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MAGIC
a PLANESWALKER NOVEL

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CHAPTER ONE

Is that the scroll the monks are talking about?” Brannon asked.

“Yes, it is.” Chandra Nalaar smiled at the ginger-headed boy as she held out the scroll, neatly rolled up and encased in an ancient leather sheath. “The brothers are done with their work, so I thought I’d take a look at it, see what all the excitement is about.”

“I heard it has strange writing that only a few of the monks can read,” the boy said.

“That’s right,” Chandra said, sitting next to Brannon. “I can’t read it, but the monks will tell me what it says.”

The two of them were in a common room at Keral Keep, a place of learning and study for the fire mages of Regatha.

Brannon asked, “Where did you get the scroll?”

“Far away.” Chandra was used to dodging questions about her travels throughout the Multiverse. It was easier for most people to accept lies than to understand what it meant to move back and forth among the infinite planes of reality. “Do you want to look at it with me?”

She had looked at the scroll before, but that was on a plane called Kephalai where she had “liberated” it from the Sanctum of the Stars. Once back on Regatha, she had handed the scroll over to the monks at Keral Keep.

The scroll was said to be unique, the only record of a fire spell more powerful than any known. Its origin was utterly mysterious, and it had been fiercely protected on Kephalai. Chandra might not be able to interpret its meaning on her own, but she was curious enough to want another look.

The monks in the monastery’s scriptorium were very interested in the scroll, enough that young Brannon was curious about it too.

“Yes,” he said eagerly, “let’s look at it. Unroll it!”

“All right. But remember,” she cautioned. “It’s very old and fragile, so—”

“Uh, Chandra?”

“—we have to be careful not to—”

“*Chandra.*” Brannon was looking past her, his eyes wide with alarm.

She turned to look at whatever had captured his attention and shot to her feet when she saw a tall, menacing stranger standing at one end of the room.

“Chandra Nalaar, give me that scroll!” he said, his tone as much a demand as the words.

How does he know my name?

“Brannon, get out of here!” she said. “*Now.*”

“But—”

“Go!”

Recognizing her tone, the boy turned and ran, seeking the safety of the stone halls of the monastery and the presence of others.

“Give me the scroll,” said the stranger, “and no one gets hurt.”

Chandra’s attention was immediately drawn to the cold, cerulean intensity of his eyes, glowing in the shadow of his cowled cloak. She could sense his intrusion into her thoughts. *A telepath.*

Chandra had only just returned to this plane, and her comings and goings at the monastery passed without fanfare. No one on Regatha knew about the scroll unless one of the monks had renounced his vows and become loose-lipped. This stranger, she realized with a hot flood of surprise, must have come from Kephelai.

“You’re a planeswalker,” she breathed.

“I’m not going to ask again,” he warned her. “And you won’t live long enough to be sorry you resisted.”

If he had followed her æther trail through the Blind Eternities, he must be very skilled. A trick like that wasn’t for beginners.

But he had picked the wrong person to follow.

“I see there’s only one of you,” she said, feeling her blood heat for combat.

“One is all it will take,” he replied.

With hair-trigger speed, Chandra’s fists lit up like torches as she thrust them toward the stranger, hurling a pair of fireballs like meteors.

But the mage was ready. As if he knew what she would do even before she did it, he met the fireballs with an ice-blue liquid mass that issued from his outstretched arms.

The counter attack was followed by a surge of power that flowed forth and encircled Chandra, glowing with the same cerulean intensity of his eyes. With Chandra momentarily paralyzed, the mind mage started mapping her consciousness, looking for the lynchpin he could use to disable her.

Chandra loathed mind mages. What could be more despicable than poking around in another person’s private thoughts and feelings? The violation, along with the stranglehold of the spell, kindled her rage like phosphorous.

By now, conscious thought was no longer an option for Chandra. The world around her slowed to a geological pace, and she could feel the power of the mountain inside her. Immovable, dominating, volcanic in its fury, it grew from that darkest part of herself, that diamond of rage deep in her core until ...

Boom.

An incomparable concussive blast left Chandra at ground zero, leveling everything around her and blasting a hole in the wall where the mind mage had been.

An eerie quiet pervaded the room. Sparks flickered and died in the dead air. “Didn’t mean to blow my top like that,” she muttered to no one in particular, as she surveyed the damage.

Chandra was sure he wasn’t dead, though. She knew it wouldn’t be that easy to kill an experienced planeswalker.

“Chandra!” Brannon cried from beyond the hole in the outer wall.

“Brannon! What are you doing out there?” she shouted. “Get inside the monastery. *Now!*”

Instead of listening to her, the boy turned and ran again. What is the matter with him, she wondered.

Not daring to leave it behind, Chandra took the scroll and went after him. She couldn't leave it unprotected with a mind mage running around.

As she stepped through the hole, she saw the stranger standing on a rocky ledge that overlooked her position, holding the small ginger-haired boy by the throat. Just like a kid to get in middle of things, she thought.

Brannon struggled to breathe, his feet dangling just above the ground.

"No!" Chandra's stomach knotted with fear at the sight of her young friend in the planeswalker's powerful grip.

"Don't make me kill the child," the stranger said.

Brannon kicked and gasped in pain even as he tried to speak. "Let me g ... *aaagh* ..." The phrase trailed off in a choked gurgle. Tears of pain and fear rolled down his reddened cheeks.

Chandra hated to lose. She absolutely *hated* it!

But she knew the scroll in her hand, however unique, wasn't worth Brannon's life. She held it up as an offering and called, "Don't hurt him! You can have the scroll."

Chandra heard how hoarse with dread her voice sounded. She watched the mind mage give Brannon a sharp shake, to make him stop squirming.

"That's all I came for," the planeswalker said. "As long as I get it right now, he's fine."

He looked cold, but not cruel. She believed that capturing Brannon was business, not pleasure.

So she tossed the scroll up to him.

It landed a few feet in front of him. "A wise decision. My impression is that you don't make many."

But before he could turn the boy over, Chandra heard her name called from the monastery. She turned to see Brannon looking out from the hole she had blasted in the wall.

"Chandra! What's happening?" he shouted from a distance.

An illusion!

"All right, mindbender ... You want to play?"

With a quickness to match her temper, Chandra leaped into the air, an aura of flame surrounding her as she recited a spell. Spreading her arms and expanding her chest like a bellows, all the air in a thirty foot radius went dead as she sapped the oxygen she needed as fuel for her fire. She paused at the top of her breath until it felt like she would explode with the effort, and when she let go, explode she nearly did. With all her might she exhaled, eyes wide, tongue extended like some primal totem. Her breath had the force of a cannon and burned with chemical intensity.

The stranger balled up, shielding his body with his cloak. The force of the blast unsteadied him, but he obviously had been able to conjure some protection. He emerged merely singed when everything around him had been reduced to charcoal. The scroll had fallen from his grasp, but lay out of both their reaches.

"Nice trick," he mocked. "I bet you're a big hit with the boys."

Jokes? This guy has to go down, Chandra thought.

But he was just getting started. The mage's eyes glowed brightly, and his skin

changed, newly streaked blue-grey. Chandra knew something was coming but she didn't know what. Still, she should have known this guy wouldn't fight his own fights. He summoned an massive cloud elemental that swooped down to knock Chandra off her feet before veering to where the scroll lay on the ground.

Two can play at that game, thought Chandra as she summoned her own fire elemental to meet the cloud. The two titans collided with a sharp hiss, flame and vapor locked in a mercurial embrace.

With the elementals occupied, the mind mage made a move to recover the scroll himself, but Chandra was on point as she raised a wall of fire between him and his quarry.

"You're going to have to work for it, mindbender." Chandra was just starting to have fun.

Still, the stranger was undeterred. He ran down the wall to where he had last seen the scroll and stepped through the flame, an icy corona surrounding him. Chandra was waiting, though, her fist cocked, blazing hot. She hit him with a left cross that had the weight of the world behind it, and sent the mage flying backward, his body like a rag doll's as he tumbled over the rocks.

As the flames died down, Chandra surveyed the scene. She had done well. The elementals had died fighting and there was plenty of scorched earth, but she had done well.

"Chandra, that was amazing!"

She turned to see Brannon. "You shouldn't be out here, kiddo."

"What happened to him?"

"He took a nasty spill. He won't be back again."

"Are you sure?" he asked pointing in the direction of the mage. There were several cloaked figures, all exactly alike, moving in different directions.

"He's just trying to trick me. He doesn't want me to know which one is actually him," said Chandra pointing to the illusions. "Look, he's running away."

"I don't think so," said the boy in a strange voice. "I think he's going to get that scroll."

When she turned back, Chandra saw the familiar eerie blue glow in Brannon's eyes and she knew ... But right in that moment of realization, the mage hit her with a mental attack that caught her completely off-guard. She crumpled as her vision faded to black.



"Chandra, are you all right?" The real Brannon reached her side and started helping her rise from the ground. "What happened? I saw your fire elemental. Wow, I've never seen anything that big! Not even Mother Luti can make 'em that big." The boy was nearly ecstatic. "And then there was a sort of ... a blue wave of light or something. What was that?"

"That was the stranger," Chandra said grumpily. "Being ... *clever*."

"The scroll!" Brannon said, seeing that her hands were empty. "Where's the scroll?"

"What are you talking about, Brannon?"

"He got it. He must have taken it!"

"The scroll?"

“I know you said the monks finished their work. But don’t we need it any more?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Did they copy it in their workshop? Is that what you said?”

“Kiddo, this is crazy talk. Everything is all right. He’s not coming back,” she assured him.

“Well I hope so, ’cause he was creepy.” Brannon asked, eyeing their surroundings a little anxiously.

“Yes,” she said. “But he’s gone.”

Chandra tried to clear her head. Something was missing. Why did that fight just happen? Who was that guy?

But the more she tried to think about it, the more it hurt. What is that kid talking about with the scroll?

CHAPTER TWO

Chandra was mad. And when she got mad, she liked to set things on fire. Call it her little weakness.

She felt heat racing through her, turning her blood into curling flames of power that sparked out through her fingertips, her eyes, and the auburn tendrils of her long hair.

“You’re saying you copied down the scroll *wrong*?” she demanded of Brother Sergil. “After all the trouble I went through to steal it? After how important I told you it was? You’re saying that you and the other brothers made a mess of *your* part of the job? After I nearly got killed doing *my* part right?”

Brother Sergil, who evidently didn’t feel deeply attached to his mortal existence, snapped, “Perhaps if you hadn’t let someone steal the scroll *back* so soon after you brought it here, we wouldn’t have a problem now!”

“Oh, *really*?” Chandra could feel her skin glowing with the power that her anger unleashed. True, she had lost the scroll, but that mage had been good. “And if anyone had bothered to *help* me fight off that mage, maybe the scroll would still be at the monastery, instead of who-knows-where?” Her memory of the scroll had not come back. The mind mage had been thorough in cleansing it from her mind. She remembered everything she had done retrieving it, everything about the fight ... But he had cut the scroll out with artisanal precision.

“All right, that’s enough,” said Luti, the mother mage of Keral Keep. “From *both* of you.”

Chandra said, “What’s the point of my bringing you something so valuable if you can’t even—”

“*Stop*,” said Luti.

“We’ve done our part as well as anyone could expect!” Brother Sergil said. “All I’m saying is—”

“Not as well as *I* expected! How did you—” Chandra stepped back with a sharp intake of breath as a small fireball exploded between her and Brother Sergil. The monk staggered backward, too, stumbling on the rough red stones that paved the monastery courtyard.

They both looked at Mother Luti in surprised silence.

“That’s better,” Luti said, her fingers glowing with the lingering effect of forming and throwing that fiery projectile between them. Her glance flickered over Chandra. “Quench your hair, young woman.”

“What? Oh.” Chandra became aware of the haze of fiery heat and pulsating flames surrounding her head. It wasn’t a roaring blaze, but it was certainly a loss of control.

She took a calming breath and brushed her palms over her hair, smoothing the dancing flames back into her auburn mane until Luti's nod indicated they had disappeared altogether.

"Until you can master your power better," Luti said, "it would be a good idea to learn to manage your temper."

Chandra let the comment pass without protest. She didn't like orders or reprimands, but she had come to the Keralian Monastery to *learn* to master her power, after all. And she had once again just demonstrated how little control over it she had.

"You have an extraordinary gift," Luti said. "Tremendous power. But as it is with our passions, it is with the fire you wield; they are good servants, but bad masters."

"It would help," Chandra said, glaring at Brother Sergil, "if people wouldn't—"

"Nothing will help," Luti said. "Certainly not other people. Only you can change the way your power manifests. Only within yourself can you find a way to master it in a reality which will, after all, always contain annoyances, distractions, fears, and sorrows."

"Right." Hoping to avoid another of Luti's lectures on the nature of life, Chandra hastened to change the subject. "Now what about the scroll?"



The pyromancers, scholars, and initiates at Keral Keep had no idea where the scroll had come from. And neither did Mother Luti, for that matter, but she alone did know where Chandra got it. Luti ran the haven for pyromancers and fire mages, who came to study and practice in the monastery on Mount Kerlia, a potent source of power. She knew a lot.

There was wisdom to be learned from her, to be sure, but the great stone walls of the fortress that crowned the summit of Mount Keralia pulsed with mana as red as the rock it was built upon. This was why mages came from all over Regatha.

The most skilled fire mages on the entire plane dwelled within the stony halls of the monastery, but none of them, including Luti, were as powerful as Chandra.

Perhaps Luti would have suspected the truth about Chandra even if she hadn't been told: Chandra was a planeswalker.

Luti was well-versed in the legend of Jaya Ballard, the bombastic fire mage whose long-ago sojourn on Regatha had inspired the founding of this monastery. Jaya was a planeswalker, too. And planeswalkers were ... different.

When she witnessed, first-hand, the magnitude of Chandra's power, Luti could only think of the celebrated pyromancy of Jaya Ballard, stories she assumed had grown like mushroom clouds with the passage of time. In any case, Chandra chose to privately reveal her nature to Luti soon after coming to Regatha, after deciding it wouldn't make sense to seek instruction in controlling her power while concealing what she could do.

It was a choice, Luti later told her, that demonstrated Chandra was capable of reasoned decisions when she applied herself.

Luti kept Chandra's secret mostly out of a desire that fire remain the most tangible of the visible mysteries on Regatha. She feared the acolytes at Keral Keep would look for answers in Chandra, rather than find their own path. To everyone else at the monastery, Chandra was simply an unusually powerful young mage who came from somewhere else. And since Chandra, like so many others, didn't want to talk about her

past, no one pried.

Apart from Luti, none of the Keralians knew that Chandra had traveled the Blind Eternities, bridging that chaotic interval between the planes of the Multiverse, to steal that scroll on Kephelai, a world they'd never heard of and could never visit themselves.

Chandra had heard of the scroll in her travels, and she was intrigued by its reputation. So, after some time studying and practicing at the Keep had improved her erratic control of pyromancy, Chandra decided to find and steal the scroll, which turned out to be a little better guarded than she had anticipated. That was a wild ride, to be sure. Still, she made it out with the scroll.

Since the scroll was fragile, the brothers' first act had been to make a few working copies of it. They had laboriously replicated the ancient writing by hand on fresh parchment.

Considering what had happened next, it was lucky they had done so. If she ever saw that mage again, she told herself, she would be ready. He would not trick her again.

Meanwhile, she knew from Luti's expression that she had better remain silent while Brother Sergil explained the problem the monks were having with their copies of the scroll.

"The script is archaic, a variant we have not seen before, so it's taken us some time to interpret its meaning. We are *sure*, though," Sergil said, with a dark glance at Chandra, "that we copied it correctly. The value of multiple brothers each making a copy means, of course, that we can compare all our results from the process and arrive at a consensus on the exact contents of the original. Right down to the tiniest brushstroke."

"Uh-huh." Chandra folded her arms and didn't attempt to conceal her boredom.

Mother Luti, who was a full head shorter than Chandra and triple her age, gave her a quelling look.

"The language of the scroll is a variant that our scholars haven't encountered, so our conclusions aren't as firm as one might wish. But it seems to be describing something of immense power, much as Chandra believed." Brother Sergil made the grudging concession to her with a little nod.

"An artifact? A spell? What?" Chandra was surprised.

"It could be either ... or something else entirely."

"I could have told you that," said Chandra exasperated.

"You mean you could have told us that had you a memory—"

Mother Luti raised a hand to stop Brother Segril from going further, her head tilted in a gesture of contemplation. Her white hair shone brightly in the sunlight of the monastery courtyard where the three of them stood. "What kind of power?" she asked when she had their attention.

"The scroll describes either an extraordinary source of mana, or it's the key to accessing mana with extraordinary results. Either way, according to the scroll, it is something that will confer enormous power upon whomever unleashes it." He shrugged. "It's not clear to us if the text of the scroll declares this as a promise or as a warning. The intention of the author, like the its origin, is a mystery, Mother."

"And does the text strike you as fact or as fancy?" Luti asked.

"Well ..." He cast a glance at Chandra. "That might be easier to answer if we still

had the original.”

Chandra scowled. “If you’re blaming *me* because—”

“No, I just mean,” the monk interrupted, “that the text seems to be saying the scroll itself contains the key to unlocking the mystery.”

“But the location isn’t in the text you’ve got?” Luti asked.

“No.”

“And you copied the entire scroll?”

“Yes.”

“So you’re saying that part of the scroll was missing?” Chandra guessed.

“I don’t think so,” Brother Sergil said. “We’re still discussing it ... but the text seems to be complete. And, physically, the scroll itself was certainly complete. It was fragile, but it wasn’t torn, or singed, or moth-eaten.”

“So what *are* you saying?” Chandra asked.

“The purported location of this powerful artifact seems to be concealed in an internal puzzle,” the monk said. “The answer *may* be in the text itself, it could be obfuscated by layers of magic, but ...” He trailed off, clearly reluctant to continue.

“But?” Luti prodded.

“We’ve tried multiple ways of interpreting the text, various ways of scrambling the words and the letters, and numerous methods of translating the characters into numbers, various decryption spells ...” He shook his head. “But so far, we only get gibberish. Of course, we’ll keep trying, because if whatever this is does exist—if the text has any basis in fact—then this is very important information. Whoever possesses the power it speaks of could rule worlds. However ... well, it’s really starting to look as if, when the text says the key to understanding is contained in the scroll itself ...”

“You think it means the *physical* scroll?” Luti said. “The original?”

“Perhaps, yes. We are increasingly drawn to that possibility,” Brother Sergil said.

“Oh, that *is* disappointing,” Luti said.

Chandra said, “Look, I did everything I could to stop the scroll from being tak—”

“I didn’t mean it that way, Chandra,” Luti said. “We wouldn’t even have known about the scroll, if not for you, and we’d certainly never have seen it or had a chance to study it. Believe me, I’m well aware of how hard you fought to keep it from the, er, intruder. Indeed, the vegetable garden on the southern side of the monastery may never recover from your struggle with him. Well, not this year, anyhow.” She shrugged. “I just mean that it’s frustrating to discover something so intriguing ... and now face the possibility of never solving the puzzle.”

“Since the stranger who took the scroll from us did not have the courtesy to identify himself,” Luti said to Sergil, “we’ll probably never know who sent him. If, indeed, anyone did send him. He may have been a free agent acting on his own behalf, after all.”

“But we might be able to better estimate the veracity of the text if we knew more about its origins,” said Sergil. “That is to say, where Chandra found it.”

“Where she found it and where it comes from may be completely different things, Brother. That’s a subject best left alone,” Luti said, “for the sake of everyone’s safety. We have all witnessed first hand the destruction that so closely followed the scroll’s arrival,” Luti paused, letting her words sink in. “We must make do with what we have. Please continue studying the text. The answer to the puzzle may well be in our

possession and just temporarily eluding us.”

Looking dissatisfied, but clearly not prepared to fight about it with Luti, Brother Sergil bowed his head. “Yes, Mother.”

After he had left the sunny courtyard, Luti turned to Chandra. “Well?”

Chandra shrugged. “If you’re wondering whether I noticed anything unusual about the scroll when it was in my possession, I can’t really answer that. And I swear by everything that burns, if I ever see that bastard again, I’ll blow him so high into the sky, his ashes won’t fall back down until people have forgotten he was ever born.”

Luti didn’t smile at her pledge. “Guard yourself, Chandra. The fire you kindle for your enemy may burn you more than him.”

“Is that Jaya?”

“No, it is Luti. Listen, the Multiverse is a very big place,” Luti said. “It is probable that you will never run into that mage again. It is better to think about what you can control ...”

Chandra’s attention waned as Luti went on. She was grateful for her wisdom, but she could be tedious at times.

“In a battle with another planeswalker, it’s said that Jaya cunningly defeated her opponent by—”

“That stinking rat made me believe he was going to kill Brannon,” Chandra said.

Luti broke off. She knew Chandra had not been listening at all, but she had hoped to penetrate the planeswalker’s obvious disinterest. “As soon to kindle a fire with snow as to quench the fire of rage with words,” she said, more to herself than to Chandra.

“What does that have to do with Brannon or what I said?” asked Chandra, unable to see the relevance of Luti’s words.

Brannon lived at the monastery. His parents, ordinary peasant folk, had sent him here upon realizing they were increasingly unable to cope with the fiery power he had been exercising since early childhood. Because he needed instruction and supervision from people who understood his gift, his family had consigned him to the Keralians’ care several years ago.

Chandra had also been a powerful child with parents who’d felt ill-equipped to deal with her explosive gifts. She felt some kinship with the boy and had become fond of him during her sojourn here.

It had been a terrible shock to see him in the clutches of the other planeswalker. And it had been a relief as much as it was an infuriating surprise to discover that it was merely an illusion.

Chandra was disgusted by the subterfuge of that planeswalker’s ploys. She understood how his tactics were ultimately successful, but she didn’t have to respect them. Chandra was used to dealing with conflict openly.

“Anyway, as many times as I replay the fight in my head, I don’t even know if that jackass also managed to erase any other memories. If I had seen or felt anything special about the scroll, I have no memory of it now.” She shrugged. “I don’t even know what to think about what Brother Sergil said. I wish I remembered the scroll at all.”

“I take it, then, that you don’t even remember where you heard about the scroll? That you have no idea what you thought you were going after in the first place?”

“No.” Chandra asked. “What do you think?”

“I believe what Brother Sergil told us. I believe that it tells of a great power, and I believe that it is old. And despite its supposed age, I’m also inclined to believe that the scroll, if it we are able to interpret it, could lead to the whatever it is.”

“You really think something like this exists? That it can be found?” Chandra asked eagerly.

“Oh, yes. After all, if the text is just some ancient scribe’s fancy, or if the power it speaks of has long since been seized or destroyed ...” Luti shrugged. “Then why would the scroll be kept in a place as secure and heavily guarded as you described when you returned? What was it called again? The Sanctum of Stars?”

“Yes.”

“Full of extremely valuable objects?”

“It sure looked that way to me.” Chandra was not a thief by trade, however, so the valuation of objects was hardly familiar to her, particularly in the rush of stealing the scroll.

“It sounds as if they were quite prepared to kill to retrieve the scroll—and, indeed, to tear their own realm apart to find it ... Well, their behavior certainly confirms that the scroll is important.” Luti paused. “And whether the previous owners of the scroll employed that planeswalker to come after it, or whether he followed you and retrieved it for his own reasons ...”

Chandra said, “I see your point.”

“Sometimes thinking things through logically is beneficial.” Luti’s voice was dry.

“Yes, Mother.”



That night, Chandra dreamed of fire.

Not the fire that exploded from her in the battle with the mind mage. And not the intoxicating heat she drew from the red stones of Mount Keralia.

The fire in her dreams tonight wasn’t the flickering seduction of a new spell. It wasn’t the spine-tingling flame of her growing skill that lapped at the edges of her mind tonight. And it certainly wasn’t the heart-pounding art of boom she loved so much, with its showers of fire and light.

This was the fire of sorrow and grief, the fire of shame and regret. This was the fire that consumed the innocent.

In her sleep, she could hear their screams, as clearly as if it were happening all over again. She could see their writhing bodies. She whimpered as the stench of burning flesh assailed her nostrils. Her throat burned with sobs that wouldn’t come out. She tried to move, but her limbs were immobile. She wanted to scream, but her lips moved without sound.

And when the blade of a sword swept down to her throat, she awoke with a gurgled scream of horror and shot upright, gasping.

She was trapped in smothering darkness. She instinctively threw up her right hand and called forth flame, to ward off danger and illuminate her surroundings.

Squinting against the sudden light of her fire magic, Chandra looked around in confusion.

Then she realized where she was; her bed chamber in Keral Keep. Her heart was pounding. Her skin was slick with sweat. She was shaking. For a moment, she thought

she would vomit. Her teeth chattered a little as she focused on breathing.

In, two, three. Out, two, three. In, two, three. Out...

She shook her hand to douse the flames before she wrapped her arms around her knees.

She swallowed. She would not cry. She would not think.

She would not remember.

As she rocked back and forth, trying to calm herself, she started reciting her favorite passages from the Regathan sagas, at first just in her mind, the words flowing through her brain in a rapid tumble.

Then, as she regained some control of herself, she started saying them aloud, and after a while, it worked, as it usually did. Her heart slowed to a normal rhythm. Her hands stopped shaking. Her teeth stopped chattering. Tears stopped threatening to fill her eyes.

But she wouldn't sleep again. Not tonight.

So she rose from her bed, removed her simple linen shift, and started donning her clothes as if the garments were armor against her dreams.

Chandra put on her leggings and her thigh-high boots. She pulled her calf-length tunic over her head. It was split from hip to hem to allow her free movement. Her clothes were reddish-brown, the material simple. They were the working garments of a woman with too much magical power and too much serious intent to waste time on fripperies and frills. But since it was nighttime and she wasn't going anywhere, she left off her gauntlets and the leather vest she usually wore. The armor she needed right now was mental, not physical.

Her bed chamber was small and simple, like everyone else's at the monastery. It had a narrow wooden bed with linen sheets and rough wool blankets, a small table, a single chair, and a modest trunk. And this was all she needed. People at the Keralian Monastery, whether they were visitors or permanent residents, came here in search of wisdom, knowledge, and power, not the creature comforts of material wealth.

The mountain air was cool at night, even at this time of year when the days were especially warm. Chandra welcomed the slight chill on her skin as she stepped out of her chamber, into the night air, and closed the door behind her. She moved quietly along the walkway, passing other chambers without waking anyone, until she reached the broad terrace on the eastern side of the monastery.

The moon was full tonight and shone brightly. To the west of the monastery's mountain were more mountains, but from this terrace, she gazed across the woodlands that lay peacefully below the imposing heights of Mount Keralia. And further east, past the forests, were the plains and the city of Zinara. When the air was this clear and still at night, she could see the tiny specks of light in the distance that were the flaming torches atop the great city's watch towers.

"Sleep soundly, little lambs," she murmured contemptuously.

The city was completely dominated by the Order of Heliud, a sect of mages whose dedication to an ordered society and strict adherence to law was becoming dictatorial. The city was prosperous under the Order's influence, but the number of laws had tripled under their governance so that one was scarcely able walk down a street without breaking a rule or two. And when it came to magic, licenses to practice even the simplest of spells became necessary. Eventually, the Order became so bold as to

outlaw many forms of magic, deeming anything other than their own brand of heiromancy—peacekeeping magic, as they liked to say, that emphasized law and order—as deleterious to the public health. It was even rumored that the practice of fire magic in Zinara would result in imprisonment, and any violent act involving fire magic was punishable by death.

Needless to say, these stories from the city did little to foster relations between Keral Keep and the Order of Heliud.

Chandra had been told that, during Mother Luti’s lifetime, the Order had gone from being merely an influential sect in Zinara and a few other cities, to dominating the entire plains region of Regatha. Under the current rule of Walbert III and his policy of “civilization for civil welfare,” it was even said their influence was spreading across the seas. But more to the point, the Order was aggressively seeking to “civilize” the mountain and woodland regions. It was clear to all that Walbert—dwelling in the massive, marble-pillared Temple of Heliud, the heart of the Order’s temporal and mystical power—aspired to control the entire plane.

According to reports from Samir Mia Kauldi, a village chief of good standing among the many races of the Great Western Wood, Zinaran soldiers were patrolling the forests between Mount Keralia and the plains. Samir said that two human druids had recently been arrested for summoning creatures that the Order had recently declared “enemies of order.” Creature summoning—especially for the ritual combat that settled disputes among tribes—was an accepted and eons-old practice for the woodlanders, but the Heliuds believed that the path to civilization was paved with law, and that the law was equal before all. There were inviolate truths, objective standards of right and wrong, and it was for the Order of Heliud to see that all sapient beings on Regatha benefited from the application of such standards.

To Chandra, this was so unreasonable as to seem insane. How could a group of people be so blind as to not see the shades of grey between the black and white truths they held so sacred? Surely a more relative approach was needed to accommodate the breadth of racial and cultural diversity on this great plane. However, as Samir had morosely reported to Luti, it wasn’t that easy to talk sense to well-armed soldiers on horseback.

Just let them try that nonsense up here, Chandra thought. She’d send them fleeing back to Zinara with their horses’ tails on fire.

In any event, the soldiers who patrolled the Great Western Wood were lucky that Samir had not been among those arrested. It would be amusing, though, if the soldiers took an elf prisoner next time they were meddling where they didn’t belong. Chandra imagined the storm that such a move would precipitate. The elves would never allow their way of life to be compromised by the Order.

Oh, yes, that would be worth seeing.

“Don’t mess with elves,” she muttered, gazing down at the darkened forest below Mount Keralia.

CHAPTER THREE

Ghost warden?” Chandra said. “What’s a ghost warden?”

“Normally, it’s a spirit from the land of the dead summoned to protect the living,” said her host, Samir Mia Kauldi.

Brannon cried, “I’ve heard of ghost wardens! They’ve got flowing white hair, and white armor, and no real legs, just wispy trails of magic dust where their feet should be! They float around in silence, spying on their masters’ enemies!”

Chandra looked to Samir for confirmation of this description as they walked through the forest, the dry twigs and leaves crackling under their feet.

He nodded. “‘Spying’ might be an exaggeration. As I said, they normally serve to protect, but the Order uses them to monitor the forest.”

“They have arms without hands, and white lightning bolts shoot out of the place where their fingers should be!” Brannon said.

“I’m told that it feels more like a sharp sting than a lightning bolt,” Samir said. “It startles more than anything else.”

Samir Mia Kauldi was one of Keral Keep’s staunchest allies in the Great Western Wood. He was well-respected among his fellow elves and shared Keralian values concerning personal freedom and the right to self determination, but, most importantly, he understood the consequences of the Order of Heliud’s ever-increasing influence on the plane of Regatha. If the Heliuds were allowed to continue asserting their “civilization” agenda on the rest of Regatha, it would, sooner or later, mean an end to the elves’ way of life. Their tribes would be broken up and individuals would be relocated to the camps where they would be “trained” as productive members of society. The forests, stripped of the protectors, would become resources for the cities, the trees a commodity to be managed by ministers. Samir had heard how some of the smaller forests in the distant east had been clear-cut and used for lumber, only to be replanted in neat rows so that their next harvest might be more efficient. The geometry of their placement, and the flat grid of roads laid down, cut the living spine of those groves and all but stopped the once-rich flow of mana. The elves who were able to flee the camps and cities returned to unrecognizable terrain, pine barrens, monocultures of ash or spruce. The Order had broken these forests into pieces and made sure they would not go back together.

Samir had told all of this to Mother Luti, but for years there had only been stories from far away. Now it was becoming a reality everywhere. But Luti, however her fighting spirit raged, was not getting any younger. Because the journey down the mountain to the forest below was physically demanding, she seldom made the trip

herself anymore. She did insist on regular contact with the races of the woodlands that surrounded Mount Keralia, and often sent others in her place. They had to keep the Order's power in check, especially since the mountains seemed to be next in line for the Order's civilizing practices.

It was true that the Keralian pyromancers and the races of the Great Western Wood led independent existences, but they all shared this desire to limit the Order's influence to the plains and the cities of Regatha. As Luti said, they must be taught that fire and forest, much like their government, knew nothing of mercy.

Alone among the woodlanders, Samir Mia Kauldi actively agreed with Luti about this. He realized that the ghost wardens and mounted patrols were only the beginning of what was to come, but many in the forest remained unconvinced and dismissed the Order's encroachment as border skirmishes. Most believed that the stories of entire forests razed and replanted in the east would be impossible in an area as vast as the Great Western Wood.

Samir was short for an elf, with smooth skin the color of freshly-turned soil. He had a lithe build, a soft voice, and a round face that looked older than his years, possibly because of the perpetually harassed look that he carried with him like an empty coin purse: that is to say, without enthusiasm. Although he was a respected tribal chief and skilled summoner, his exhortations against the Order were met with little acceptance by other inhabitants of the woodlands. That wasn't to say he did not have support. Samir was known far and wide to summon the greatest beasts of Regatha. His status as chief had remained unchallenged because of this, and no tribe would dare question his authority, but might did not necessarily make right among the woodlanders. Much as it was with the Keralians, tribes—and the individuals who made them up—were given the right to determine their own future, whether for good or bad, so long as it was not disruptive to the harmony of life in the forest.

Samir first came to the monastery as a supplicant. Since then the Keralians had been prepared to offer whatever assistance necessary. Chandra relished the opportunity to leave the monastery, so often volunteered to act as a liaison to Samir and his loose association of druids, elves, and oufes.

It had been two days since her heated discussion with Brother Sergil about the scroll, and Chandra had decided to bring Brannon along as company on the long trek to Samir's small village deep in the woods.

The boy was clearly excited by the news that ghost wardens had been seen in the Great Western Wood.

"So what does a ghost warden do besides float around and sting people?" Chandra asked Samir.

"It only stings," Samir said, "if threatened."

"Whatever," Chandra said. "What good are they if they don't do anything?"

"The order uses them as spies," Samir said. "Rather than have them protect a living being, as was originally the intention of a ghost warden, they have them watch over the forest in general. The summoners share a psychic link with the warden and so are able to sense when things are out of the ordinary."

"Its summoners? You mean the Order of Heliud?"

"Yes. It is said that the summoner, once alerted by the ghost warden, will dispatch a patrol to the area in question."

“You’re sure about these sightings?”

“So sure,” Samir said, “that I have recently returned from Zinara, where I went to speak to Walbert himself. And I tell you Chandra, a more ridiculous place you will never find. They put plants in pots to decorate windows that look out on other windows with still more potted plants. They contrive *fountains*, which are absurd stone structures that trickle water in a meek imitation ...”

“Wait, I know what a fountain is. The high priest of the Order agreed to see you?” Chandra asked in surprise. Walbert III wasn’t reputed to be a very accessible man.

“Only after I spent two days insisting I would not leave the grounds of the Temple until I was granted an audience. It was a harder task than you can imagine sitting on flagstones amid those tortured trees. Can you believe they top the trees to stunt their growth? Imagine the arrogance that imposes Heliudic aesthetic values on nature. Even flowers are made to look like wounds on their hideously stripped stalks.”

“So you confronted him?” Chandra said with relish.

“Yes. I demanded to know by what right the Order sent soldiers into our land to arrest us, and I said these ghost wardens must be withdrawn from the Great Western Wood.”

“What did Walbert say?”

Samir made a disgusted sound. “It was infuriating, my friend. Walbert claimed that, in the interest of ‘unity’ throughout these lands, the laws which govern the cities and the plains are being extended to govern the woodlands, too. The ghost wardens have been summoned to patrol this vast woodland for our protection.” His tone twisted the final word into an epithet. “And the soldiers are only enforcing fair and just laws that have been passed in the interest of preserving safety and ... *order*. As if they have any understanding of protection, let alone fairness and justice.”

Chandra was appalled. “Walbert is claiming the Order has authority over the woodlands?”

Samir nodded. “And he’s enforcing that claim with the might of his soldiers and the skill of the Temple mages.”

“He can’t do that!”

“I said that to him.” Samir shook his head. “In response, he offered me some pompous title in exchange for encouraging my people to abide by the laws of the plains. That, or I could remain in violation of some law and he would jail me. I decided to retreat and fight another day.”

“So he’s trying to take over the Great Western Wood.” Chandra said in outrage. “That’s unbelievable!”

“He will find it a more difficult task than he supposes,” Samir said darkly. “The other tribes have been reluctant to enter into conflict with the Order, but if they continue to arrest druids for summoning hunters, perhaps I can bring others to my side.”

“What will they want next?” Chandra said with contempt. “Control over Keral Keep? Do they imagine that the rule of the Order can spread to the mountains?”

“That may not be beyond the scope of their ambitions,” Samir warned her. “They see the monastery as a threat. They think the Keralians are destructive and their teachings dangerous.”

“It wasn’t enough for them to outlaw fire magic in their own lands? They think they