

Chapter One

Reez woke with a start, his heart pounding and his mouth dry. His eyes darted anxiously around the dark room, searching for the familiar and safe. The candle that had shed a little light as he tried to sleep had gone out long since, but the moon was nearly full and its light was enough for Reez to make out shapes and forms. In the gloom, he recognised the long shelves of books and papers, the chest in the corner, and the desk positioned by the window to catch the last light of the day. He was home. He was safe. Reez could feel the sweat cooling on his body in the frigid air, and a sound somewhere between a sob and a moan forced its way past his lips. Sensing the protective shell within him rising to the fore, he willed himself to calm down. Breathing deeply, his panic subsided, until he could sit up and swing his legs down from the cot in his room. Shivering, he pulled the woollen blanket from the bed and wrapped it around his shoulders. There would be no more sleep for him tonight.

Wincing as the familiar ache rippled through his left leg as he stood, he limped slowly down the smooth stone stairway and into the freezing galley. With trembling fingers, he struck the tinder box until the small pile of kindling caught and flames licked the wood already stacked in the stove. Ignoring his former Master's seat, Reez sat in his own chair and allowed the warmth of the small blaze to penetrate his frozen soul.

He couldn't start a fire for a long time, the terror of the previous summer still holding him in its grip, but as the winter cycle began, and the frost set in, he had forced himself to face his fear. Despite that, the range had gaped like an open maw around the tiny blaze, and even now he had to fight the urge to run and hide from the crackling flames. His gaze roved unseeing past the familiar shelves and cupboards holding the pots and pans for cooking and the food stores which were woefully lacking. His appetite was virtually non-existent, and he ate more because of habit than anything else. He knew he had lost weight; his face, gaunt and haunted, stared back at him in the looking glass if he caught sight of his reflection. His brown eyes were dulled with remembered horrors, and his dark hair hung limp and lifeless. He had lost his hair, and the fire had ravaged his face on one side. Even though the hair had grown, it was still not long enough to hide the grotesque scarring. He had tried to hide some of them under a beard, but the hairs refused to grow properly, and the result was thin and patchy. Nevertheless, the scruff remained, as he could see no point in taking a razor to it.

Water.

Reez stood with a sigh and grabbed the half full pitcher on the pitted and scratched wooden table in the centre of the room and filled a mug with the icy liquid. The part of him that was plant was usually silent, but

when it had a need, it was very insistent.

In some ways, Reez acknowledged, it had forced him to live. While he could often ignore the demands of his stomach, a plant's simple yet constant cravings for nutrients and water were nigh impossible to resist. Its need for sunlight had forced Reez outside when he would otherwise have curled up in his room and slept, trying to find peace in oblivion despite the terrors that appeared to him as he slumbered.

As the moon waxed and waned and the sun rose and set, Reez had been drawn into a rhythm that was comforting and familiar. He ate and drank, finished the mindless chores that demanded nothing from him but effort. Every other day he would walk across the meadow where he would lie down, his skin bared, and soak up the daylight before returning home and burrowing back under the covers of his cot. All else was beyond him.

Returning to the relative warmth of the small fire burning steadily in the stove, Reez sipped his water and tried to purge the dreadful memories that had haunted his nightmare from his mind. The fire devouring and scorching. The stench of burning flesh and the bubble of fat. Wicton's face distorted in death and, above everything, Verrin laughing, always laughing.

As light streaked through the dusty windows, Reez stood painfully and made his way back to his room to dress, knowing he would need to make the most of the clear skies and satisfy his counterpart's need for renewed energy from the sun. Every task took much longer now, either because of the constant pain or his physical limitations, and his plant self was growing more insistent as he finally finished.

"Maybe I should give it a name," he grumbled to himself roughly, his voice harsh from disuse.

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The trees whispered of her approach long before he felt her footsteps on the hard earth by the tower. When everyone else had given up, she had persisted, walking up to the door every morning before the inn opened for business with a basket of food, sitting on the step in silence and stillness, or wandering around the meadow for a little while before returning to the village, leaving the offerings of baked treats and ale behind. Even though he refused to open the door at her knock or acknowledge her presence in any way, the fact that she continued to care was a comfort and a balm to his tortured mind and he found he looked forward to her visits.

This morning, however, he had neglected to place the empty basket outside the door, as was his custom. Would she worry when she found it missing? He half hoped, half feared that she would seek him out as he lay in the meadow's grass. Something was moving within him, an urge to grow and spread himself. He didn't know whether it came from the plant element, reacting to the return of spring and the promise of new life, or if it was a need from deep within his soul.

There was silence for a while. He could feel the soft breeze flowing over his ravaged face and bared chest, and he took a deep breath of the cleansing air. Then he felt her tread the path around the tower and past the glass house. Attuned as he was to the subtle shifts in the plant life, he knew the moment she stepped into the meadow, bending the stalks of grass under her feet. She moved towards him. He sensed her feet falter, likely as she caught sight of him, before slowly carrying her onward, stopping a short distance away from his prone form.

His eyes closed against the bright light, Reez tried to imagine what she would see. What would disgust her the most, he wondered? Would it be his crippled leg, mercifully enclosed in the fabric of his treads? Maybe she would shy away from the scars and tracks marring his chest and abdomen? Or his seared arm, weakened and thin, lying by his side, his hand a painful claw? Perhaps it would be the grotesque mask on the left side of his face, skin red and puckered, pulling down his eye and mouth? Or would it be the way his body was luminescing

green as his plant self soaked up the rays of the late winter sun? Schooling himself for either her look of horror or of pity, he opened his eyes and stared at her.

Destry stood transfixed, wisps of her blond hair dancing across her face as the breeze caught and lifted the stray tresses that had escaped her long braid. A shawl was draped across her shoulders and she was wearing a sky-blue dress which matched the colour of her eyes, eyes which were wide and focused on him. Her pale pink mouth had opened slightly as her gaze roamed across his body. Reez watched the emotions flash across her face; sadness, concern, curiosity and then something like wonder. It was nothing like the revulsion he expected. When she finally met his eyes and realised he was watching her, she jerked suddenly and flushed, her eyes darting away from him for a moment. He observed her swallow and lick her lips before turning back to him; her face composed once more.

I brought food, she signed.

Sitting up slowly, Reez reached for his tunic and pulled it up his damaged arm and over his head, wincing at the stab of pain in his shoulder. He wished he had brought his cloak so he could raise the hood and hide his deformed face. Reez stood awkwardly and faced her. He moved his fingers stiffly, trying to remember the patterns and shapes that had once come so easily to him.

Thank you.

She smiled swiftly, and it was like the sun peeking through the clouds on a dark, dismal day. Reez sighed deeply. He abruptly realised how much he had missed the companionship of others: friends, family, the chatter of the inn and the familiarity of the village. He kept himself away from such things because he knew nothing could ever be the same again. Truthfully, he was afraid of the reaction his face and figure would garner from the villagers. It was one thing to hold himself apart, but another matter entirely to be publicly shunned or even laughed at. He looked at Destry, who still beamed at him. She wasn't rejecting him. He could turn away now and go back to the tower, shut the door and close himself off from the world once more, or he could risk a little more and reach out to at least one other human being.

How are you? he asked carefully, his decision made.

Well, she replied before her fingers flew in a complicated weave that had him floundering. Reez held out his hand, and she stopped with a frown.

Slowly, he signed.

Even though she complied, there were still parts he didn't recognise. *I don't understand,* he admitted.

Why are you...?

He shook his head and repeated the pattern with a question. Destry thought for a moment before crouching down, pulling her shawl across her head.

Afraid? He asked.

Not afraid, she signed. She thought for a moment. Rising, she looked around before running to a stubby bush on the edge of the meadow and disappearing behind it.

"Hiding," Reez murmured to himself. When she returned, Reez could only shrug, knowing instinctively she wouldn't like the answer.

We will... again, an unfamiliar word. At his confused expression, she stood in front of him and turned, drawing an imaginary knife and swaying from side to side as if watching for an attack.

Reez swallowed. She was telling him that the villagers were ready to protect him against whatever had

harmd him and killed Wicton. He nodded his understanding but didn't reply. Unwilling to let her see the depth of the emotions rising in him, he motioned her to walk back to the tower. He was relieved and strangely pleased when she not only matched his stride, but moved to his left side as if his disfigurement were unimportant.

Your family is worried, Destry signed hesitantly as they walked, as if she was anxious about his reaction. *Will you come down and see them?*

Reez felt guilty. Apart from a message to say that he had returned, and that Wicton was dead, he had refused to venture from the tower and had ignored all attempts by his family to speak face to face.

Perhaps, he hedged, unsure whether he wanted to risk a meeting. They had not parted on good terms, and although he regretted the words that had been said, he had not found the courage to confront them. A picture of Aydal's face bloody from Reez's fist flashed into his mind, swiftly followed by his sister, Amily's, anguish and his father's shock. He had been a blind fool that day, smarting from Nula's rejection of him and her preference for his eldest brother. Mere days later, his Master had voiced his own opinions, forcing Reez to re-evaluate his relationship and recognise that he had been selfish. Now he bore no ill will towards either of them, but they remained in ignorance of his change of heart.

As if she could read his mind, Destry signed. *They wish to be reconciled. They don't want you to hate them.*

They had reached the tower door, and Reez stopped. *I don't hate them*, he said with a frown. *You can tell them I have forgiven them.*

They should hear it from you, not me. You have the power to mend things and put right the wrongs.

But I am not the man they remember, he argued. *Look at me. They don't need to see this.* He gestured to himself and turned away.

Destry reached out as if to touch his cheek. He flinched, and she withdrew her hand. Instead, she moved around, so he had to look at her again. *You are still Reez*, Destry pointed out. *That will never change. When they feared for you, not knowing whether you were coming back, it broke their hearts. It was such a relief to have you return. They love you, not your body or your face.*

Reez looked down the lane that led towards the village. Could he have a little of his old life back? He missed his family, he realised with a pang. The easy banter he had enjoyed with Aydal. Amily's laughter. Damino's quiet encouragements and his father's wise words. Surely it was worth venturing out to repair the damage that had been done and restore his relationship with them? Before bending down to grab the laden basket that Destry had left on the top step, Reez made a sudden decision and turned to her. *Will you wait?* he asked.

She smiled knowingly and nodded, sitting down and leaning her back against the rough stones of the tower as she had done so often before. Pushing open the heavy door, Reez limped inside, allowing the door to close with a soft thud. He made his way through to the galley and put the heavy basket on the table. Lifting the cloth, he peered inside; fresh bread, meat, cheese, goat's milk and preserves nestled inside, along with a few nips and taters and a scroll of parchment. Breaking the seal, Reez unrolled the missive from the Margrave. Apparently, the farmers were anxious. The winter cycle was almost over, and spring planting would soon be upon them. They needed reassurance that Reez would bless the ground as Wicton had been wont to do. Would he come?

Reez let the parchment fall and stared into the cold range, the small fire long burnt to ashes. There had

been no requests or petitions in the long winter cycle, and Reez had almost begun to believe that the world outside didn't exist for him anymore. Now that world was calling to him and he didn't know whether he could answer. There was no-one to guide and mentor him, no-one to prepare him for the role that he had only imagined in some far-off future. He wasn't a Master and would never be one. He was alone and ill-equipped to take on the mantle that Wicton had worn so well.

Yet, despite that, Reez felt the responsibility bearing down on him and realised not only had he been hiding from the person who he now considered his enemy, but he had been avoiding the truth of his situation. No matter how incapable he felt, he was the only person who could ever step into Wicton's shoes and continue to serve the people of Fiora province. As much as he would like to stay within the confines of the sturdy stone walls surrounding him, he knew it was time for him to emerge from the darkness that had gripped him and re-enter the land of the living. The thought of it filled him with dread.

He had never been crippled by such doubt and self-loathing before. Learning and magic had come easily to him, as if he had been born for it but had just forgotten for a time. Even when he had made some of the biggest mistakes of his life, he had bounced back with the knowledge that he was wiser for having made them. When Wicton had given him tasks to do, or problems to solve, it had never entered Reez's head that he might fail. Now he faced the awful possibility that he would be proved a fraud and be completely humiliated. Reez slumped into his chair and held his head in his hands, his breathing laboured as his mind filled with images of the villagers when they realised he couldn't help them. Would they just turn away or would they be angry? The only reason he was here was because of Wicton's foresight. His diligent study and quick thinking had saved Reez, even as Verrin's malice drained Wicton's life from him to fuel his magic.

As if he were next to him, Reez suddenly heard his Master's voice in his mind. "Everything you need is in the vault. When the time comes for me to leave, you will have the wisdom of a hundred Masters to turn to." Wicton hadn't left him without help and guidance. He had promised Reez that all the information and instructions he would require were waiting for him in the depository beneath him. All he had to do was look for it.

Feeling bolstered by the knowledge, Reez took a deep breath and stood. With a new determination, he donned his cloak and pulled the hood over his head. Taking the empty basket with him, he opened the door and stepped outside.

Chapter Two

Reez paused at the familiar door, wracked with memories of his last visit. He had been full of anger, hurt, and nursing feelings of betrayal. Last time he had entered this house, he had said and done things which he now sincerely regretted. He went to open the door, then stopped. This hadn't been his home for a long time, having left to start his apprenticeship with Wicton eleven summers ago, yet he had never once doubted that his presence would be welcome. Destry's comments had given him hope that his family would be willing to meet with him, but apprehension still filled him. He wished Destry had stayed with him, but she had continued back down to the village after giving him a smile of encouragement and a small push on his back, leaving him to face this task alone. He almost turned back, but this new burgeoning need to reconnect outweighed his fear of rejection. Gathering his courage, he knocked and waited, his heart thumping wildly in his chest.

He glanced at the small front garden, once lovingly tended by his mother. The flowering shrubs were wild and overgrown, choking the smaller plants. Her beloved rosa bush had been sorely neglected and Reez decided that, no matter what the outcome of this day, he would return to care for it, even if he had to wait until nightfall to avoid any awkward encounters.

He heard slow footsteps within and took a deep breath as the latch lifted and the door opened with a creak. As his father's face appeared, Reez could see that he had aged before his time. His dark hair was lined with grey. Deep grooves of sorrow etched his visage, and his once strong back stooped as if he carried heavy loads that bore him down. Beran's eyes opened wide with surprise when he saw who was standing before him. Instinctively, Reez pulled his hood down lower over his face to hide himself.

"Son," his father said, his voice breaking as his breath hitched with emotion.

"Hello, Da. May I come in?" Reez asked tentatively.

"Of course," Beran said, hurriedly pulling the door wider to allow Reez to pass. They moved into the parlour where a fire blazed, cheerfully heating the room from the last of the winter's chill. The small almira stood in the corner holding the crockery for the household and Reez knew the large ornate chest next to it held linens for the beds. Several padded chairs were arranged around the hearth, some displaying cushions his mother

and sister had embroidered. Familiar colourful tapestries lined the walls, providing extra warmth, transforming the room into a welcoming, comfortable place. The table underneath the small window was littered with metals and tools, evidence that Amily remained in residence, still creating her jewellery. Reez moved the chair his father indicated further back from the hearth and the fierceness of the blaze before sitting across from him.

“Where are the others?” Reez ventured.

“Damino has taken permanent residence with Moron now,” Beran began. As apprentice to the apothecary, his brother most likely found it simpler to live in the same place that he worked. “Aydal and Amily are out in the fields preparing them for the spring planting.”

“You’re not with them,” Reez stated. “Are you ill?”

Beran shrugged. “I have no heart for it,” he said shortly.

Reez tentatively lowered the hood of his cloak, revealing his face to his father for the first time, and winced when he heard Beran’s indrawn breath.

“What happened?” Beran asked, scooting forward in his chair to look closer. Reez turned slightly to hide his left side further.

“I can’t speak of it yet,” he admitted. “It is too raw. I barely survived after being attacked.” He thought of his long recovery wrapped in the willow roots’ embrace and being cared for by the earth and the deep magic underneath the clearing. “Wicton’s last thoughts were to protect me. Without him, I would have died with the others.” Whatever the concoction was that Wicton had brewed had not only shielded him from Verrin’s magic, but had also permanently altered him. Now he was a conglomeration of human, plant and mineral, and he had no idea what that meant for him in the long term.

“Others?”

“All the Masters are gone. Paiter,” Reez paused as sorrow gripped his heart. “Paiter too. Only Verrin, Malander’s apprentice, walked out of there unscathed. He betrayed us and murdered them all.”

“All gone?” Beran gasped in horror. “What is to become of us?”

“That is one reason I have come,” Reez said. “I had a missive from the Margrave wanting to know whether I would bless the spring planting. I know I am not a Master, but Wicton told me he left instructions about his responsibilities for me to follow. If Fiora province will have me, I will try to make up for Wicton’s loss.”

“I’m sure they will welcome you with open arms,” Beran said with relief. “If it is true, we are fortunate to have you to take his place.”

“Would you treat with the Margrave for me?” Reez asked, pointing at his face. “I can’t face meeting with the council. I’m not yet ready to be widely seen.”

“Of course I will,” Beran said, his shoulders rising slightly. He reached across and laid a hand on Reez’s arm. “Does it hurt, son?”

“A little,” Reez admitted, not wanting to worry his father further. “Mostly it itches and aches. I have nightmares,” he said, swallowing loudly, “and I cannot tolerate being close to fire. It brings back memories that haunt me.”

Beran glanced towards the hearth and nodded slowly. “Scars like that go deep beneath the skin and into the heart. You may never be entirely free of them.” The two men sat in silence for a while, deep in their own thoughts.

“Tell me about the family.” Reez ventured, breaking the quiet. “I have heard no news. How are Aydal and Nula? I imagine they are handfasted by now.”

Beran looked at Reez and shook his head. “They both felt guilty after you left. It was in their minds to clear things up with you when you returned. When you didn’t return home, neither of them felt at ease and stopped seeing each other for a while. As time passed, we feared you were...” he swallowed audibly. “Aydal was tortured with remorse and blamed himself for hurting you. He pushed Nula away, saying he didn’t deserve to be with her. They barely speak, although I see them watching each other when we go to the inn. They are both dreadfully unhappy.”

“But I didn’t die, and I’ve been back home for a while now.” Reez pointed out.

“Injured and secluded,” Beran replied. “In some ways, it has only hardened Aydal’s belief that he should stay away. I think he torments himself, thinking that maybe he was the cause; that you would have been alert and watchful if he hadn’t hurt you that day.” He gestured to Reez’s face. “Their scars may not show like yours, but in their own way, they both bear wounds that run as deep as your own.”

“What about Amily? Why is she still here? She seemed excited at the thought of apprenticing to the jeweller I met in Minra province.”

“Losing you devastated the family,” Beran said in a low voice. “We were all adrift and barely able to function. I couldn’t bear to let her go. Besides, she was adamant she didn’t want to leave us when we were so desolate. To be honest, I don’t know what we would have done without her. She has been the twine binding us together.”

“I’m sorry,” Reez said softly. “I thought by keeping my distance I was being kind to you, but it didn’t help at all, did it?”

“You’re here now, son. That’s all that matters.”

“And you? It seems to me as if you have been as affected as everyone else.”

Beran sighed and shrugged his shoulders. “I felt useless. I couldn’t fix the hurts and I couldn’t bring you back. I felt more lost than when I stood over your mother’s resting place. At least then I understood what I needed to do. My responsibilities were clear. Your Ma would have counselled you all, but nothing I said or did helped. As a father, you want to guide and protect your children, even when they are grown, but I was useless. It broke my heart, in truth.”

Reez reached across and held his father’s hand. “Perhaps between us we can make sure things get better. After all, it’s an auspicious time of the cycle, with new beginnings and growth after the long sleep of winter. It’s a time for life to flourish and thrive. I’m sorry. I should have visited a long time ago, but I was too wrapped up in my own sorrows and sufferings. I didn’t think about what it was like for you. My only thoughts, when I had them, were that you would hate me or despise my face.”

“Never,” Beran said fiercely. “You are my son. Nothing in all creation would stop me from loving you and wanting the best for you. Perhaps I should have remained outside your door and insisted you see me. It was my responsibility to be there for you.”

“I should have had more faith in you,” Reez replied. “I ought to have known you would never turn me away.”

“All that is in the past, son. I’m a fervent believer that we can fix anything with a bit of effort.” He patted Reez’s hand and smiled. “Let me make a brew, and we can speak more.”

While Beran went into the galley, Reez sat and allowed himself to get lost in memories of his childhood. In every one, Aydal was a constant presence, teasing, playing, teaching, and protecting him. His heart constricted at the thought of his lively, carefree brother punishing himself unfairly for so long. He would need to correct the wrong as soon as possible.

When Beran returned, the two of them spoke of more trivial things as they sipped a hot drink. As Beran apprised him of the gossip from the village, Reez relaxed. Apparently Amily was still a fount of knowledge about the minutiae of village life and kept the family apprised of everything that was happening. It was heartening to hear familiar names, and the ordinary complaints and celebrations that made up the day-to-day life of the village. He even laughed loudly as Beran related how Tazar's grandson had complained about digging up the taters. When they insisted he help with the back-breaking work, he had grumbled that they shouldn't have bothered burying them in the first place.

Eventually, Reez winced and rubbed his leg as his wasted muscles cramped. "I should go back," he decided. "The walk down is the most I have done since getting back. My body isn't used to such activity. It may take me a while to get back up the hill."

"I could find a wagon in the village..."

"No. It's time I worked on recovering what strength I can."

"You know, we had a fire in Nain's barn ten or so cycles ago. Youngsters thinking to keep warm whilst impressing their girls. Most of his winter wheat was destroyed, and he was burnt some trying to save it. Wicton gave him an ointment to put on his arms to soothe the wounds and help with healing. Maybe he wrote it down somewhere."

"I'll look," Reez said. They both walked to the door. Reez was pleased to see that his father's spirit seemed lighter and his frame a little taller. "Da..." Reez said, pausing for a moment to take a breath. "When he returns, would you ask Aydal if he will visit me tomorrow at the tower? I think it is long past time we spoke."

"Of course." Beran pulled his youngest son in close, holding him carefully, as if afraid his touch would hurt him. "It's good to have you back. You'll come again, won't you?"

"Now that I know I am welcome, I would like to visit often." Reez wrapped his right arm around his father, noticing how he, too, had lost weight. He was not the only one in need of healing. With a nod, he moved out of his father's embrace and limped out of the door to begin his journey home. He knew his father stood watching him until he finally turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

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The light was fading when Reez finally pushed open the heavy wooden door and dragged himself into the cold tower. He looked at his meagre supply of firewood and groaned. He needed to source some more if he wanted to keep warm. His store of firestones was low too, and he had never sent word to the Margrave requesting that it be restocked. He made a mental note to take an inventory in the morning and make a list of his needs. Despite the ache in his body and the chill of the air, Reez felt content as he pottered around the galley. For the first time, his heart had eased, and he felt a peace within. Feeling stronger, he decided to tackle one more barrier while he had the courage to spare.

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After eating a frugal meal, Reez tentatively lit a lantern and used it to light his way up the worn, winding steps, stopping outside the study door. He hadn't been inside since returning home, preferring to stay in

his own room or spend the long evenings down in the galley. His hand shook slightly as he grasped the handle and turned it before stepping inside.

His breath caught in his throat as he choked back the sudden tears that threatened to overwhelm him. Wicton's papers littered the desk alongside pots containing the brown, withered remains of plants long dead. All the glass boxes lay dark and silent, devoid of life. Several books were piled up on a small table within easy reach of the fireside chairs. Logs lay ready in the hearth for the fire his Master would never light. Reez wandered over and reached for a taper on the stone mantle above the hearth and set it to the kindling. As the flames grew and caught, dancing in the grate, Reez sank into his old chair and looked over to where Wicton would have sat.

"I miss you so much," he said to the silence. "I don't know how to carry on without you." Reez closed his eyes and imagined his old Master leaning back from warming his hands by the fire to give him his attention, his green eyes alight with merriment. He missed having his Master to talk to, but here it was as if Wicton was close by, listening to his apprentice talk about his day, or share his worries and frustrations. Reez spoke his thoughts aloud.

"I'm so afraid all the time," Reez continued. "Scared of living in case I am ridiculed and rejected. Scared of dying as I relive the fire every night. I'm worried I'll fail these people who are looking to me to restore their hope. I'm terrified that Verrin will come for me if he finds out I survived," he admitted in a small voice. Voicing that fear aloud made it seem even more real. Perhaps that was the main reason he had remained hidden inside the tower for so long. The shade of Wicton seemed to nod at him, encouraging him to explore these fresh revelations. When he recalled that dreadful day, he had focused on the events themselves, but as he forced his mind to replay it over, there was one thing that stood out. Verrin had incapacitated all three Masters before they could stop him, and had used them to fuel his magic as he destroyed Malander and tortured Paiter until he died writhing in agony, but he had all but ignored Reez.

"I know, I know, he doesn't see me as a threat," Reez responded as he imagined a small smile on Wicton's face. "At least that was a success." Although it had chafed, Reez had pretended to be ignorant, and sometimes even stupid, in order to dissuade Verrin from unearthing the secrets of green magic. "The fear remains, though." He imagined Wicton's brow furrowing in frustration. "I didn't say any of it made any sense," he said defensively. The fire crackled loudly in the hearth, punctuating the quiet of the room, and Reez jumped. "See! I'm a mess. How can I serve these people when I start at my own shadow?" His eyes filled with tears and his breath hitched. He watched the flames leaping in the hearth for a while, forcing himself not to retreat from the heat that washed over him, struggling to slow his breathing and heartbeat down. Eventually, he felt in control once more.

"I know what you would say. You would tell me to do my best and face my fears, wouldn't you?" He sighed. "It sounds a straightforward thing to accomplish, but from where I'm sitting, it all looks terrifying. Where am I supposed to start?" He chuckled then, as he remembered how Wicton would merely gaze at him, his eyebrows lifted, waiting for him to figure things out on his own. "Of course," he conceded with a crooked smile. "I'd better sleep on it then."

Reez allowed the fire to die down before taking the lantern and making his way up the stairs to his own room. Wrapping himself in a blanket, he crawled under the counterpane on the cot and closed his eyes, his breathing slowing as he succumbed to the exhaustion of mind and body.

For the first time since the horrific events at the Tower of the Mages, he slept soundly until morning.

Chapter Three

Reez looked around at the devastation in the glass house, and his heart sank. The carefully nurtured plants of the previous cycle were gone. Brown, dried leaves littered the floor, and the plethora of pots were either empty or held dead stalks. Any life growing there originated from the weeds encroaching through the door or blown in by the wind. It was a sad reflection of his own life. Everything he'd ever thought important seemed dead or lost to him. Worries and memories overwhelmed the rest.

"What would Wicton tell you to do?" he asked himself. He smiled as the memory resurfaced. That was a simple question to answer.

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"Welcome to the glass house," Wicton said as he led his new apprentice through the door. Reez looked round at the large space in wonder. Tables and shelves lined either side, all full of pots and trays of different shapes and sizes. Underneath were bags of dirt, tools, and more pots stacked in neat piles.

"The glass allows sunlight to reach the plants," Wicton continued, "yet shelters them from the elements outside, protecting them from winds and frost. We can grow things here that wouldn't survive outside. We can also grow seedlings earlier so that they are ready to be transplanted in the garden when the seasons change. From now on, you'll be in charge. I leave the care of all the plants in your hands. Remember to water them every day, because the rain cannot reach them in here, and you will need to decide whether to ventilate the glass house if the air grows too hot. You also need to keep it clean and tidy and check all the plants to make sure they remain free from blight. Do you think you can manage it?"

Reez had nodded eagerly, keen to impress his new Master. When the first fungus growth took hold, he was dismayed, but instead of berating him, Wicton had taught him the proper way of watering the plants and keeping them moist but not wet. His favourite plants by far were the fragrant orchids. Wicton was growing several of them, all of which had their own scent; lemon, jasmine and even cinnamon that reminded him of the raisin buns his mother baked occasionally. The warmth of the glass house lured him in often until it became his favourite place to sit and work.

#

Letting the memory fade, Reez sighed as he wandered over to where the precious flowers had stood. He had killed them once before when he was learning how to use magic, inadvertently draining them along with the rest of the plants as he worked to grow a daisy. Then Wicton had merely smiled and handed Reez some seeds. It had taken many moons before the initial shoots broke through the covering of earth, and long cycles until the flowers appeared, but eventually he had replaced the orchids. Now, once again, they were all gone.

For the rest of the morning he busied himself despite the constant pain in his limbs from his injuries and the long moons of inactivity, clearing the dead foliage, cleaning the pots and the glass, sweeping the benches and the floor and throwing out the earth. Only one plant had survived the many moons of neglect, and that barely. Somehow, the apprentice plant still retained some life, although most of its leaves had dropped and the soil was barren and dry. After re-potting it and soaking it with water, Reez had used his skills to encourage the plant to draw up the life-giving liquid and nutrients before allowing it to recover on its own. It seemed wrong to force too much upon it at once. Like him, it needed time to rest and heal before taking on the vigorous task of growth again.

He was planting the last orchid seeds when a familiar voice interrupted him.

“You wanted to see me.”

Reez put down the trowel and turned slowly around, careful to keep his injuries shadowed. Aydal stood in the doorway, his face lined and pale. His ready smile was absent, and he stood with his arms crossed over his chest as if holding himself together. The brothers watched each other warily, and Reez’s heart dropped. Gone was the easy-going boy who had taught Reez to embrace life joyfully. Aydal was guarded and serious, unsure how to act around the baby brother who had once adored and worshipped him. Reez pointed to two stools in the corner of the glass house, and Aydal sat. Reez limped over to join him, careful to keep his disfigurement turned away, but Aydal saw it anyway. Reez noticed him wincing and bunching his fists tightly at the sight of the drooping eye and puckered cheek. He stared over Reez’s shoulder; his jaw clenched hard. Reez saw a muscle tic under his left eye, which was bruised and black. He frowned and glanced down at Aydal’s hands. He could see cuts and bruises on the knuckles.

“What happened to you?” he asked. “Have you been fighting?”

“It’s nothing,” Aydal said, waving his hand dismissively. “Just a minor disagreement.”

“About what?”

“Do you really want to talk about insignificant matters? Because I have more important things to say.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry.” He took a deep breath. “I want to apologise to you,” Reez began slowly.

“My last words to you were unkind and spoken in anger.”

“I deserved it,” Aydal replied tersely. “I was wrong. I shouldn’t have...”

“No, you were right,” Reez interrupted. “I was blind and stupid. I couldn’t see the reality because I was so focused on my dreams. Nula wasn’t happy, but I refused to listen. In fact, that day I had gone to the inn expecting her to be full of remorse and eager to continue our relationship. Not once did it occur to me, she might not agree with my plans, or that hers were just as important. She deserves much better than that. She deserves you.”

Aydal shook his head. “She’s yours, Reez. I never should have come between you.”

“Nula isn’t my property. She should decide who she wants to be with. It’s time I listened, really

listened, to what she has to say.” Aydal didn’t reply, but Reez could see that he was absorbing his comments. “I’ve done a lot of reflecting over the past few moons,” Reez continued. “When I thought my life was ending, all I could think about was our last meeting. Facing your own mortality suddenly puts everything into perspective, and you realise what is really important in life. I hurt you, and for that, I am truly sorry.”

“I hurt you first,” Aydal said.

“Only my pride,” Reez admitted, “not my heart.”

“But you’d been walking out with Nula for many cycles. You loved her.”

“I think I loved the idea of having a wife waiting for me and it fitted into the perfect plans I had imagined for my life. To be honest, I don’t believe I really knew Nula all that well. I certainly didn’t want to factor in her dreams and wishes because it would upset my orderly schedule. Wicton even advised me as we travelled to the triumvirate that we weren’t suited to each other. He could see much more than I.”

“He was a wise man and will be sorely missed,” Aydal said softly. “Funny, but I never imagined that we would ever be without him. I thought he would live forever. Even though he grew older, he never seemed to age, if you know what I mean. He still kept a twinkle in his eye, especially when he looked at you and made you feel as if he could guess all your deepest secrets.”

They both sat in silence for a while, their thoughts full of memories. “I miss you, Aydal. I miss laughing with you and talking to you. There should be no barriers between us.”

Aydal took a deep, ragged breath and swallowed. “I miss you too, Weet,” he said shakily.

Reez smiled at the use of his old nickname. Aydal rubbed his palms over the soft material of his trows and looked around the glass house. “So,” he ventured, his voice stronger, “you’re the Master now.”

Reez shook his head. “I haven’t earned that title yet, but I mean to work hard to provide for the village the way Wicton did. He told me all the information I needed was here, so if I don’t know the answers immediately, I can search in the archives.”

“You’ll do fine,” Aydal assured him. “We were desperately worried when you were both gone for so long. We knew things were bad when neither of you appeared for the celebration. A Master would never miss such an important ceremony in the past. The villagers will be relieved to know you will continue to serve us, like Wicton did.”

Reez nodded. “I returned too late for the ceremony, but I could bless the seed, though no-one saw me.”

Aydal let out a huff of breath. “It’ll be a relief to the villagers to hear that. It didn’t seem right to plant without the blessing.” He paused for a moment. “Da said that another apprentice attacked you,” Aydal said, gesturing vaguely at Reez’s face. “Do you think... I mean, will he come for you here? To hurt you again?”

Reez paused before replying. “It is one of my biggest fears,” he admitted in a low voice. “It plagues me at night, but in truth, I don’t think he will. There is nothing here for him. He doesn’t even see me as an equal, let alone a threat. I should be safe enough.”

Aydal nodded fiercely. “Well, if he tries, he’ll soon find himself on the wrong end of a pitchfork. I suppose its best if he stays away. I would hate to add murder to my list of shortcomings.”

Reez grinned wryly. “Always ready to defend me. I’m glad you are on my side.”

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else,” Aydal replied. “If I’d been with you, I would have stopped him.”

“You wouldn’t have stood a chance against him,” Reez admonished bitterly. “He bested three Masters without difficulty. You would have just been another source to fuel his hate.”

“Is he that powerful, then?” Aydal asked, his face pale.

“He draws on living things to maintain his power,” Reez explained. “He has no compunction in using a man and draining him dry to suit his own purposes.”

“Then should he choose to turn on us, he can’t be stopped?”

“I have no idea,” Reez admitted, “and the only people who might have tried are dead.”

Reez watched as Aydal struggled with these revelations. Supremely confident, his brother had never come across a situation where he felt helpless or ill-equipped. He didn’t know what it felt like to fear for his life and he was finding it hard to imagine himself defenceless and weak.

“Honestly, I don’t think you need to be anxious,” Reez said. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling the truth of the words deep inside him. Verrin was as far away from Maston as was possible without crossing the Endless Sea. He would never journey through all of Bestra and Fiora provinces just to find Reez.

Aydal nodded and smiled before glancing up at the sky. “I ought to go back,” he said wistfully. “The fields need preparing, and I still have a great deal of work to do.”

“I’m glad you came.”

“Me too.” They both stood, and Aydal frowned as he watched Reez limp to the glass house door. “It’s a shame you’ve nearly finished that wall,” he mused.

“Why?”

“You need to build your muscles back up again.”

“I suppose...”

“I could help,” Aydal continued, “if you want, that is.”

Reez shook his head. “As much as I might wish to be stronger, if I exert myself too much, the skin splits and bleeds,” he admitted. “Getting back home was difficult.” Aydal winced. “One step at a time, eh?”

“Of course.” Aydal had started across the grass towards the lane when he span round and clicked his fingers, his eyes lighting up for the first time. “Before I disappear, you ought to be aware that Amily is very upset that she couldn’t come with me today.”

Reez groaned. “That’s all I need,” he grouched.

“Take my advice and meet with her soon. It will be worse the longer you leave it.”

“Then you’d better ask her if she’ll come up tomorrow. I’ll find something to stuff in my ears beforehand, so the shrieking doesn’t deafen me.”

The brothers clasped arms, and Aydal grinned. “I wish I could watch her welcome you home, Weet,” he said. “I would pay good coin to witness it.”

Reez rolled his eyes. “I suppose I should be grateful that this place is so isolated. It wouldn’t do for the villagers to witness their potential new Master being castigated by his little sister.”

“I doubt it’ll be the last time,” Aydal replied as he began to walk back to the village. He looked back once and gave a jaunty wave before disappearing down the lane.

#

Reez shivered and pulled the long, heavy cloak tighter around his body to ward off the bitter wind. A door slammed and several men left the inn, laughing together. He moved further around the trunk of the old tree to better shield himself. As the men neared, he could hear them talking.

“Don’t be ridiculous. You make it sound like we’ve been cursed.”

“Mayhap we have. I heard he’s nought but a shade, not a true man at all.”

“Man?” another scoffed. “He’s just a boy, and not fully trained at that. What can he do for us?”

“Master Wicton wouldn’t leave us without help,” the first man insisted.

“Well, perhaps he didn’t have no choice. Maybe it was him killed Wicton.”

“Shut up, Fane. You’ve already got one bloody nose from running your mouth off.”

“That Basta jumped me. He took me by surprise.”

“The only surprise was that he kept his temper that long,” chuckled one of them. “We all know he’s hotter than hay in a bonfire these days. It’s not wise to rile him like that.”

The men wandered further out of earshot and Reez slumped against the tree, his head bowed. Aydal had been fighting over him. He wondered what else the villagers were saying and how far-reaching the rumours were. Did they really believe him capable of murder? His throat felt thick, and he rubbed his chest as he tried to keep his breathing steady. He pushed away from the tree, suddenly desperate to return to the safety of his tower, but stopped after only two steps. Was this how he wanted to live? To cower away from everyone? What would his Master say if he could see him? A door opened, and he heard men wishing each other a pleasant evening as they made their way back home. He pressed his back against the tree as hot tears streamed down his face. Verrin had taken his Master, and had almost killed him. Was Reez going to allow him to destroy the rest of his life, too?

#

Eventually, the lights finally dimmed, and the last patrons drifted away. He heard the back door open and hurried towards it as Destry beckoned him inside. He made straight for the hearth to warm himself by the banked fire. Destry moved to stand next to him.

Nula will be here soon, she signed.

Thank you.

She hesitated for a moment. *Are you here for her?*

Reez made the sign for a question.

Like before. Do you want to walk out with her again?

He shook his head. *No. She doesn’t want me, especially now. I’m just here to talk.*

Destry nodded and huffed out a breath. She glanced up at his face as if there was more she wanted to say, but eventually turned and left through the door into the taproom.

It seemed like an age before Nula finally appeared, and Reez was thankful for the dim light that hid his features under the cowl of his cloak. He watched as she slowly crossed the room to stand on the far side of the hearth, keeping her gaze down as if afraid to look directly at him. Reez could see that she was miserable. Her face was drawn and pinched and his heart clenched at the sorrow he had caused.

“How have you been, Nula?” he asked softly.

“Well,” she replied.

“I met with Aydal today,”

“You did?” she asked, looking at him for the first time. “How is he?”

“He’s been better, I warrant. He’s been fighting.”

Nula’s lips thinned, and she crossed her arms. “If I had been a man, I would have joined him,” she said

tersely.

“Will you tell me what happened?”

She stayed silent for a moment before glancing at his face again. “No.”

Reez sighed. “It’s about me, isn’t it? He’s doing it for me. Because of the rumours.” Nula looked away.

“You should tell him to stop.”

Nula glared up at him and pointed her finger at his chest. “No, you need to...” she stopped and covered her face with her hands.

“I need to what?” Reez asked quietly. She shook her head. “Nula, I know I have shown little inclination to listen to you in the past, but I am willing now. You have something on your mind. Tell me what it is.”

She wrapped her arms around her body and faced the hearth. There was enough light from the embers to see the emotions racing across her face. “The villagers need to see you. They need to hear you tell them exactly what happened, not just vague reports and made up stories. They need the truth.”

“The truth,” Reez said scornfully.

“Surely that would be better than lies and half-truths?”

Reez grabbed his hood and pulled it back with a jerk. Nula gasped and took a step back, her mouth wide and her eyes full of horror as she stared at his ravaged face.

“Is this what they want to be confronted with when they wander the lanes or walk into the inn?” Reez spat. “Can you imagine the screams and the fear as I come into the village? I can. It’s what haunts my dreams at night. It’s better that I stay away.”

Nula swallowed and took a deep breath before moving closer once more. Reez flinched as she laid a hand on his chest. “It is a shock, I admit. Even after Destry had told me. I’m sure it will prove difficult for people to begin with. Perhaps some may be afeared in the beginning, but they will become accustomed to it, to you. Think about it.”

He shifted slightly to better hide his disfigurement and nodded. He went to pull his hood back up, but Nula caught his arm. “No, leave it,” she whispered with a small smile.

Reez looked at her. “I’m sorry for scaring you.”

She shook her head. “That’s all right. I get that you’re afraid of people’s reactions. Perhaps be a little less dramatic when you meet the rest of them, though.”

Reez chuckled. “Point taken.” He took a deep breath. “There was a reason I wanted to talk with you,” he continued. “I came to give you and Aydal my blessing. He’ll prove a more attentive husband than I could ever be. He loves you dearly and misses you. I know you miss him, too.”

“Thank you,” Nula said, her eyes shining with unshed tears.

“I’m sorry for hurting you and not listening to you. I was so full of my own plans that I didn’t stop to think that you had dreams of your own,” he admitted.

“No,” she said firmly. “I share the blame. All my friends envied me for being with you. It made me feel good to be seen on your arm. I should have been firmer when I realised it was no longer enough; that I wanted more than you could give me.”

Reez sighed. “Can we be friends?” he asked.

“Of course.”

“Can I ask one boon of you?”

“Anything.”

“When you and Aydal have your first child, will you name it after me?”

“No!” she whispered fiercely. “I already have the names picked out.”

“You have?” Reez said, realising it was yet another thing he was ignorant of. “I’ll just have to petition Aydal, then. He loves me enough.”

“Don’t you dare,” she said with a grin.

“I’ll have time. I’m sure I can wear one of you down. You know, I am famed for my persistence.”

Nula lifted her hand and laid it on his arm. “Are you sure?” she asked tentatively.

Reez knew she was referring to her being with his brother. “In my mind, I have pictured you together these past six moons,” he said. “It was a surprise to me to learn you had not held a ceremony. I am content. All you need to do is send him one of your saucy looks, and he’ll be wilting at your feet, and I shall be there to laugh at his poor protestations of love.”

“Perhaps you will lose your own heart one day,” she said with a soft smile.

Reez shrugged. “I’m too busy for romantic dreams, even if there were someone who could stand to look at me without running in horror. I have much to learn over the next few cycles if I am to assume Wicton’s position in the village.”

Nula glanced towards the door, which led back out to the taproom. “Love may not be as far away as you believe.”

“That remains to be seen. As it is, I should return home before I am tempted to stay in front of your warm fire.”

“Thank you for coming, Reez,” Nula said, “and for your blessing.”

Reez nodded and went to the door. “Be happy, Nula,” he whispered. He pulled up his hood and slipped out into the chilly night. As he limped back to the tower, he smiled, his heart lighter and his mind clearer. Making peace with those he loved was strangely liberating, as if someone had removed a weight from his shoulders that he hadn’t known he was carrying. Now, instead of being surrounded by darkness, he could see the dawn appearing. He huffed out a breath. Nula was right. He needed to allow the villagers to see him, and the Council deserved more than a short missive about Wicton’s final day. His days of hiding were over, but instead of the crushing fear of earlier, he sensed a small flicker of hope. He allowed the feeling to warm his heart, even as he wrapped his cloak tighter against the wind. Spring was on its way.