcs since the last report.”

“Maybe he is dead and we just don’t know it yet,” the shaman replied.

The orc snorted. “We would be dead if that was the case. You know they’ll kill us no matter what happens. Being here is a death sentence. All I want is a little payback before they slit my throat.”

The shaman stood up, looking the orc in the eye. “I need you here.”

“Why?” the orc shot back. “Standing here and waiting gives him the advantage. We must react to his actions. If we hunt him, he will have

to react to ours. He has come into our domain. If we pursue him, he might make a mistake or stumble into one of the traps.”

“You would leave me exposed?”

“Ha! There is no way he is getting past those hedges. They’ll rip him apart as soon as he gets near them. And if he does get past them, there is no way he’ll get to you as long as you stay in your ring.”

The shaman stood, staring at the orc. Llyr was once again glad that he had taken the time to learn the languages of the lesser races. Many had told him that he was wasting his time but now he was proven right.

“No defense is ever undefeatable,” the shaman said after a while.

“Then keep the archers,” the orc responded. “Let me and these others hunt this Aldri. We will drive him before us and then we will feast on his flesh before we are killed.”

After a moment, the shaman nodded. The orcs around him cheered and ran down corridors. “Archers, join me,” the shaman said, raising his voice. Llyr moved to the edge of the hedge and very carefully jumped down, falling to his knees as he hit the floor. He didn’t want the boots to slip when he landed.

Llyr stood up, moving slow. Here on the ground, his size and stature would be obvious and it wouldn’t take the shaman long to realize he was not an orc. The other three archers had already reached the shaman, their backs to him, facing down the corridors. Llyr slipped the bow into his left hand, placing his right hand on his sword.

The shaman stood, his eyes far away as Llyr stepped into the enchanted area. The magic around him shimmered and the bracelet he had taken gave him a little shock. The shaman looked up and his eyes widened as he looked into Llyr’s hood. Llyr’s sword sang as it exited the sheath, decapitating the shaman. Llyr dropped the bow and brought his left hand up to his sword, stepping closer to one of the archers, slicing hard into it. He twisted as the archer fell dead, thrusting his sword into another orc’s back before it even started to turn. He pulled his sword out as he turned, his sword meeting the remaining orc’s short blade. He pushed his opponent’s sword away and to the side, causing the orc’s arm to fly out wide. The orc stabbed in from the wide position. Llyr deflected the blow and cut down, severing the orc’s leg. The orc fell, screaming.

Llyr killed it and turned, running into the corridor he had come from and kicked off the orcish boots as soon as he was past the enchanted hedges. He climbed up the hedge, putting on his own boots before bolting across the top of the hedge. As he jumped over the open area to another hedge, he heard yelling behind him. He kept moving, not wanting to allow the orcs any time to catch up.

He increased his pace, jumping from hedge to hedge. Few orcs were on top of the hedge anymore and those were too far away to get a

good shot at him with their bows. In a quarter of the time it took him to get to the center, he was at the outer edge of the maze. He jumped down onto the floor, looking either way. The orcs were making such noise that he couldn't tell which way they were coming from, but it didn't matter, because Llyr had no idea how he was supposed to get out.

They had instructed him that he needed to kill the magic user but said nothing about the rest. If they wanted him to kill all the orcs, then he had gone about it the wrong way. Llyr began trotting down the lane. An area of the outside layer began to glow and he rolled away, whipping a knife into it. As he settled into a defensive posture, another knife ready to throw, he heard a loud, hollow *thunk*, as if his knife had hit a wooden door. The sounds of orcs were growing stronger down the hall and Llyr ran into the hedge, hoping that it wasn't a trap. Luck was with him, as it was a corridor like the one he entered the maze through. The door at the end, with his knife in the middle, opened; the Highest beckoned to him. Llyr rushed to the door, grabbing his knife as he went through.