

A Desperate Fight.

“Ow!” Julia cried in surprise. “Oh dear...” Julia said staring at the arrowhead protruding from her chest. Numbness spread down her right arm, as she half sat half fell behind the broken wall for protection.

Brian stared at the arrow in horror. He quickly crossed the distance between them and cut away Julia’s beautiful dress to expose the arrow. It had hit her in the back and pushed right through. The arrowhead was clearly visible standing out of her body just below the point where her breast and right shoulder joined. Strangely, and to Julia’s relief, it didn’t seem to hurt at all.

Brian bit his lip in concern. “I’m sorry m’lady, but if I pull this out it will bleed something awful. I think it’s best if I leave it for the mages—or any way, until later.”

Julia nodded weakly. Most of the mages were dead. She had seen someone carrying an unconscious Renard into the fortress and Mathius was badly hurt.

Later... later would be better.

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The God Decrees
Devan Chronicles Part I

Mark E. Cooper

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Thanks everyone.

For you Mum

Chapter One

SHADOWY FIGURES DASHED FROM HOUSE to house and from shop to shop. Where they passed, fire sprang up throughout the town. In silence and haste, the men burned all they owned. Although many eyes watched the destruction, no one protested. No one drew sword to stop them. It was night and the new moon had yet to appear, but they could see well enough—too well. The burning houses and shops provided more than enough light to show them what their lord's orders had wrought.

From the saddle Lord Keverin watched the destruction and brooded upon the waste of it all. Was there another way? If there was he couldn't see it. The firing was necessary, crucial even, but by the God how it rankled. Years of work gone in a single night all because he could not see another way to save his people. While he watched in impotent silence, hundreds of woman and children streamed up the road away from their burning homes carrying a few meagre possessions. It was all they owned now. They were good people. None accused him, none blamed him for what he knew was his failure. When he came down to tell them what he wished them to do, they had nodded and asked when. No outcry, no protest of any kind, just: When Lord? He didn't deserve such loyalty. That he was justified in destroying all they owned mattered not—not to him. He should have found a way to avoid this, curse it!

Keverin turned his horse and stared up at the brooding shadow of mighty Athione where the huge walls of the fortress loomed waiting to defend her people once again. Although too dark to see, he knew the cross-fisted banner of Athione flew proudly beside the crescent moon of Deva above her towers. Athione had never been taken, never even been in serious danger in her entire history. His family and people had been secure here, never fearing defeat. He feared now. How much longer would those proud banners fly over his home before the lightning bolt of the Protectorate took their place?

Cavell stamped a hoof as if to tell him it was time to leave. "Easy girl, easy," Keverin said patting her muscled neck. "I'll have you in a nice warm stable soon enough. I promise."

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Keverin waited stony faced for his order to be carried out, but at the last, the menfolk from the town stood before him with torches held aloft in silence. Shadows cavorted upon their upturned faces causing each man to appear a stranger. One figure stepped forward to reveal his features.

“It is done Lord.”

Keverin nodded. “It’s done Dergan.” He raised his voice so all could hear. “Go now, go swiftly all of you. Join your families and see to their welfare.”

“But what of you Lord?”

“I’ll stay awhile Dergan.”

Dergan bowed and moved to lead the others up the steep slope of the road to find their families.

Keverin waited for them to enter the gates of Athione before turning back to watch the town burn. It was the least he could do. The fires roared as the roofs collapsed. The flames leapt skyward as the cool night air fed them. Windows exploded succumbing to the intense heat. Nothing would remain of the town but ashes come the morrow. That was as it should be—as he’d ordered it to be. Not one loaf of bread to feed the enemy, not one wall to hide him, and not one roof to shelter him. A mere gesture of defiance. What more was there at this late date?

He watched the flames consuming his town waiting for inspiration to strike, but the voice of the God was silent within him. The roar of the fire was his only answer. So be it. There had been no answer because there wasn’t one. He had done all he could do here. It was time to be inside the walls.

Lord Athione, Lord Protector of the West, turned his horse and rode for home.

The dawn found Keverin standing upon the battlement with Darius watching the invaders moving along the pass below. The distance was too great to make an accurate estimate of their strength, but he guessed there would not be less than a legion. Numbers meant little. Darius, and mages like him, would be the deciding factor in determining who was to rule Deva.

Keverin couldn’t help thinking that he was to blame for what was about to happen. Though for the life of him he couldn’t see how he could have done otherwise. Surely there must have been something—a point where he could have avoided all this, but looking back, he just couldn’t see it. Everything he had done in his time as Lord Athione had been done with the good of his people in mind, yet still his path had led them all to war. The Protectorate’s invasion of Bandar five years ago had led him to believe that Deva was next on Mortain’s list, and so it had proved. But was it his reaction to the fall of Bandar that spurred Mortain to this attack? It might be egotistical of him to believe so, but he did. His wish to protect his home and people had led directly to their current peril. He was a fool to have ever believed he could give Mortain pause by strengthening his defences with magic. Athione was now a threat that Mortain could no longer ignore. Why hadn’t he seen the inevitability of that? Keverin shook his head. Inevitable or not, standing by and doing nothing had been, and still was, out of the question. Mortain would have turned his attention to Deva eventually. Of that Keverin had no doubt. He only had to look to Hasa to know that.

Al'Hasa, once the proud capital of the nation called Hasa, fell to the sorcerers centuries ago. The mages from the Black Isle had long since intermarried with the Hasian population, making Hasa an intrinsic part of the Protectorate. Ruled from Castle Black by a long succession of lords styling themselves after the first Mortain, the Protectorate and its legions had become aggressively expansionist in recent years. When Bandar fell, Keverin had thought the sorcerers would wait to digest their latest meal as they had waited after taking Hasa, but he was only partly right. Five years had gone by since the closure of the pass into the Protectorate, but already the Hasians were on the move. This time they were trying to cross the Athinian Mountains into Deva, and Athione protected the only route.

From his position above the west gate, Keverin watched the Hasians approach. His face was calm, but the clenching and unclenching of his fists could not help but betray his tension to those who knew him. The Hasian legions were the envy of Waipara. The men were the best fighters, the best disciplined, and the best equipped soldiers any country had ever fielded. They had fought in many battles, though not in the last five years, and were always victorious. The men were hardened professionals and worse—they were veterans. Keverin knew his guardsmen would fight well, but they had no experience of being under siege. Nor did he have any. He was outnumbered and outclassed. If he led his men in an attack, they would die. It was as simple as that. Sally and die. If he did anything more than he was doing they would all die. He kept trying to see something he'd missed, but there was nothing. They must defend, not attack. Darius agreed with him, but it was cold comfort. Keverin had fought brigands and raiders successfully in the past, but this fight was way beyond a small raid. The Hasians were invading. He hoped his inexperience wouldn't doom them all.

Keverin glanced at his friend. "How many do you think?"

"Too many for us by far, my lord. We have five mages of varying strengths, but they have ten times that number." Darius clenched a fist and banged it down on the crenel in front of him in frustration. "Mortain would not send weaklings. You must know that."

Keverin nodded. Indeed he did know.

Keverin pushed his hair out of his eyes from where the wind insisted on blowing it. He reminded himself to tie it back for the battle ahead. "Do you still intend to cast the spell?"

"I see no other option. We could hold them off for a few days... with luck more than just a few. Renard has some ideas, and you know how good he is at warding. So then, we hold them off for a few days, but what then? Even together with my brothers in the craft I am not strong enough to defeat them. We will tire long before the enemy does. When that time comes, the sorcerers will smash the gate and we all die."

Keverin shivered at Darius' matter of fact way of discussing his own death. He was only thirty yet he looked fifty at least. Why anyone believed magic was worth such a price, he couldn't fathom. Keverin had puzzled through some of the texts in his library, but by no means all. Even with all he had read about magic and the Founders, he still didn't understand why they risked so much. To throw away years of life, to burn ones youth in the pursuit of magic was incomprehensible to anyone but the gifted. Keverin reminded himself that he didn't have to understand their motives

to thank the God for them. And he did, every day. Of all those in his service, his mages alone might yet have a chance to save Athione from going down into defeat.

"If only Pergann would send help!" Keverin hissed in frustration. "The Chancellor writes that the King is too ill to make such a decision. No help is coming. We have to defeat the sorcerers alone."

"Umm." Darius said frowning in thought. "I should tell you that I scried the palace at Devarr last night."

Keverin gasped. "You fool! You know that's a death sentence!"

Darius laughed but his heart wasn't really in it, "I hardly need worry about being executed for scrying, do I?" He said with a weary smile.

"I won't argue with you my friend. Not this day of all days. What did you find out?"

"I'm not quite certain to be honest." Darius said in puzzlement. "The palace seemed almost deserted. There weren't many servants walking the halls. The stables were empty and the walls didn't even have sentries. I know the King is old, but the realm is surely in someone's hands."

That didn't sound good at all. Pergann was a weak fool, but he was still the King. The Chancellor however wasn't even a noble, yet he effectively ruled the kingdom by Pergann's order. Morfran even commanded Athione's loyalty. It was enough to turn Keverin's stomach, but he was loyal to the king and there was an end to it.

"Chancellor Morfran is handling things in Devarr, but my messengers have had no luck convincing him of the danger we face. What about the King's mage?"

Darius was shaking his head. "I did try to find someone I could talk to at the palace, but I couldn't find anyone with the gift there—no one at all. I fear the kingdom is leaderless my lord. What of the nobles?"

Keverin grimaced. He wouldn't trust most of the lords to polish his boots, let alone aid him in battle. The four great fortresses protected Deva from outside aggression. They and they alone might help. Athione in the west, Malcor in the north, Elvissa in the East, and Meilan in the Southeast. The south was open to the sea, but still had protection in the form of reefs. Many a fleet had tested them to their destruction. The lords that Keverin considered trustworthy, and more to the point, had enough guardsmen to make a difference, were leagues away. Gylaren Lord of Meilan was one, and Purcell Lord of Elvissa was another, but both had their own approaches to guard. Malcor was the closest fortress with guardsmen enough to help, but it was problematical in that Lord Malcor hated him with a passion, and with good reason. Keverin killed his father.

"I've sent messages to all of them." Keverin explained. "Athlone didn't answer. Most of the others don't have enough men to patrol their estates let alone aid me. Those that do made excuses not to send them. Gylaren is on his way with two thousand men, but only half are cavalry. Anything else would leave us open to the south. Purcell is bringing five hundred, but all of his are infantry. We're lucky to get that many."

"Tanjung and Japura are quiet, have been years now. Purcell and Gylaren don't fear an attack... do they?"

Keverin snorted. "Our beloved neighbours to the east would just love for us to reduce our defences. While we're worrying about the Protectorate, they could take

us in the rear.” He shrugged then smiled. “You are right about them being quiet my friend, but we can’t take the chance.”

Darius nodded. He took one last lingering look at the sorcerers in the pass below before visibly making an effort to look confident and cheerful. “So then, we are agreed. With your permission my lord, I must prepare for the summoning. Luck to you, and... farewell.”

Finding no words to express his fears, Keverin embraced his friend. After a moment they parted and Darius walked away toward the gate tower.

“May the God watch over you my friend,” Keverin called.

Darius stopped, and looked back over his shoulder. “I expect he will,” he said then entered the tower.

Keverin watched Darius disappear from view. “May the God watch over, and comfort you at journey’s end.”

It was the prayer for the dead.

† † †

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Chapter Two

DARIUS REFUSED ALL HELP FROM HIS FELLOWS in the fortress. Keverin would need everyone to stand a chance at repelling the Hasian invasion. If indeed it could be repelled.

He knew Keverin didn't understand why he and mages like him willingly paid the price of the craft. Only someone with the gift could understand the ecstasy he felt when using his magic. It was one reason why mages regardless of their rank tended to overuse it. He had felt the point when the sweet ecstasy of the magic turned to agony many times. Without discipline a mage could age himself a hundred years in moments.

Darius wore the red robe that declared his rank as wizard. Only the black robe of a sorcerer was higher. He was the strongest mage in the fortress, yet even his discipline had failed him on a number of occasions. He was only thirty years old, but outwardly he looked fifty or more. That didn't deter him from using his power—nothing could. When he released his magic after a major conjuration, he would often swear never to let it seduce him into that last grasp for more, but as always the next time would come and he would abruptly forget the oath, ageing perhaps another month. Then again, and he would age a year, then another month, on and on. Now he was a young man with an old man's body about to perform his last and greatest work. To be ready for this day he had studied for years piecing bits and pieces of the stories together from the histories. He had not known that then of course. He had studied not for any high minded ideal such as saving the kingdom from the Hasians, but rather for the sheer love of it. Coming to Athione was the culmination of his life's pursuit of knowledge. Fitting then, that it was here he discovered the answers to so many of his questions about the Founders and the loss of the Great Spells they brought with them.

In the beginning, the world had been devoid of magic wielders. Sorcerers had arrived on Fisher Isle, through a gate where some stayed to build a home that would later be called Castle Black. A smaller group wished to explore the mainland and flew to shore there to separate and mingle with the inhabitants they found. To Darius'

mind, Athione's construction with sorcery attested to the validity of the story. No one could construct anything on such a grand scale today, but he was determined to attempt something just as ambitious—a gate spell.

The key to the spell had come into his hands quite by accident when he swore his oath to Keverin. At Keverin's request, he had warded all the books against removal from the library soon after his arrival, but the lord hadn't entrusted one particular volume to the library. No indeed. That book was in the vault, guarded night and day. Keverin had asked him to place wards on the vault to ensure that a lord of Athione must always accompany anyone who wished to enter. It was his strongest ward, and he had aged himself an entire year on purpose to make it. The ward would outlive anyone currently living and would endure forever if it remained untouched by a greater mage. To break it, a mage would need to be not only extremely powerful, but also ready to sacrifice more than a year of life to do it. He wasn't sure the ward was enough, but he could do nothing more to ensure the vault's security. The spell would hold long after his death—it must.

Darius surveyed his room one last time. He was as ready as he was ever going to be he decided. He straightened his robe and stepped out into the dimly lit corridor. Before closing the door, he glanced back at the table where a sealed scroll lay.

Perhaps it will ease your mind in some small manner my friend.

Darius locked the door and made his way through the fortress. He didn't want to be late for his own demise. The thought started an absurd chuckle building in his chest.

"Darius!" Gideon called. "Please wait a moment would you?"

Darius' heart sank when he heard the priest call out to him. He had hoped to avoid this. "I wanted to say good bye Gideon, but I'm late and Keverin is waiting for me."

"So it's true." Gideon said shaking his head in disbelief. "You are throwing your life away for nothing Darius. The God won't let Athione fall to the sorcerers."

"I know you truly believe that my friend, but you and I both know that the God helps those who help themselves. I have never been one for praying or begging for help. Certainly not when I can do something to aid the situation myself. I am not going to start now."

"You can't unmake the barrier! No one can do that!" Gideon said with frustration heavy in his voice.

"True." Darius' ready agreement seemed to put Gideon off his stride, and he quickly followed up the advantage. "But I can make a tiny hole and slip through."

"You are deluding yourself. The stories are just that—stories."

"You're wrong, my friend. I've read the histories as you have, but where you see charming stories, I see logical and well written accounts of the sorcerer's journey and first years here."

Gideon sighed. "I cannot sway you. I will pray for your success. Perhaps the Holy Father would chastise me for saying this, but I am proud to be called your friend."

Darius could say nothing around the lump in his throat. He embraced the priest fiercely, and Gideon responded in kind. He stepped back to receive Gideon's blessing then bowed formally and left his friend standing alone.

Darius walked quickly to the great hall where Keverin waited for him to begin.

When he entered, he found his brothers in a group talking amongst themselves to one side of the great hall. Keverin was sitting tensely in his high backed chair as if in judgment. Darius knew his friend was worried for him. He could not tell Keverin that his concern was justified—he dare not for fear that Keverin would forbid him from casting the spell. In an effort to forestall any such order from Keverin, Darius moved to speak with his brothers. Three wore the blue robes of master mages; two wore the yellow denoting journeymen, and on the outskirts of the group was Mathius, who was the youngest at twenty, wearing the green robes of an initiate. The Hasian mages all wore the black robes of true sorcerers, but they did so only to hide their ranks from outsiders. There was a very real advantage in such a practice, but not when living together as Darius did with his brothers of the craft. One mage could easily gauge the strength of another. Darius knew that if, *when*, he was successful, the hierarchy within Athione would shift and a new leader would arise to take his place within candlemarks of his death. His brothers wouldn't fight the newcomer. The strongest always led by tradition. The thought of bringing someone to save his brothers and his other friends pleased Darius. It *was* worth dying for.

"Renard," Darius said as his brothers moved to encircle him. "When it's done, you will lead until the newcomer, whoever he is, has learned all he needs to know. I want you to tell him about the Hasians and Castle Black straight away."

Renard looked unhappy about the situation, but he nodded. "I understand."

"Good." Darius turned to the other master mages. "Eamonn, Helton, as soon as the gate closes I want you to keep a watch on the sorcerers. I don't know what they'll do when they realise what I have done, but best you are prepared."

Both mages bowed in assent without speaking.

"Haliden, Wregan," Darius said acknowledging the yellow robed journeymen. "I want you two to keep your eyes on the lord. He... he will be troubled by what I have done."

Wregan nodded but Haliden spoke up. "Are you sure this is necessary?"

"You have seen the enemy. What do you think?"

"I think anyone can be killed—even so many sorcerers. We could strike the centre of their camp in the night. Or at least ward the wall."

Darius nodded. Warding the wall would work for a time as he had explained to Keverin, but it wasn't a complete solution. "I expect you'll have to raise wards at some point. Defence is important but we can't win without a good offence as well."

Haliden looked sceptical, but he would learn in time. He was only a young man yet. Give him another ten years and he would be as paranoid as Keverin and he felt. Darius turned to Mathius. He had no task for an initiate, but the young man needed something to feel needed.

"I need my complete concentration for the task at hand, Mathius. Father Gideon will arrive shortly and he has already tried to talk me out of casting the spell. I want you to keep a watch on him and prevent him from interfering."

"I'll take care of it," Mathius said with a small smile.

Darius chuckled. The boy wasn't so easily fooled. Ah well, time was wasting. He was about to address Keverin when he saw Gideon slip quietly into the room. The priest smiled sadly at him then made his way to a quiet corner to watch and pray.

"My Lord, I am ready to open the gate," Darius said in a loud and clear voice.

There was no sign of the excitement he felt—or the fear.

Keverin opened his mouth as if to forbid him, but he hesitated on the words. Finally, the lord nodded his permission. “You have my leave Wizard.”

“I thank you my lord.” Darius said with a deep and very respectful bow.

Turning to his fellows, he inclined his head to each of his brothers again. The mages bowed deeply in return and then retired to the sides of the hall so as not to interfere with the summoning.

Taking a deep breath, Darius centred and raised a ward to contain the forces about to be unleashed. A faintly glowing cylindrical wall came into existence, which slowly increased in size with Darius at its centre. He constructed the ward as strong as he could, but did not make it self sustaining. It needed to be strong but also temporary. He fashioned it ten yards tall to seal against the floor and ceiling. Where it touched there were little bursts of blue light accompanied by crackling noises as particles of dust flamed and were gone. A faint thrumming noise accompanied the growth of the ward. Darius fed more magic into its matrix and the thrumming grew louder. The magical wall brightened and dimmed in time with the odd sound throwing shadows across the floor and over the tapestry covered walls.

Thrum—thruuum, Thrum—thruuum, the shield pulsed like a heartbeat.

This indeed was his strongest ward. Darius revelled in the sweetness of the magic flowing through him. Forcing himself to remember his task, he reached for more power, and yet more until he felt he would burst apart. He called upon his mage sight and lost sight of the ward as he concentrated all his thoughts on what he had to do. Using the magic in a way not used for over a thousand years, Darius *reached* and revealed the barrier. His mage sight showed the wall the God had made to separate the worlds. What impudence he had even contemplating what the God had ordained to exist, what incredible arrogance to think he might breach it. The audacity of what he planned to do came crashing in upon him and despair threatened to take him. Forcing his thoughts onto what he was here to do, Darius shaped his will into a sharp point backed by all the magic he could draw and thrust it at the wall.

Shock!

Darius’ probe was smashed contemptuously aside and his head rang. He waited for the pain to diminish, and then forced himself to the very edge of agony. He thrust again and was smashed away again. He wanted to scream in frustration and no little pain. It was as if the barrier was made of fire. It hurt to touch as fire did, insubstantial yet still a solid barrier to his will. He had known it would come to this, yet he hesitated. A roaring filled him as if the largest waterfall in the world was trapped within his head. It was the magic raging at its confinement within him.

Darius flung open his link to the magic before his fear overcame him. No longer was there any restraint on its flow. He was swept along completely at its mercy. He struggled against the current as it threatened to drown him in a river of magic. He had but one thought remaining. *Hasians... Keverin, Keverin... Hasians*. He grasped the thought and slowly, agonizingly, he dragged himself from the river until his world returned to the barrier and pain so excruciating it felt like a river of fire running through his veins. He thrust his probe at the barrier again, but this time he felt a tiny breach. Forcing himself to push until all that was left of him was his driving will...

The wall surrendered and Darius was through.

The pain lessened as his body lost its ability to feel. He was dying but Darius did not care about that. He found himself floating in nothingness and silence. All around him there were millions of pearl-like spheres—worlds rich in colour and life. They stretched forever into the vast unknowable distance. They were so beautiful. Darius spun about, giddy with childish delight and awe. Worlds uncountable. If only he could go back and tell Keverin not to grieve. It was so wonderful here. Thoughts of Keverin caused him to rush headlong through the nothingness until he was hovering over one of the pearls. He reached out to touch it and was suddenly looking upon Athione's great hall. Keverin was beating his fists bloody on the ward. Renard and the others were trying to restrain him, but Keverin was a big man. He was a handful.

He mustn't do that.

Darius quickly used the magic to search nearby worlds for the one he came for.

There!

It was unmistakably the spark of a great one, a true sorcerer. What had been Darius quickly threw out his will to snag the spark and then hurl it at Keverin in one motion. The vision faded, and Darius began to fade with it.

It's so beautiful here...

Welcome home Darius. Come, come meet thy God.

I'm coming...

‡ ‡ ‡

Julia Morton danced across the mat in precise moves designed to train her body to remember. She was wearing her ballet shoes and leotard, but the dance she was performing wasn't for a ballet. It was a routine based on ballet for the women's floor exercise in gymnastics.

"You're too tense!" Jill called over the music. "The movements should flow one to another, not lurch like some kind of zombie!"

The sweating dancer held her position with one leg extended behind her. Hearing the criticism she faltered, then wavering, she tried to regain her poise but it was no good. She had lost her concentration. Julia lowered her leg to the mat and tried to force the pain from her cramping muscles. Six months left to prepare before joining the rest of her team. She wasn't ready and knew it. The games, no longer a far off and eagerly anticipated event, loomed ahead of her like a rain cloud on the horizon—an ominous and inevitable climax to her life thus far.

What will I do after? Is there an after?

Julia was pushing herself to exhaustion each day, but something seemed missing from her work. She was just going through the motions and not improving. Worry and anxiety over the floor exercise had long since replaced the excitement and anticipation she used to feel when thinking about the games. The ballet was Jill's attempt to instil some grace into her movements, but the task seemed impossible. She was at home on the asymmetric bars or balance beam, even her vault was good, but the floor exercise was a nightmare of cramping muscles and shaky legs as she strained for, but never attained, the perfection she so desperately needed. Improvement in her other events came easily by comparison, but the floor routine left her gasping with nothing to show for the effort she expended. She was spending all her time making

her body perform unnatural, painful, and intricate movements all in the hopes of forcing an improvement.

I spent too much time on weights!

It was a familiar thought. She had wasted six years of training before she learned that strength, though necessary, wasn't the only thing a gymnast needed. When first starting out she had spent, and wasted she now felt, too much time strengthening her body. Jill disagreed saying no training was entirely wasted, but Julia blamed her strength for her inability to attain her goal. She was far too heavily muscled to perform intricate movements accurately.

"Give me a minute and I'll go again," Julia gasped.

"No," her coach said.

"But I need more practice! You said yourself I look like a zombie lurching around the mat."

"I said no, Julia." Jill said testily. "You're pushing too hard as it is. The way you're kneading that thigh tells me it's time to quit for the day." Jill knelt and started vigorously massaging the cramping thigh muscles.

"But Jill, I need this. You know why I need this!" Julia said looking down at her coach working on her legs. "You're always telling me about the Three D Method: Determination, Discipline, and Dynamics. Well, I'm determined to get this right."

Jill replied without looking up. "You have more than enough determination and discipline. What you lack is common sense. If you continue to push it, you'll lose everything through one type of injury or another." She stopped the massage. "There. How's it feel now?"

Julia flexed her legs ignoring the twinges as the muscles bunched. "It's great. Better than great—it's perfect. I can go another hour—honest!"

If I can just smooth out the transitions, I'll be halfway there.

"—listening to me?" Jill was saying.

"What? I'm sorry I didn't catch what you said."

"Exactly! You're not *listening* to me. Keep on as you are and you'll be out with an injury." Jill moved toward the door. "I'm going home for the night."

"Oh come on! Just watch me for another twenty minutes," Julia said as Jill opened the door to leave. "All right *ten* minutes!"

"I've said all I'm going to say on this. Go home. I'll see you tomorrow, and don't forget to lock up." Jill said over her shoulder and then left.

Damn!

Julia pulled a towel out of her bag lying against the wall. Jill was right about her common sense, but it didn't change how she felt. Gymnastics was her entire life now. Without it she had nothing. Robby had someone else and wouldn't even talk to her. Mum and Dad...

Don't think about it!

Julia tried not to, but it was no good. Even as a child she had enjoyed sports. She had wanted to be bigger and stronger than everyone else, and her mother encouraged her. She joined the local gym and worked out every evening. On weekends she worked non-stop. Julia never did grow very tall, but she made up for her five foot frame with muscle and attitude. She had lost friends because of her preoccupation with gymnastics, but that didn't seem to matter. The only people that *did* were her

parents and Robby. It wasn't bloody mindedness on her part when she dropped out of college to work in the gym full time. Gymnastics was important—it was! It was more important to her now than it had ever been in her life. Robby just hadn't understood her. He was studious, Robby was. Some would say boring, but never to his face. Julia really did love him, or she thought she did... or had, but she loved her gymnastics more. He couldn't accept second place in her heart, and he knew he would never be first, so they had split up. Robby had someone else already, and she had what she wanted—her gymnastics. So what if the house was empty? So what if she was lonely? She could handle it. She didn't have time for relationships any longer. She didn't need anybody but Jill.

She didn't need *anything*—really.

Julia knew that some people found her strange or too out spoken, but if they couldn't handle that, it was their loss. Even her father hadn't understood why she wanted to be a gymnast. He used to say that she was becoming too mannish, and didn't look like a girl her age should look. Her mother had understood what drove her though... Julia sniffed and buried her face in the towel. The tears came as they always did when she remembered her parents. They had both wanted the best for her. Her mother had pushed her in the direction she already wanted to go, but her father was more down to Earth. His vision of her success was a high paid job and marriage. Now that her parents were gone, she had only Jill to help her. The death of her parents was a strong reason to push her self. If she didn't do it, who would?

Drying her eyes, Julia looked around the gym at the familiar sights of beam and bars. She needed the distraction. Her eyes swept back to the beam. *No*. She didn't feel like working on the beam. The asymmetric bars were her favourite of all her disciplines. She always felt as if she were flying when she was up there. Time seemed to slow giving her plenty of time for the next catch or twist. She was at her best while flying.

Just ten minutes won't hurt.

Julia rummaged in her bag for her palm protectors. It was awkward to put them on without help, but she managed to do it finally, before walking over to the chalk. With an irritated sigh, she realised she was still wearing her ballet shoes. She untied and removed them, and then thoroughly chalked her hands before walking over to her start position. Taking a deep breath, she sprinted and launched herself perfectly from the springboard. Time slowed as she passed easily over the lower bar to catch the higher. She moved into a handstand, held it for three seconds, and then allowed herself to fall into a full giant. Swinging around for the second time, she performed a back-straddle release to catch the lower bar.

Julia lost herself in the movement.

Time passed as pirouettes and hand changes blurred into giants and saltos. She held her position in a handstand on the higher bar, and then allowed herself to fall into two giants. At the perfect moment, she released to perform a double-back salto dismount. She sailed through the air twisting and turning, but then something went wrong. She lurched sideways and lost the correct posture.

Oh shit, this is going to hurt!

Julia's dismount turned into a crashing sprawling fall.

Chapter Three

KEVERIN WATCHED THE FAINTLY GLOWING wall as it grew. It was tall enough to reach the ceiling, and a strange noise hummed in time with a faint increase in glow. This was truly magic, the kind ordinary people could see. The ward hesitated as it encountered a slight step in the ceiling. The brightness increased as if the ward were snagged, pressure built until it cleared the obstruction. The magical wall dimmed and stopped growing after forming a circular wall about twenty yards across with Darius at its centre.

Thruuum—thrum, Thruuum—thrum, the shield pulsed.

To one side of the hall Keverin's mages stood in attentive silence. Not a murmur came from them, but Gideon's prayers were clearly audible even though he spoke quietly. Darius stood unmoving within the ward staring at something only he could see. He looked peaceful enough.

"Forgive us I pray." Gideon was saying. "We, your children, beg your understanding. Do not take this man. He strives for our salvation. Lend him your strength in his task and do not smite him for his temerity—"

Keverin added his own prayers to those of the priest. "Please don't take my friend."

"...as we believe in you and life everlasting. He is a good man, a just man..." Gideon stumbled to halt.

Slowly the wizard began to glow.

"*Please!*" Gideon cried. "I beg you to strengthen your chosen! With his power, which is your power, he strives to protect us as you protect this Earth. Lend him your might—"

Keverin glanced at the other mages and found them concerned enough for it to show on their faces. He dismounted the dais and went to talk to them, but before he reached halfway, the most terrible screaming began.

"*AEiiiiiiiiii!*" Darius screamed without a breath.

Keverin ran to the ward and looked in. Darius was writhing in torment as if a

demon were eating him alive. The glow was becoming intolerably bright as if a fire burned inside him.

Keverin wheeled upon the nearest blue robe. "Stop this right now Renard. Do you hear me? Stop it now curse you!"

Renard gaped at him. "I cannot lord. It... the ward... it's stronger than... I've never *seen* such power unleashed!"

Keverin spun back in torment at what his friend was going through. He shielded his watering eyes. "Darius! Give it up man! Do you hear me?"

"Lord, he has gone too far. He cannot hear you." Renard said sadly.

The screaming went on, and on, and on. Keverin tried to shut it out, but it felt like it was inside his head. He blocked his ears shaking his head violently from side to side.

No, NO, NOOOO!

Keverin smashed a fist into the ward in frustration. The wall of light flashed in reaction and left his hand red and stinging. The pain was nothing to what Darius was going through. Before anyone could stop him, Keverin punched at the wall again. Right fist, left fist, right fist, until his hands bled freely. Someone grabbed him from behind, then another. Suddenly robed men were mobbing him from every side. Roaring he threw them off. Using both fists together as a club, he smashed them into the wall.

The ward flashed blue fire.

"AEEEE!" Screaming in agony Keverin fell to his knees.

Sobbing in pain, he held his hands up before his disbelieving eyes. They were burned black from the discharge. The mages rushed him a second time and he fought to free himself from their weight.

"Guards!" Keverin bellowed still struggling beneath the combined weight of the mages. Glaring around he snarled, "I'll have you all executed for this!"

Six armed and armoured men rushed into the great hall. Seeing their lord in peril they drew swords and charged. Mathius saw the danger and gestured toward the guardsmen. A flickering blue ward sprang up before them and the guardsmen ran headlong into it. The ward crackled ominously and the men jumped back more wary than hurt. Mathius gestured again and the guardsmen froze as if turned to stone. Seeing no help from his men, Keverin struggled even harder.

Darius' screaming abruptly ceased.

The grunting of straining men was the only sound in the hall. Gideon had quit his prayers and was staring at Darius in sick horror. Keverin stopped struggling and peered between robed bodies at the ward. There was a groan of dismay from all present when they saw what it contained. There was an old man standing where Darius should be. His jaw was locked open on a terrible but silent scream and his eyes stared blindly at a horror only Darius knew. The glow was fading now as it finished its terrible work. The last of Darius' hair fell out as Keverin watched and his straight posture crumpled. Darius fell to his knees and then onto his side. The terrible light seemed to drain out of him. It flickered fitfully then winked out. The ward continued to pulse and hum but at a much slower rate now.

Keverin shoved at Renard and Wregan. "Let me up."

This time they obeyed.

Keverin moved to the ward and leaned into it hoping to push it out of the way. It was no good. “Arghh...” He pushed harder crying out at the pain in his burned and bloody hands. The ward brightened as it opposed his strength with its own, but it replied with less energy than before. It was not enough to injure him.

Keverin looked back at Renard with hope that he might take down the ward, but he shook his head. It was hopeless. He turned back and found the wreck of a man was smiling. Smiling? What could he possibly... Keverin gaped as a hole opened in the air. Lightning crackled as it crawled over the floor then began climbing the walls of the ward. It quested for an opening like a vine reaching for the sun. Without warning the ward collapsed and Keverin stumbled toward the gate. He barely had time to stop himself from pitching head first into it when he was flattened to the floor by the newcomer. He threw the man off, scrambled to his feet, and ran to Darius.

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Julia landed. “Ow?”

She sat up only to find she was kneeling astride a darkly tanned man with long black hair frosted with grey at the temples. What the hell was he doing here... Julia gaped at her surroundings. She was about to ask what the hell was going on when her landing cushion shoved her unceremoniously onto the floor and ran off.

“Hey! Who do you...” She called after the retreating figure.

The man didn’t look back, but Julia was past caring about him. She was sitting on a patterned marble floor in a medieval throne room complete with guardsmen and a real throne. The pattern on the floor was like a coat of arms. There was a solid green circle with two gauntleted fists crossed in the centre. Above her head was a chandelier hanging from chains. There were four of them altogether. There must have been a couple of thousand candles up there. The vaulted ceiling was very high and supported by stone columns. There was something odd about them, but she couldn’t quite think of what it was. The walls were covered in tapestries and banners—more banners hung at intervals from the ceiling. It was almost as if she was in a castle or something. Ha! A castle, yeah right! She frowned at those huge columns again. They were very tall, but that wasn’t what had caught her attention. There was something bugging her about them, but what? They were all of one piece instead of in sections, and they looked too delicate to support the weight of the stone ceiling.

The tapestries depicted battles mostly, but some showed fanciful creatures like griffins and dragons. She looked back at the guardsmen who were busy ogling her out of the corners of their eyes as if she couldn’t see them. The swords looked okay, but the armour seemed to be made of leather. Shouldn’t they have been wearing metal breastplates? Julia shook her head at her preoccupation. She should be in the gym! Had she hit her head when she fell? Yes, that was it! She was in a hospital and dreaming all this. She felt much better about her situation knowing that. She hoped it wasn’t serious. She needed to be fit for the games no matter what.

Julia stood and walked around rather than freeze her behind off on the cold floor. The men standing together with her landing cushion took no notice of her as they tended to someone lying on the floor. All of them were wearing colourful robes. The blue ones were nice, more like an aquamarine than plain blue. She didn’t think

much of the yellow ones, but one man had decided to make a fashion statement by wearing green. On her right the guardsmen continued to watch her without moving more than their eyes. They were as motionless as statues and looked uncomfortable.

“Hello, are you standing like that for a particular reason?” Julia said on her best behaviour. What she really wanted to say was that if they didn’t stop ogling her as if she were the only woman ever born she was going to slap them silly.

The man in the front was a sergeant if Julia understood the purpose of the chevrons on his armour. He glowered at her when his friends laughed, but when he didn’t answer, a man on his left answered for him.

“We be magicked, young missy.”

“Shut yer face Brian.” The sergeant said.

“Magicked... are you serious? Magic is all tricks and nonsense...” Julia began but then swallowed nervously remembering they wore swords and this place definitely wasn’t her gym. “Isn’t it?”

The sergeant growled a no, but another of his friends answered more informatively. “Don’t say that where they can hear you.” He said nodding at all the robed figures. “The little one in green stuck our feet to the floor.”

“Really? Why don’t you take your boots off then?”

The guardsmen gaped at her, then looked sheepishly at their mates. As one, they started to pull their feet out of the magicked boots. Julia tried to lift one of the vacated boots but she couldn’t move it. They really were magicked! Thoughts of ogling went out of Julia’s head as a solvable problem presented itself to her. She gratefully latched onto it.

“I’ll just go over and ask the one in green to get them unstuck for you.”

“Wait! Don’t—” the sergeant began, and tried to make a grab for her, but his feet were still trapped within his boots. Julia side-stepped and easily evaded him.

This place was truly amazing. She hadn’t thought her imagination was this detailed. Everything was so vivid and colourful. She studied a tapestry on one of the walls and loved it on sight. Dragons flew overhead while on the ground below more were roaring and blasting fire at soldiers in armour. The soldiers were winning of course, but that didn’t detract from the artistry. It was gorgeous. The colours were so vivid and lifelike—all the reds and the gold’s, it was wonderful work. Maybe Jill was right about her working too hard. She might have had a nervous breakdown.

Julia reached out to tug the sleeve of the man in green. “Excuse me. My friends would like their boots back if that’s not too much trouble,” she said politely.

The man in the green robe turned toward her with a distracted air about him. Julia thought his eyes were going to fall out of their sockets when he focused upon her. Anyone would think he’d never seen a woman before. He stared down at her as if mesmerized by something. She squirmed starting to feel a little exposed.

“I *said*, will you let my friends have their boots back please?” She growled becoming annoyed. Behind her back the guardsmen groaned in unison.

The pimply faced man shook off his distraction. “I’m sorry, but your raiment... it’s a little... and I can see your...” He blushed so red he looked as if he had chronic sunburn. “Never mind. What did you want again?”

Julia sighed. *Give me strength!* Suddenly she did feel stronger and clearer headed. “I said,” she began slowly as if she were talking to a simpleton. “My friends would

appreciate it if they could have their boots back. This floor is cold you know.”

He glanced over Julia’s shoulder at the guardsmen and blushed again with embarrassment. He quickly went over to apologise with Julia following closely behind. “I am so sorry about this—truly. I didn’t want you to start fighting. You can see the Lord is in no danger. Now let me sort this out.”

Julia watched the magician intently and blinked in amazement at what happened. It was weird, but she thought she saw... she didn’t know what it was but it was something. The man in green glowed with an inner radiance before something flew away from him to touch each of the boots in turn. After it touched the last one the glow faded away.

“There you are. You can put them on again now.” The magician said before inclining his head politely to Julia all the while keeping his eyes focused over her shoulder.

Julia frowned and watched him leave. What was it she saw? She turned back to her new friends. “There, that wasn’t too difficult. Do any of you know what his name is?”

The sergeant seemed in better humour now that he could move without showing the holes in his stockings. She had noticed they were in a terrible state.

“I am Sergeant Burke lady. His name is Mathius.”

“He wears the green robe.” Another soldier added helpfully. “That means he’s an initiate.”

“An initiate into what? Into magic I suppose. How high is green?”

“Third rank lady. The colours go: white, brown, green, yellow, blue, red, and black.”

One of the guardsmen leaned around Burke’s shoulder. “Shouldn’t we get her some clothes? What she’s wearing might be all right for bedroom games, but we’re standing with the high and mighty here.”

Julia was about to snap that he could ask her what she wanted, but the sergeant spoke first.

“Good thinking. If you follow Brian, lady, he will get you some *proper* clothes.”

Julia was feeling a bit chilly in her leotard, so she ignored Burke’s emphasis and nodded her agreement. She followed Brian out of the throne room and into an entry hall. There was a large door ahead that opened into what she assumed must be a courtyard. She could only see a glimpse from here, but the ground did seem to have cobbles. The foyer was less ostentatious than the throne room. The walls did have some ornamentation in the shape of large portraits and a few small tapestries, but the floor was made of stone not marble. The stone was granite. To the right and left a corridor stretched into the distance.

This place is BIG!

Brian was frowning down each corridor.

“What’s the matter Brian?”

“Oh nothing much miss,” he said frowning both ways. “I’m trying to think of ways to get you into the women’s quarter without anyone seeing you. T’aint decent for a lady such as yourself to be seen in her night clothes.”

Julia grinned, nightclothes indeed. “My name is Julia, Brian, not miss. This is a leotard. I don’t sleep in it. It’s for gymnastics—do you know that word?”

Although he obviously wanted to, Brian was trying not to look at her. “No miss, I mean Lady Julia. Do it be some kind of magic?” He said and finally succumbed. He peeked at her before going bright red and looking away.

Julia sighed. Men could be such children sometimes. “Not as you mean it, but I must admit it does feel like magic if you perform well. Does your country have sporting events where everyone comes to compete?”

“We have a tournament in Devarr every few years. I think not this year though ‘coz of the invasion.”

“This tournament, what events do you have?”

“Sword play, archery, lance work, wrestling, boxing, and... oh, all sorts of things. The prize is a gold medallion with a picture on it. A sword for sword play, and a glove for boxing, and such like.”

Julia frowned in disappointment. “All your events are about fighting. Don’t you have any for woman, like swimming, or running, or jumping?”

Brian’s eyebrows shot up. “Course! We have all those, but women don’t compete. They’re too weak and fragile like.”

What! “Oh really? Too fragile, I see.”

Brian didn’t recognize the signs of an imminent explosion, so continued regardless. “Everyone knows women need protecting. Why, any man would die before seeing a woman come to harm, or he be no true man.”

Julia listened to Brian and realised he meant every word. She didn’t bite his head off. After all, how could she argue with him when he was determined not to let harm befall her? As she listened to the intricacies of honourable behaviour, she noticed someone coming down the corridor toward them.

“How about if you take down that smaller tapestry, Brian. I could wrap it around myself before that man sees me.”

Brian glanced the way she had nodded and yelped in dismay. He quickly jumped onto a chair and tugged down the tapestry. It was a nice one. It had pictures of horses running along a river. The spray was clearly defined and the colours were vivid. It must have taken years to make. Brian quickly wrapped her in it, and snapped to attention as the man reached them.

The newcomer was about a head taller than Julia was, making him about five feet ten inches. He was heavily muscled in the shoulders and beardless. The tight leather trousers he wore displayed his muscled legs to perfection, and incidentally made Julia feel a little hot in the face. His sheathed sword was thrust through a blue sash tied tightly around his waist. His armour was the same kind Brian wore and seemed to be made of boiled leather. The same emblem she had seen on the floor of the throne room adorned his chest on the right side.

Julia didn’t think the armour offered much protection against the swords all the men carried... not unless it had some kind of hidden strength. Magic perhaps? He was wearing his dark hair long with a leather band around it to create a ponytail, and diagonally across his chest from left shoulder to right hip he wore a blue sash. It probably denoted rank. From Brian’s reaction she guessed he was a captain of the guard.

“Report!”

“Darius died, Sir. He made a wall out of light and brought Lady Julia here

through a hole in the air!” Brian said in awe. “I’m taking her to the women’s quarter now, Sir.”

“Darius is dead you say?”

Brian nodded. “He was glowing like the sun and then he fell. He was an old man, Sir.”

“Hmmm. The Lord?”

“He was very upset. The mages stopped him from hurting himself.”

The Captain’s lips tightened. “But he is well?”

“Yes sir.”

Julia listened as Brian concisely reported the facts. She was extremely interested to hear about Darius who it seemed had died trying to summon her to this place. Served him right too. She had been minding her own business and then wham! Here she was.

The captain turned toward her with a supercilious smile on his face.

You... I... do... not... like.

The captain inclined his head in a small bow. “Lady Julia, I am Marcus. As you can see,” he indicated the blue sash, “Senior Captain. I will escort you to the women’s quarter if you wish.”

Actually, Romeo had a very nice voice, but Julia had no intention of going anywhere with him. “That’s very kind of you Captain, but I thought I heard your lord roaring about someone called Marcus just a few moments ago. Are there perhaps two people of the name here?”

The Captain’s smile wilted and he hastily excused himself to enter the hall. Julia listened and grinned as she heard someone call to him.

“Ah, Marcus. I have something—”

Brian looked at her strangely. “How did you know, Lady?”

Julia shrugged. “I just made it up. I have a feeling I wouldn’t like to be alone with you so Senior Captain Marcus.”

Brian nodded, and indicated with a polite wave of his hand that she should follow him. “The Captain knows his job, no question of that, but I’ve heard from the serving girls that he takes... you know... *liberties!* One girl said he slapped her on the... on her *rear.*”

Julia gaped in disbelief. Brian sounded positively scandalized. Perhaps she’d been a little hard on Marcus if all he’d done was pat some girl’s rump. The more she heard, the more she realised this place took protecting women entirely too far. In most women’s minds that would be good news, but she was starting to realise how wearying something like that would be. She wouldn’t be able to leave the castle without armed escort, wouldn’t be able to compete in the tournaments, she would go mad with boredom living like that.

“What does a woman do for amusement around here?”

Brian shrugged. “Lots of things. They make the tapestries and clothes. They read poetry and write some as well, but music is the best.”

Julia thought that she might like to know how to make a tapestry like the one she was wearing, and the music sounded all right, but the poetry was definitely *out!*

Brian kept walking for what seemed ages. Julia didn’t know how she would remember her way around, because so far she hadn’t seen a window anywhere. The

place was enormous. It must cost a fortune to run something this size. The lord of this place lived like a king—unless he really was one. She hadn't thought of that. The entire place was probably built on other people's suffering. The thought turned her stomach.

"Brian? This castle must cost a fortune. How does whoever owns it pay for it all?"

"This is Athione, Lady." Brian said with a wave of his hand at his surroundings. "It's one of the four great fortresses of Deva. Lord Keverin pays for it all—he's rich!"

Julia sighed. "I can see he must be rich Brian, but did he tax the poor people to get rich?"

Brian goggled at the idea.

Perhaps not then.

"Athione was built by the Founders with sorcery." Brian said reverently. "The Lord pays us well for being here. The only taxes he gets are from his tenants and farmers—only one copper in twenty. Traders give him one copper in ten. That's one reason, the least important one, why everyone is so loyal to Athione." They turned another corner and Brian continued. "The King taxes everyone *four* coppers in ten."

The way Brian explained the situation spoke volumes about his opinion of the King. It fairly shouted his outrage at the idea of taxing so heavily. It sounded as if this Lord Keverin was ahead of the times. By taxing low he attracted more people and trading. He would gain more by that than taxing high.

Julia tried to memorise the route they were taking. Lamps were spaced about thirty feet apart on the walls to provide light, but the darkness in between made her very uneasy. Her fear of the dark, she would never call it a phobia, might be more of a problem here than it ever had been at home she realised. The lamps did provide light, but they weren't very bright. There were shadows and ominous looking alcoves almost everywhere she looked. Some of the alcoves contained pieces of furniture or paintings that looked antique to her untrained eyes. Others contained busts on pedestals or statues. She gave up trying to memorise the turns when it started to feel like mapping the maze on a school trip.

"Are you deliberately trying to confuse me, or are you lost?" Julia said grumpily.

Brian laughed. "I'm using the older corridors to avoid anyone seeing you in your small clothes."

"Oh. Where I come from no one would take any notice. I can wear whatever I want... well, mostly any way. In England a woman can take a job or not as she pleases. If she wanted to wear men's clothes and do the same job as a man she can—mostly."

"That sounds like a recipe for disaster to me." Brian said in disapproval. "Don't you have criminals in England? What is to stop a brigand from having his way with a woman? As for work, a man is more restricted than a woman. Usually he grows to be a farmer, a guardsman, or a crafter. There are some others, like artisans, but you see what I'm saying."

Disgruntled Julia said that she did. What was annoying her she realised was that here she would be unable to compete in the tournament.

Whoa! What's the matter with me?

Julia had forgotten this was all a dream there for a minute. Competing in a medieval tournament did not compare with the Olympics—and any way, she would

wake up soon. Jill would tell her how stupid she was to work in the gym alone and this would all be over.

After walking through miles of dimly lit stone corridors and climbing hundreds of steps, Brian stopped outside a door. It was no different from countless other doors she had seen, except in one respect. There was no handle on this side.

Brian took a deep breath, and quickly straightened his hair.

“You look fine,” Julia said.

Brian grinned at her then knocked. After a moment, the door opened to reveal a very wide woman with a leather belt encircling her ample waist. Iron keys swung to and fro on a ring hanging from the belt. Julia assumed the woman to be some kind of guard for the women’s quarter. She was certainly big enough to break any number of male interlopers over her knee. She stood like a mobile roadblock in the centre of the doorway and looked from Brian to her, and back again.

“Well young Brian. What brings you to my domain?” Roadblock said.

Brian inclined his head. “Lady Elise, this is Lady Julia. Lady Julia, this is lady Elise—she is the seneschal.” Brian must have noticed Julia’s puzzled look because he went on to explain. “A seneschal is a housekeeper when the house is a castle or fortress.”

Elise snorted. “Housekeeper indeed. Where did you find your stray, Brian?”

Before he could answer, Julia jumped in. “He found me in your lord’s throne room after I was summoned from my world by a wizard named Darius.”

The housekeeper’s jaw dropped.

Satisfactory!

Elise looked her up and down. “Leave her with me Brian. I’ll take care of her.”

Brian on his best behaviour inclined his head to both of them. “Ladies, if you will excuse me.”

Julia watched Brian leave then stepped through the door into the women’s quarter. Elise closed and bolted the door behind her. After another interminable walk—in silence this time—Elise showed her to an empty apartment. After indicating the facilities, she left Julia to explore her rooms. There was the main sitting room with a large fireplace—the fireplace was cold but she was warm enough. She had a bedchamber lavishly furnished with tapestries on the walls, thick rugs on the flagstones, a wardrobe bigger than her bedroom at home, and a comfy looking bed with ornately decorated quilt depicting a stag in flight. The bath chamber was a wonder for these times. A stone bath with taps providing hot and cold water. More magic?

Julia sat on the padded stool in front of the dressing table and looked at herself in the mirror. A tired and bedraggled gymnast in a leotard and tapestry looked back at her. She stood and looked out of the windows to see a bright sunny day outside.

She was in the mountains!

Julia gazed at them in stunned delight. England could be beautiful, but it had nothing this... this *grand*. She craned her neck and found a tall curtain wall topped with a crenulated parapet, and guardsmen armed with swords walking the battlement. Set in the wall was a pair of heavily barred gates. They were huge and covered in bronze. They were more like vault doors than gates. There was a great deal of activity on the walls, more than she thought necessary, but who was she to say.

Perhaps they had outlaws like Robin Hood here. It was her dream after all, and she liked Errol Flynn. Athione was huge, just as she had thought earlier. She was very high up she saw. The women's quarter wasn't truly a quarter of the fortress at all. It was more like an entire floor—the third floor to be exact—of a huge hotel. Her suite of rooms had its own bath and privy, which was unexpected, but with magic nothing was impossible.

Julia turned away from the window and entered the bath chamber to fill the bath. A short time later she was reclining in the stone tub and luxuriating in the feel of her muscles un-knotting. She drowsed for a time before reluctantly deciding to wash and get ready for bed.

Julia found a nightgown in the wardrobe. It fit her very well, though it was old fashioned from her point of view. It was made of white cotton and covered her from neck to toes. It was only mid-afternoon, but she felt jet lagged or something—gate lagged. She snorted at the stray thought as she slid between the cool sheets. The last thing that passed through her mind before falling asleep was what a weird dream she would share with Jill tomorrow.

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A black robed man sat on an uncomfortable stool staring into the mirror on the table. With him in the tent were two others. Both men were dark haired and wore beards, but there the similarity ended. Lucius wore the black robe of a sorcerer, but the other man was in armour. He was General Navarien, commander of the Fifth Legion and the invasion of Deva. He wore a dagger sheathed at his belt on the right, and a sword with an ornate hilt hanging at his left hip.

Navarien turned to the sorcerer standing with him. "What precisely is he scrying for my lord sorcerer?"

"Please General, call me Lucius."

Navarien never knew quite where he stood with Lucius. One moment the man was telling him to mind his own affairs, the next he was being friendly and telling him to call him by his given name.

"You honour me lord sorcerer," he said inclining his head in assent. "Is there a problem I need to be aware of?"

"Belgard is the most sensitive among us. He's the best at scrying as well—"

Navarien frowned at the dislike he heard in Lucius' voice. If Lucius and Belgard were rivals, nothing good would come of them working so close.

"—earlier today," Lucius was saying. "Belgard felt something he thought might be the disturbance caused by the invocation of a Great Spell. It's extremely unlikely of course, but we must check so that no errors occur. *The God decrees* we not fail in our mission."

On hearing those words, Navarien bowed with his right hand over his heart in devotion to the God. "There will be no failure Lucius, not while I live." He said knowing that he wouldn't survive long if one were discovered.

"I'm sure there will not be. Tell me, have your men settled in satisfactorily?"

"Yes my lord sorcerer. They are ready to do their duty to the God. If it's not too presumptuous of me, can you say when we attack?"

Lucius glanced at Belgard. “As soon as Belgard has satisfied me that there are no nasty surprises, we will assault the gate.”

“That is good news. If I can be of any assistance, please make it known to me.”

Lucius didn't reply but nodded his understanding. They both turned to watch Belgard. Navarien could only catch a glimpse of the mirror, but it seemed to be showing a young woman in her bed chamber.

If he's using the mirror to spy on the women, I'll... what?

Navarien frowned. Belgard could swat him just by glancing his way. He glanced at Lucius in time to see him scowl at the mirror. Slowly the glass cleared, and was just a mirror again.

“Well?” Lucius said shortly.

The only reaction from Belgard was the raising of an eyebrow as if surprised at the rudeness of a boy child. Navarien nearly burst out laughing, but he managed to stifle it with a cough. Belgard could swat him without trying, true, but Lucius had no restraint these days. He could obliterate most of the camp in his anger.

“A gate has been opened.”

Navarien gasped in shock, and Lucius wasn't far behind.

“Are you certain?” Lucius said intently.

“Of course I'm certain!” Belgard snapped in annoyance. “I never say a thing unless I know it to be true. It's something you should keep in mind Lucius, and perhaps emulate.”

Navarien winced at the acid dripping from Belgard's words and waited for Lucius to erupt, but to his surprise Lucius stayed calm and waited for the rest of the report. Perhaps he had misjudged the man.

“It seems one of the Devan mages was quite skilled for an amateur. He succeeded in opening the gate, but then he failed to bring anyone of importance through. He died in the fires of his own magic. I watched part of the preparation for his funeral—he looked about a hundred and fifty years old.” Belgard frowned. “I wonder how old he was before the spell?”

Navarien was intrigued. “What does his age matter?”

“Well General, I'm not giving away secrets by telling you that if a mage over reaches himself he will age. If I knew his age before the spell, I could estimate by how far he over reached. Do you see?”

“I can see that,” Navarien said.

“Well... if I knew how much he was short by, I would know how strong their best mage was. We know a so called wizard named Darius lives at Athione. He is supposed to be strong, but we don't know if he's the strongest. They would obviously have used their best. The other mages in the fortress are bound to be weaker.”

Navarien nodded. Belgard's reasoning impressed him. The information would definitely be worth having. Sadly, it was dependent on knowing who the mage was, and how old he was before the spell. He mentioned this to Belgard who nodded agreement.

“What is the point of debating something that cannot be known?” Lucius said in annoyance. “I want to know who or what was brought through, and I want to know now!”

Belgard seemed amused by Lucius' anger, but Navarien was not. He stayed quiet

pretending not to be there. It was safer.

“The pursuit of knowledge is never a waste of time Lucius, but to answer your question: the fates have been unkind to Deva. Instead of bringing through someone who could help them, the mage died bringing through a girl.” Belgard chuckled. “It appears he died just as he entered the higher realm. He must have realised his time was up and snatched her at random hoping to get lucky. He wasn’t.”

Navarien sighed and relaxed tight shoulders. No woman had ever been born with the gift for magic. It was a man’s power exclusively.

“That he managed to open a gate at all is worrying.” Belgard continued. “He must have realised that he would die and willingly sacrificed himself. There’s power in that.”

“We will begin the assault at sunrise General.” Lucius said. “The Devans should be at their least effective then. Have your men ready to enter the breach as soon as we provide it.”

Hearing an order for the first time since entering the tent, Navarien came to attention. “Yes, my lord sorcerer. All will be ready. With your permission?”

At Lucius’ nod he bowed to both mages and left. Outside the tent, Navarien paused to breathe a sigh of relief. He had survived by the God! Looking around at his orderly camp, a feeling of justifiable pride came over him.

During the war with Bandar, Navarien had proven himself worthier than several others when he was raised to temporary command of the Second Legion—he had been Senior Captain when his General was relieved for a serious failure. He had taken up his new duties without a fuss and immediately planned an attack. By splitting his forces, he by-passed a defensive position, and while the Bandarians fell over themselves trying to change front, both halves of his legion wheeled and struck. The Bandarians were annihilated.

Now he had a new command and a new campaign to fight.

Navarien’s legion, the Fifth, was ten thousand strong. All infantry. He had made it clear at the outset that cavalry would be a liability at this stage. Athione sat on an escarpment completely blocking the pass. The only way into Deva was to negotiate a narrow road out of the town, and follow it up to the gates of the fortress. Lucius had told him that the escarpment was created by the up thrusting of rock with magic. Looking at it, Navarien could see for him self that it wasn’t natural.

Navarien had chosen a campsite approximately half a league from the remains of the town just at the point where the pass widened out into an irregular circle. It mattered not at all to him that he was following in the footsteps of armies and generals now long dead. They had attempted to breach Athione and failed, but they hadn’t brought sorcerers with them.

He had.

Moving through the camp, Navarien glanced at the burned remains of the town. It was an annoyance that he had been unable to capture it intact, but only that. He had hoped, but not counted on, taking the town to resupply his troops. It would have been considerably more than an annoyance if he’d brought cavalry with him. The pass was completely devoid of vegetation. No forage meant no horses. It was as simple as that.

Navarien stopped a moment to watch some of the men unloading the latest

pack train to arrive through the pass. The stores of food and other essentials looked pitifully small, and ordinarily he would be worried. He wasn't though. Everything was going according to plan. Two battalions had been detailed to start the unenviable job of supplying the legion with food and other necessities. Those two thousand men were important, any less and the task would become unworkable. It took his men two days to travel the pass to reach this point, so to make the round trip the draft animals had to work on low rations for four days. It would be pointless to ferry in food for the animals, he would need even more of them to carry it. No, it wasn't critical to his plan to capture the town, but it would have saved a great deal of effort.

Stopping outside of his tent, Navarien stared up at the arrogant and forbidding walls of Athione.

Soon.

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He should never have let Darius study that God cursed book!

Keverin sat slumped in his chair atop the dais in the great hall. He had ordered the room cleared a few candlemarks ago. The mages had removed Darius to prepare him for the final journey. Darius had always said the term was silly. He said the body was like a cup, and the wine was life. When death came, the soul left the body behind after savouring the wine of life.

A soothing balm leached the pain from Keverin's burnt hands, but he wished they had one for his soul instead. He unconsciously clenched then released his fists and took no notice of the blood soaked bandages. The blood welled then dripped onto the dais.

He did not notice.

It was a habit he learned from his father who wanted to strengthen him. His sword work had been atrocious when he was a child. His father had decided his forearms needed more strength. Kevlarin had given him a ball made out of rags tightly bound together and told him to squeeze it when he had an idle moment. Keverin had idolized his father, and took the orders to an extreme. For years, he used the ball. Other children thought him a baby for carrying it, but he ignored the comments and continued to exercise with it until the string wore out. His sword work became excellent as even the largest of blades became light as a feather in his hands. Now whenever he became upset the familiar motion of clench and release eased his soul.

Suddenly his emotions came to a head and he jumped to his feet to storm out of the hall. He made his way through the labyrinthine corridors and eventually came to the north tower steps. Climbing quickly upward, he came to the last door. Hesitating briefly, he unlocked it and went inside.

There wasn't much to see. A bed, a wardrobe, and a chest he knew held spare red robes. On a wall, a shelf supported a mirror and two books. He picked up the books and read the titles. The larger of the two was a book of poetry he recognized as being borrowed from the library. He replaced it on the shelf. The smaller of the two was a history entitled: *The Black Isle*.

Taking it with him, he sat on the bed and began to read.

Time passed unnoticed while he read, then turning another page he realised there was no more. Surprised, he looked toward the window, and saw the sun was going down. He replaced the book on the shelf and was about to leave when a scroll caught his eye on the table. How he had missed it before he didn't know, but he snatched it up as if it held all the secrets in the world. On the outside of the parchment was his name in Darius' hand. Breaking the seal, he began to read.

My dear friend.

If you are reading this, events have proceeded as I foresaw. Do not blame yourself for my death, mages such as I never expect to live to a ripe old age as the founders were said to have done. Only another mage could truly understand the ecstasy of using the power to create something never seen before.

"I never did understand my friend. How could I know?" Keverin said into the gloom.

To me the gate spell is like a fine horse or blade is to you, it begs to be used and used wisely. I hope I am wise, but if I am not, I will not know it after today. Already the knowledge of the spell works upon me. It calls me, and I burn to use it. The founders had iron discipline to thwart temptation. Alas, I'm not one such as they.

"You were the strongest man I ever knew." Keverin whispered. Who else would walk into his hall, knowing he would come out an old man, or not at all?

You must use your best judgment about whether to show the book to anyone else, but I urge you to destroy it before allowing the Hasians access to such a treasure. Uncountable harm would result should they build gates to anywhere they wished. Imagine for a moment, a gate opened into this very room, and an army of Hasians pouring through.

Keverin was nodding. He had already decided to destroy it. Not for fear of the Hasians, but to prevent anyone else going through what Darius had. He bent his head to continue reading. The light was failing now and he could barely see the words.

If the spell worked, you have a new guest in your fortress. Be kind to him, as you have been to me. He will be confused and will not understand our world. Teach him what he needs to know, and above all, if he wishes to try the return journey you must let him. I snatched him against his will, a crime for which I shall surely be called to account when I kneel before the God.

Farewell,

Your friend and servant,

Darius.

Keverin rolled the parchment up. He stepped outside and re-locked the door. Walking through the silent fortress, he tried not to dwell on Darius and the screaming. After walking for a time, he thought he could by thinking about the coming battle. Then he had an idea about using the mages.

“I’ll ask Darius what he thinks.”

The screaming came back louder than ever.

On reaching his rooms, Keverin put the scroll in a velvet bag with some other papers and put them in a hidden drawer in his desk. He crossed the study to open a cabinet. Inside were crystal decanters of wine and some glasses. He hesitated on choosing which one to take, but then he remembered Darius saying the wine from Talayan was the best.

Keverin took out the decanter, and with a glass in hand proceeded to drink himself insensible. Strangely, it seemed to take a long time. After finishing the wine, he started on a Camorin spirit those northern people called White Lightning. He managed two glasses before losing consciousness.

Darius...

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