

Chapter One

Vrainnan Hamevna didn't hesitate as the door closed behind her with a soft click, leaving her in total darkness. Instead, with the familiarity of centuries, she reached unerringly for the lever and pulled it down. She didn't wait for the orbs to flicker into life in order to light her way, but walked the gallery confidently towards the stairs, her right hand trailing across the spines of her beloved books like a lover's caress. Occasionally, she slowed to push an errant tome back into alignment or paused at a gap in the ordered shelves to recall the location of the missing book.

The lights eventually pulsed and brightened, illuminating the archives, and the corners of her mouth curled into a smile as she descended the iron steps of her kingdom, gripping her long skirt with one hand to avoid catching her foot on the hem.

Vrainnan loved this time of day; before raucous students invaded her sanctuary with questions and demands; before lazy Masters requested her assistance instead of exerting themselves; before drowning in the buzz and hum of another day.

After navigating the five staircases that connected the galleries, she crossed the stone floor which had seen the tread of a thousand students and stood before her desk, casting a critical eye over the perfectly arranged papers, and the pile of books stacked neatly to one side. She pushed her eyeglasses further up her nose, huffing in satisfaction, and pulled the topmost tome from the pile. After opening it at the place marked with a silk ribbon, she began to read.

How long she stood there she didn't know, but the soft snick of a door and the long stride of a confident foot eventually interrupted her studies. She knew he would come. She didn't turn as he paused behind her and snaked his muscular arm around her waist.

"You left," he whispered in her ear, his breath causing a shiver of longing to travel down her spine.

"I have work to do," she replied with a small smile.

"I could have kept you busy, Vrai."

She turned then and tipped her head back to look into the face of her consort. Soft blond hair waved around his head and fell into his piercing blue eyes. She reached up and tucked the errant locks away. She had noted that his eye colour changed depending on his mood. Today they were as clear as a summer sky. Full lips twitched into a wide smile, revealing perfect white teeth.

"If it were up to you, Baddon, I'd never leave our chambers."

"Now there's a refreshing idea," he murmured as he reached up with a grin and pulled the pins from her hair, letting it cascade on to her shoulders. "You know I prefer it down."

She sighed. "It's impractical."

He shook his head ruefully before frowning and pulling off her eyeglasses. "You need to take better care of yourself," he grumbled. The faintest of arias began to play around her before

fading away. She blinked as the angular lines of his freshly shaved jaw came into focus again. "Better now?"

"You shouldn't," she argued without heart. "You know the rules on magic use in the tower."

"I enjoy taking care of you. Besides, the smell is divine, like flowers and honey."

She nodded and smiled. Magic manifested as sound to her, from a cacophony of screeches to a beautiful melody, depending on the skill of the wielder. He smelt it and often complained about the dreadful odours he had to put up with.

A door on one of the upper levels opened, and she heard several people entering the archives. "It seems we are no longer alone," she observed.

His beautiful mouth curved down, and he sighed dramatically. "It seems I must wait until tonight."

"Don't forget, I may be late. There is another council meeting, and you know how Hamnan likes to talk."

"You can tell me about it later and send me to sleep."

She rolled her eyes. "You know I can't."

"Keep your secrets, then," he said with a smile before capturing her lips with his own. He pulled away when a burst of laughter came closer. "Think of me," he whispered.

"I always do."

He tapped her nose with his finger and winked before turning and walking away. A brief illusion of the two of them entwined on the bed appeared.

"Baddon!" she hissed, her cheeks reddening. The illusion disappeared, and she watched him go, appreciating his wide shoulders and slim waist. She sighed, remembering how she had catalogued every inch of his fine form with lips and fingers. He looked back once, gifting her with an airborne kiss, before opening the door across the room and leaving.

Turning back to her desk, she picked up the pins he had discarded and twisted her hair back into a knot on her head before securing it tightly. She carefully folded her eyeglasses and placed them in her desk drawer, ready for when she would need them again. Unlike most of the other mages, she wasn't obsessed with maintaining a youthful image, although since her friendship with Baddon had blossomed into something deeper, she found herself taking more care with her appearance.

Satisfied that everything was in order, she turned her attention back to her study of roots as the surrounding tables filled with students intent on understanding the magical arts.

It was sometime later when a shadow fell across the pages of her book. She looked up into the angular face of her dearest friend, Reeve Dantez, to see her violet eyes flashing dangerously.

"You haven't eaten," she stated blandly.

"Is it time already?" Vrainnan asked as she glanced around the busy archives.

“It is long past time. Honestly, Vrai, I don’t know what you would do if we didn’t look after you.”

Vrainnan stood and stretched her back. “I wanted to continue to research root caps and their lubrication systems,” she said, waving a hand at the books littering her desk. “Did you know a root can be as long as the plant is high?”

Reeva shook her head, and grabbing Vrainnan’s hand, pulled her along to one of the doors leading away from the archives. “Later,” she said curtly. “We need to go now before they stop serving for today.”

They passed through a richly decorated door full of carvings depicting myriad animals from around the land of Zelannor. The corridor beyond was plain and dim, occasionally punctuated with nondescript doors leading to storerooms, or small, dark rooms that used to be classrooms but were now dens used by the teachers when they returned from the satellite campuses. Students were not allowed to use this access, and they met no-one on their way through. A small door at the end opened out into the Grand Hall. Mainly used for festivities, assemblies, and the occasional religious service, the vast area was, at present, empty, save for the beautiful silver birch tree in the centre. Said to be the original tree created by the First Mage, it was a symbol of faith, and a promise of hope for those who still subscribed to the old teaching. Evening light streamed through the high windows bathing the room in a warm glow.

Oblivious to the majesty of the chamber, Reeva dragged Vrainnan across the hall and through another door. A wider corridor led to the Refectory, where the last of the diners sat enjoying the remains of their meal, and the companionship of friends and colleagues.

“I found her,” Reeva announced as they stopped before a large counter separating the room from the galley beyond.

A tiny, grey-haired woman twisted round and grinned. “I saved some of the venison and vegetables, and stopped Baddon from taking the last of the cloudberry tart,” she said as she pulled out plates from one of the ovens. She wrinkled her nose at the food. “The meat will be dry,” she warned.

“Thank you, Arna,” Reeva said. Vrainnan inhaled deeply as she took the plates, savouring the aromas of the food.

“This smells wonderful,” she said with a smile.

“It would taste a lot better if you ate it fresh,” Arna grumbled before turning back to two novices elbow deep in soapy water. “Mind you scrub them well,” she admonished. “I don’t want to be here all night.”

Vrainnan sat at one of the nearest tables and began to eat, surprised at how hungry she was. Reeva watched her carefully, her shrewd eyes assessing every move and her thin, pale lips pursed. “When did you last eat?” she asked when the first plate had been scraped clean.

Vrainnan shrugged as she cut off a chunk of tart and popped it into her mouth, chewing appreciatively.

“Did you come to break your fast?”

Vrainnan shook her head. “The Refectory wasn’t open when I woke.”

Reeva sighed. "You know, it is not good for you to bury yourself with your books. You need to get out into the fresh air and sunlight, meet friends, and eat more than once a sennight."

Vrainnan waved the spoon at Reeva. "I'm meeting you now."

"It doesn't count," Reeva said sharply.

Vrainnan smiled quietly and spooned up another morsel. Most of the students and a large part of the faculty were afraid of Reeva. She rarely smiled, and had an acid tongue that could etch metal, but Vrainnan knew she had a soft heart that she protected with her acerbic nature. Her white hair was drawn back and tied in a loose knot, accentuating her sharp features, but Vrainnan had seen joy shine from Reeva's face as she worked on her jewellery, and fierce pride when a student excelled. Reeva's respect was not easily won, but once you had it, she would stand by you forever.

"Well done, Reeva. You winkled her out at last." A rotund man with a large grey beard and big bushy eyebrows made his way over, a beaming smile on his face. He chuckled as Reeva crossed her eyes at him, and he sat heavily down on the chair opposite.

"She doesn't take much finding, Hoster," Reeva snorted. "She is always closeted away with her precious books."

"Surely not always," Hoster Maylord teased, his light green eyes alighting on her, and his face shining with mischief. "I have it on good account that she has been seen abroad on the arms of a rather handsome man."

Vrainnan rolled her eyes. "Tis no secret he is my consort," she said between bites.

"At least you are openly declaring yourselves," Hoster exclaimed gleefully. "You two have been dancing around each other for an age."

"Three cycles is not that long," she argued weakly.

"Perhaps not in the grand design, but tis a lifetime for a young man in love."

"Here he goes again, spouting romance and poetry," Reeva said, her face soft. "You are worse than Imma Josela. She would have everyone paired up and handfasted before the next moon if she could."

Hoster dipped his head to one side. "She just wants everyone to be happy. She sees the new novices arrive alone and homesick and wishes to ease their heartache."

"I am no mewling novice. Neither do I need a man to make me whole," Reeva said firmly. "I have my work, my art, and my friends. I need nothing else."

Vrainnan pushed away the empty plate and sighed. "I used to feel the same," she said slowly, "but now I feel as if my world has doubled its portion. I'm not sure that I want my life to go back to the way it was without him."

Hoster clapped his hands. "Wonderful! I am delighted for you, Vrai. It makes these old bones sing to hear of it."

"You are not much older than me!" Reeva said indignantly. "I am still young and intend to stay that way."

Hoster sighed dramatically. “Mayhap a century doesn’t register with you, my dear one, but I am feeling weary. Why, just two days ago, I only passed six students on my way up to the observatory. I fear these limbs of mine are weakening.”

“Should we alert the physikar?” Vrainnan said, patting his arm in feigned concern. “Perchance he can save you from a premature grave.”

“No need, no need. I am sure I will be back to my old strength in short order.” Hoster laughed heartily. “Besides, I intend to outlive you all.” He pushed his chair back from the table and rose as a bell chimed in the distance. “We are summoned,” he said, turning to Vrainnan with a huge sigh. “Promise you will wake me if anything interesting happens.”

Vrainnan said her farewells to Reeva and took Hoster’s proffered arm as he led her out of the refectory.

“I hear on the wind that another messenger has arrived from our Sovereign,” he whispered as they moved up the spiralling stairs.

“Another one?” Vrainnan frowned. “I wonder what demands Casimir is making now?”

“I don’t know, but his behaviour is more like that of a petulant child than a monarch. His ludicrous orders are not endearing him to many in the faculty.”

“He fears us. All his demands are born of that. I wonder which of his advisors has been dripping poison in his ears?”

“Does it matter?”

“I don’t know,” Vrainnan said slowly, “but it feels as if something dark is growing beyond our sight. We should be careful to weigh up every decision to avoid being drawn down the wrong path.”

“You know we look to you to keep us all in order,” Hoster said tenderly, as he patted her hand. “You will make sure that we do nothing rash.”

“Well, if this discussion goes the same way as the last, I will have no need to wake you. The shouting and arguments will do it for me,” she replied wryly as they turned down the corridor and headed to the council chambers.

Hoster chuckled. “At least the arguments are entertaining. When you can potentially live forever, the mind needs an occasional diversion.”

Vrainnan narrowed her eyes. “Then, study. There is enough information in the archives for several lifetimes.”

He waved his hand airily. “Plenty of time for that. Care to wager on who will leap to their feet first?”

She shook her head. “You’re incorrigible,” she said with a soft smile.

Chapter Two

The receiving rooms of the Archmage were filling rapidly as Vrainnan and Hoster pushed through the groups of mages to find their preferred chairs in the corner, where Hoster could nap surreptitiously, and Vrainnan could stay out of the way unless she was called upon. She nodded to several people as she took her seat and looked around the familiar room. Hamnan Vestrin's large chair was still empty, and the mages made the most of the delay by trading gossip and speculation, until the small door at the back of the room opened to admit a short man in the black and purple robes of the faculty, wearing the black and gold bonnet of the archmage. As he seated himself at the head of the room, mages scrambled to their seats and all eyes turned expectantly towards him. When the hum of conversation was finally silent, Hamnan stood and lifted his hands. Vrainnan bowed her head as he spoke the ceremonial words to open the meeting.

"I hold this conclave in honour of the First Mage through whom all magic flows. May our words and deeds reflect his wisdom, and our hearts his light. Blessings be upon you."

"And also on you," the assembled people repeated with one voice. Vrainnan mumbled the response automatically.

Hamnan took his seat once more, and the meeting began.

As the Keeper of the Archives, which included the extensive histories of Zelannor, points of ethics, religious observances, and the application of the laws passed down through the ages, Vrainnan's attendance at all meetings was mandatory. Should there be a question regarding any areas of governance, she was the one to bring clarity to a muddled argument or answer a pointed question. In reality, however, her input was rarely required as Hamnan had been in position for a long time and had a keen mind when it came to the jurisprudence of his domain. Few ever bothered to challenge him, but on the smattering of occasions she could remember when clarity had been demanded, the Archmage had invariably been proven correct.

Vrainnan's mind wandered as the Archmage's monotonous voice intoned about the minutiae of faculty law, and the minor infractions committed by various staff and students. Magic was rationed in the Tower. Having so many magic users in one place was a challenge. Its use had to be limited, or else they ran the risk of stripping the surrounding land of all life. In order to wield magic, you had to syphon it from somewhere - the plants and animals in the vicinity, or the elements of earth, wind and water. The necessary restrictions grated on the mages, who often argued fervently for more freedom. Invariably, unsanctioned magic use was a regular occurrence, and Hamnan was dogged in his quest to ferret out the culprits and make an example of them. Unfortunately, it didn't seem to have any effect, as the list of infractions was always long.

Her gaze wandered over the assembly. In all, they represented the entire faculty. The Deans of all nine sciences were there, as well as their delegates; representatives for the household and grounds staff attended, as did others like Imma Josela, Head of the Novitiate, Saurain Duchan who was the Leader of the Peacekeepers, responsible for everything from the defence of the Tower to maintaining discipline in the halls, and Primo Dravid Salong who was the Cardinal for the faculty. It was he who caught her eye as she looked around the room. His brown eyes sparkled as he lifted his brows with a small smile and carefully wriggled his left hand before pointing to his ring finger. She grinned and shook her head slowly, almost laughing out loud as he feigned shock and placed his hand over his heart.

The chapter preached that handfasting was the only rightful communion of a man and a woman, and Vrainnan had enjoyed many a heated debate with Dravid over a cup of hot wine. She had vehemently argued that the status of consort was enough and, until recently, had been very vocal in her views. It was disconcerting to her that her rigid stance had begun to waver. Inwardly, she craved the permanence and security such a union would represent, but she had no intention of revealing that to the Primo yet. She would not give him a chance to gloat at her change of heart, no matter how well-intentioned.

“Here it comes,” Hoster murmured, leaning forward in his chair and breaking her out of her reverie.

She turned her attention back to the Archmage who was being handed a scroll by one of his aides.

“Today I received another missive from our Sovereign, King Casimir. As usual, the contents are long and rambling and I won’t bore you with the bulk of it. However, I wish to share a pertinent passage with you.” He unfurled the scroll, and after scanning its contents, began to read.

“It has come to my attention that there are factions within your faculty meeting in secret to plot against me and usurp my rule. I demand that your treasonous staff and their deluded pupils be prevented from attending these perfidious gatherings around the country, inciting unrest, and urging rebellion. I also demand that their bases of operations be demolished forthwith.”

“What on earth is he talking about?” Josta Baylo, Dean of Creations, asked. “There are no secret meetings.”

Hamnan rolled up the scroll and passed it back to his aide. “I believe he is referring to our satellite campuses,” he said.

Shouts of disbelief echoed around the room, and Vrainnan frowned. Having such a large gathering of mages in one place would cause terrible problems if they were all allowed to practise their art, as well as the dangers of teaching students who were untried and wild in their learning. As a result, they had created nine campuses, spread out around the country, and often in more isolated spots in order to allow the students to learn, and the teachers to practise without fear. The environments were carefully cultivated to maximise the presence of magic in the area and were allowed time to recover before the next batch of magic users arrived. There were also several other smaller locations used by faculty members who wished to pursue their studies in a particular discipline and needed unrestricted use of magic.

“We teach magic, not rebellion,” Corra Lomax, Dean of Experimentation, declared, as if that were the end of the discussion.

“He cannot tell us to destroy our campuses,” another voice called out. “We need them to spread out our students and husband our resources.”

“Since when do we bow the knee to the monarchy?” Paravin Danby, the delegate for the Dean of Taxology shouted. “We have never been under the thrall of mere humans. We are not his subjects, and we are above his petty laws.”

A furious argument broke out in the chambers and voices became louder and louder as mages tried to make themselves heard. Vrainnan shrank back as the sounds rang in her head. She was sensitive to noise, no doubt an effect of her ability to detect magic aurally, and she could hear everything despite clamping her hands over her ears. The King’s demands were like a flint lighting the dried husks of mages steeped in the boredom and mediocrity of centuries. She had never seen them so animated as they raged about their own status, the limits of Casimir’s authority, and possible responses which included tearing down the royal residence in Etheradia. Vrainnan shook her head as they revisited old insults in their disagreements with each other. Even Hoster rose and approached the nearest group to add his own views.

“Order! Order!” Hamnan shouted, trying to wrestle back control of the meeting, but he was ignored. Just when Vrainnan was considering quitting the chambers altogether, an ear-splitting whistle sounded, causing a lull in the shouting. Hamnan took advantage of the interruption and banged his tankard on the table. “Order! I will not have this meeting descend into chaos. Be silent and let us debate this with equity rather than like squabbling babies.” Once the meeting quietened again, he continued.

“These are unprecedented times, and I confess I am not clear if there are any laws or agreements which actually dictate the relationship between the monarchy and the mages. We have lived in peace, side by side, for millennia and there has never been occasion to question the relationship or the division in governance. As far as I am aware, we leave the running of the country, the protection of the populace, and the distribution of resources to the ruling monarch. In turn, we are left to study, practice, and train students as we see fit. Those that wish may live in communities and use their skills to aid them however they deem necessary.” He lifted his hand to forestall further arguments as the murmuring began again.

“Surely we should ascertain whether there is a precedence in law,” Maddox Lind interjected.

“I suppose,” Hamnan said hesitantly. “Lady Hamevna, it appears we have need of your guidance.”

She frowned slightly. He seemed reluctant to seek her aid, even though he had always welcomed her assistance before. Vrainnan stood and surveyed the faces in the chambers. “It may take some time, but I will search the archives for any pertinent documents. The earliest records are often difficult to read as the quality of the scrolls has deteriorated, and the writing faded. There are likely to be examples in the histories that may cast some light on this subject.”

“Very well. You have four days, Lady Hamevna,” Hamnan said curtly.

“That is not enough time,” she began, but the Archmage stood up, ignoring her protestations.

“This meeting is concluded,” he announced and turned his back as the mages clamoured once more.

Vrainnan slumped back in her seat. “How does he expect me to find anything in four days?” she mumbled to herself.

“That must count among the most interesting council meetings I have attended in a very long time,” Hoster said cheerfully. “I didn’t even get to have a nap.”

“You, at least, will make up for it tonight,” Vrainnan grumbled. “Hamnan hasn’t given me enough time to conduct a proper search. I shall have to start it immediately.”

They both rose and joined the flow of bodies leaving the chamber. “What about getting your assistants to help?” Hoster asked.

Over the centuries, Vrainnan had employed many of the students to assist her in the day to day running of the archive, but none of them had shown the aptitude or interest in apprenticing, although she had cautiously high hopes for the two presently employed. Both were hardworking and seemed to love the books as she did, but she tended to do the bulk of the work herself for speed and efficiency. In truth, she liked to keep a tight rein on her tiny empire and found it hard to relinquish control.

“I have had no chance to train them in the handling of ancient documents, nor on the complicated filing system I use. They would just hinder me and impede my research,” she said finally.

“They need to learn sometime, Vrai,” Hoster said gently. “You know better than anyone that there must always be someone to deputise in each department. You are fortunate that the Archmage only wants to deal with you; anyone else would have had you disciplined many cycles ago for not fulfilling your duty.”

“Perhaps, but not today, and not on this task. It is too important. What if they missed a crucial reference or skimmed over a relevant passage in their ignorance? No, I will be the only one searching. They can watch over the general archive until I am free again.”

Hoster took her hand. “Very well, my dear one. You know where to find me should you have need of my help.” He bowed respectfully to her and took his leave, heading for the stairs leading to his private chambers.

She smiled. Hoster was a simple man. He loved his food, his bed, and his beloved birds. In his role as Keeper of the Aviary, he taught students of all disciplines from Fundamentals, dealing with the basics of magic, Taxology, looking at observable form, through Application, where students were required to interpret magic for general use, and even Experimentation and Investigations, where imagination and innovation could be entertained. Students loved his genial nature, and his classes were always popular. She had often noted how enthused they became as they returned to the archives to continue their studies, especially after a lesson with his favourite birds, the raptors. Books on the alluring creatures and their habits were some of the most frequently in need of repair and strengthening due to their hard use.

Vrainnan was about to head down to the library when she was stopped by another man, who took her hand and bowed low before her. “May I have a moment, Lady Hamevna?”

“Of course, Lord Lind. How may I assist you?”

Maddox Lind, the Dean of Investigations, looked quickly at the mages, some of whom lingered in small groups outside the receiving room. He offered his arm, and they walked down the corridor, away from those who might wish to overhear their conversation. He was a tall man, and large in stature, although not bulky. His hair was dark, but he had allowed some grey near his temples, once claiming with a charming grin that it gave him a distinguished air. He grew a beard but kept

it cropped close to his face, which Vrainnan secretly admired. After walking in silence for a short while, he turned his dark eyes, the colour of cocoa beans, towards her and smiled.

"First, I wish to thank you for the hard work you do for the council. You are a voice of reason and calm in times of chaos. I know you are not one to embroil yourself in petty disputes or idle gossip."

"Neither are you, my Lord. I noticed you did not add your voice to the fray this evening."

He raised an eyebrow. "Very discerning and observant, too."

"I have learnt to distinguish individuals by tone and intonation."

"Even in the unholy racket of earlier?" he asked, obviously impressed.

She smiled. "Even then."

"Did you recognise my contribution, then?"

"The whistle?" she guessed.

"It seemed prudent. Our dear Archmage could not make himself heard."

"He did appear to be out of his element," she agreed.

"This missive from the King is troubling," Maddox said. "We are used to his posturing and blustering, but this smacks of something different. It is almost as if he doesn't trust us, nay, as if he fears us and the powers we wield."

"But nothing has changed in millennia. Why would he suddenly be so alarmed?"

Maddox sighed. "I do not know."

"But you have a theory," she stated.

"Primila Barador has postulated that he may be affected by a malady of the mind. As Dean of Taxology, she has seen the detrimental effects of interbreeding among lower creatures, including a reduced mental capacity. The recent diktat of royal handfasting only allowable between members of the immediate family appears to have weakened them severely. Look at Prince Brassak, for instance. He was always a sickly child, and even now often keeps to his bed. His sons are both infected with the same malady. Casimir seems to be infertile, and it does not bode well for the future of the throne should he not produce an heir. It is not beyond the realms of understanding that their minds are similarly disadvantaged."

"Primila is a good woman and a wise one, too."

"She is." They stopped in a small alcove, and Maddox turned to face her. "A few of us are concerned that the King may not be in receipt of the best advice at this time. We also feel that the Archmage may not be the ideal person to deal with any correspondence; indeed, it is possible that he may inadvertently have exacerbated things, leading to the demands we heard today. We think it may be time for other measures to be put in place."

Vrainnan frowned. "I would have you speak plainly, Maddox."

He smiled and nodded his head. "Of course. What both parties require is a trusted intermediary who can treat with the King whilst also representing our own cause. We are planning to

approach Baddon Nox, to see if he would be willing before putting his name forward to the council for consideration. I was hoping that you would see the wisdom behind such a move and consent to add your voice to ours as we plead our case.”

Vrainnan pursed her lips and looked over Maddox’s shoulder as she thought through the proposition. The only person allowed to study to the level of mage in a century, Baddon was a powerful magic user. He had a deep love for the Faculty and would certainly be a faithful representative. He was also related to the current monarch through his mother’s family, which would normally prevent his admission to the Tower, which would make him more likely to gain the acceptance of Casimir, who would view him as an ally rather than an enemy. Baddon was charming and personable, well-liked by staff and students alike. She had often envied the way he could win any crowd with ease, and make each person feel special and interesting, while she stood aside feeling awkward and clumsy in her dealings with people, preferring her books and scrolls to banter and polite conversation.

“It seems like a well thought out idea which has great merit. Baddon would make a fair intermediary for both sides.” She looked back at Maddox. “Very well. You will have my support.”

His eyes crinkled attractively as he smiled down at her. “Your approval means a great deal, Lady Hamevna. I feel certain that this will be a positive strategy. Would you be willing to approach him with the offer?”

“No,” she said firmly. “It would be much better coming from you.”

“As you wish, my Lady.” Maddox bowed and lifted her hand, kissing it lightly before squeezing her fingers gently. “I will speak with him on the morrow.” He turned to leave, but stopped, his hand still holding hers. “I wonder, would you do me the honour of joining me in my chambers? You know how much I enjoy your company.”

“I should get back to my work,” she said.

“Again, you reject me,” he said, with an exaggerated sigh. “Another time, perhaps.”

She nodded and watched him walk back down the corridor, his stride long and confident, before continuing her own route down to the archives. She liked Maddox, but although he had pressed her over the long cycles to form a relationship, she had refused. Even now, when she was publicly aligned with another, he had not given up his pursuit of her. Pushing open the door on the third gallery, she made her way down to the floor where Bex Vatraman sat at her desk, her long dark hair tied in a messy knot and her blue eyes fixed on the book before her. She stood quickly when Vrainnan approached, leaving the seat free for her.

“All is well,” she said quickly. “I have logged in all the books and put them back in their rightful place. The tables are cleared, except for those two still in use, and I dusted the shelves down on all the galleries.”

Vrainnan paused at the anxious look on Bex’s face. She thought back to her conversation with Hoster, and suddenly realised she was being too exacting. Both Bex and Jerod had proved to be more than capable and seemed willing enough to learn more. It was long past time to loosen her grip.

“Excellent,” she said and watched as the young girl’s face transformed with the unexpected response. “I am going to be very busy over the next four days - far too busy to look after this place,” she said, indicating the library with a wave of her hand. “I will expect you and Jerod to

oversee everything for me. I will not want to be disturbed, so you will have to deal with all the enquiries yourselves. Do you think you can manage that?"

"Oh, yes, my Lady," Bex gushed enthusiastically. "I promise we will take good care of everything for you."

"I will be in the historical archives or among the ancient scrolls, should you need to give me any messages." She went to move past, but stopped and looked back at her assistant. "Speaking of the old records, I have been wondering if you would consider staying on as my apprentice. If so, I will need to take you through the care and placement of the more delicate papers. When my research is finished, and I am free from council business, I could start your instruction, if you are willing."

She moved on quickly, not waiting for an answer, but heard an excited squeal just before the outer door to the ancient archives shut. She smiled to herself, remembering her own reaction when her mentor had suggested she study under him long ago.

Pausing in the short corridor, she looked at the doors leading off and mentally reviewed her options. The most troublesome part would be determining if a formal agreement even existed. Deciding to leave off reviewing the historical records, which would be easier to navigate, she moved to a door to her right and, taking the key chain from her belt, unlocked it. She pulled the lever behind the door and the light globes hummed, gradually illuminating the room stacked with scrolls and papers.

Fleetingly, she thought of Baddon, who was likely even now awaiting her return from the council meeting. He would be disappointed when she did not return to their shared rooms. Perhaps she should have taken a few moments to go up and speak with him, but in her heart, she knew he would have persuaded her to stay and start her search at first light. This was too important, and she didn't have the time to spend on other pursuits, no matter how appealing. Turning her attention to the ancient writings, she pulled out a scroll from the lower shelves and began to read.

Chapter Three

Vrainnan smiled softly as an arm snaked round her waist, pulling her close to the hard body behind her. Lips nuzzled her hair, and she felt a kiss on her head.

“You’ve been in the historical archives again,” a sleepy voice rasped. “I can smell the dust.”

How long she had spent pouring over scrolls and struggling to decipher the faded handwriting and scrawling script she didn’t know. At some point the words no longer made sense, and her eyes were gritty with lack of sleep, so she had given up and returned to their rooms. She had undressed quietly and slid into bed beside Baddon, falling rapidly into a deep sleep.

“I’m sorry. I had urgent research to do for the council.” She turned to face him. His eyes were a soft blue-grey like the mouse-ear flowers that grew in a profusion of colour at the beginning of the summer cycle. She traced his jaw with her finger.

“I missed you,” he said simply.

“You would have made me stay had I returned,” she confessed. “I didn’t want to waste any time.”

He pulled back slightly. “So, you view me as a distraction?”

“You know you are,” she chided. “You have a way of making me forget everything.”

He grinned. “I shall take that as a great compliment.”

She sighed and closed her eyes briefly. “I should return and continue my research. I have been able to uncover some vague references which might help me.” She frowned. Compiling an extensive catalogue of the ancient records had been in the back of her mind for a long time. Now she wished she had tackled the project instead of becoming preoccupied with other, more interesting tasks.

“Eat first,” he demanded.

“But...” He stopped her lips with his hand.

“You know I will have my way, so don’t waste your time arguing with me. I don’t care how urgent this work is. Hamnan can wait. I will not have you neglecting yourself.”

"I can take care of myself," she said weakly.

He propped himself up on one elbow and stared down at her. "You forget to eat unless we come and fetch you. You neglect your health, too. Remember, it was only yesterday that I had to repair your eyes again because you strain them so much. I swear you would smell like one of Arna's hogs if I didn't throw you into the bathing house once in a while. Loving you is an endless task." He traced a finger over the frown that had suddenly appeared on her forehead. "I wish you wouldn't doubt me," he sighed.

She bit her lip. "I have been alone for a long time," she said. "It is difficult to understand such devotion."

"I pursued you for three cycles and admired you from afar for much longer. When you finally gave yourself to me, you took my heart captive and chained me completely to your side." He pushed her hair away from her face. "When will you realise that there can never be anyone else but you? Your face inhabits my thoughts and dreams, and I long for you like a parched man in a desert."

"And when you have slaked your thirst, perhaps your eyes will feast on other delicacies."

"Never. You owned me from the day you chastised me for returning a book with a tear on one page. From that day, I knew you were the only one for me."

She had heard him tell the story several times. "I still have no recollection of that moment," she said.

"Your eyes flashed like daggers and your tongue whipped me like a disobedient cur. One glimpse of that passionate woman and I wanted her for my own."

She replicated his grin. "Those books are precious, and I berate any who return them in a poor condition."

"I was tempted to rip every book I used just to see the fire in your eyes. Perhaps you would have noticed me sooner."

At some point, his constant presence in the archives had registered on Vrainnan's mind, and she had begun to look forward to seeing the handsome, charming man who visited her daily. She watched him covertly as he sat near her desk and read, or as he wandered around the galleries searching for books. Sometimes he would catch her eye and smile, and she would bury her nose in her latest tome until he left. Occasionally he would ask for her help, and she would walk beside him to show him the treatise he needed, her head strangely light and her chest tight.

Then one day he had left a chrysanth on her desk. After that, she would find a fresh flower every day. She had unearthed a book on the hidden meaning of plants and recognised his offerings: fidelity, beauty, compassion, strength, hope, and love at first sight. After he caught her referring to the book, he had smiled widely at her and nodded. The next day, he left a bunch of coriander. When she looked in the book and found that it meant lust, she flushed scarlet, only to find him standing before her with a handful of jonquils. Taking the book from her hand, he turned the pages until he found what he wanted before handing it back with a hopeful smile; return my affection.

After that, he would search her out if she wasn't in the archives. They spent time walking in the gardens, talking in the refectory, or laughing as he charmed her friends. He had stolen a kiss in the walled garden where she occasionally lost herself in the care of plants, and at that moment, had stolen her heart, too.

Suddenly, she found herself on her back, her arms pinned above her head as his body laid heavily over her. "Tell me," he demanded.

She repressed a grin and shook her head.

"Tell me," he growled, "or I will keep you here for all eternity."

"What is it worth to you?" she teased.

"Everything," he said, his voice catching.

She looked up into the face that was dearer to her than any other. "I love you, Baddon Nox. I love you with all of my heart."

Vrainnan yawned widely and Reevea tutted. "Are you sleeping at all?" she demanded.

"A little. Hamnan hasn't given me the luxury of time." It irked her that he would rush something of such import.

"I think it unreasonable, and were I on the council, he would know of it. I would give him no peace until he listened to me."

"Fortunately for him, you are not," Vrainnan said. "I swear you take issue with everything just to see others squirm."

"It is not my fault I am surrounded by fools and sycophants," she pointed out.

"The truth is admirable, of course, but other things should temper it. People respond better to a kind word and would be more likely to listen if they felt heard themselves."

Reevea huffed. "I refuse to pander to their delicate egos and precious sensibilities," she said vehemently.

Reevea had been passed over several times for promotion to Dean, or even assistant, in both Fundamentals and Experimentation. The departments found her difficult and confrontational and, despite her experience and knowledge, had chosen people with easier demeanours and lesser gifts. Her friend acted as if she were unconcerned by the rejection, but Vrainnan knew it hurt her deeply.

Instead of bemoaning her lot, she hid behind harsh words and bitter rhetoric. Reevea was a formidable mage with unusual skills, especially in the working of stones, and her knowledge of the unstable earth fires was unsurpassed. Any other person would have been made Dean long ago, but she remained a teacher of earth magic in the Experimental Sciences department, avoided by all but a handful of people who could see beyond her tough exterior to the fiercely loyal woman underneath.

They had bonded over a shared love of music and stillness. Being with Reevea was more often than not a peaceful experience as they sat together in companionable silence, having no need

to fill the void with empty words. It was a strange dichotomy, considering her tempestuous nature. Vrainnan had once compared Reeva to the fierce dogs kept by the Peacekeepers in kennels outside the Tower compound. At first, they seemed feral and dangerous, but underneath they were protective and faithful, quick to give affection to those that showed them kindness.

Arna wandered over and refilled their cups with their favourite herbal brew. "Drink up, Lady Hamevna. Your vittles will be out shortly." She pulled a small package out of the pocket of her voluminous skirt. "Baddon bade me give you this when you came back into the light," she said with a grin, resting it on the table in front of her.

"What is it?" Vrainnan asked.

"How should I know? Open it and find out."

She picked up the parcel wrapped in soft fabric and tied with a blue ribbon. She pulled the bow and unwrapped the material, revealing a small flat box. Pausing, she looked up to see both Arna and Reeva leaning forward in anticipation.

"Go on, open it. Don't leave us in suspense," Arna prompted.

Vrainnan lifted the lid and gave a little gasp. Nestled inside on a bed of velvet was a silver broach depicting a shooting star. The intricate trails behind the central piece were composed of dozens of tiny crystals, as if they had broken away from the one complete jewel in the centre of the star.

"Oh, my!" Arna said with admiration.

Reeva turned the box slightly and looked closely at the workmanship. "That's a fairly solid effort," she conceded, and Vrainnan laughed.

"High praise indeed!"

Reeva smiled, a rare thing in itself. "At least we know why he spent so much time in the north last cycle," she said. "He must have been hunting for these."

"But we had not declared ourselves then," Vrainnan pointed out.

Reeva snorted. "You may have been keeping your feelings close, but he had declared himself long since. For him, the sun rises and sets with you."

Vrainnan brushed her finger over the exquisite piece and smiled.

Arna patted Vrainnan's hand. "It is time happiness came your way. Grab it with both hands, and hold tight," she said before walking back to the galley.

Reeva took the broach out of the box and pinned it to Vrainnan's tunic. "There," she said.

Vrainnan's stomach rumbled as two bowls of rich, warm stew were placed in front of her alongside a heel of bread still hot from the oven. She began to eat the delicious fare, barely acknowledging the tangy ale or sweet meat as she swallowed.

Reeva shook her head. "When will you learn?" she chided.

"Don't fret, so," Vrainnan said between mouthfuls. "This is only until tomorrow night and then I will be free."

“We both know that is a lie.”

Vrainnan shrugged. Already her mind was back in the archives, wondering which of the scrolls and parchments to look at next.

“The only freedom you will have is to bury yourself in whatever project has taken your fancy this time,” she replied. “It doesn’t take much to tempt you back into those dusty rooms.”

“You are right. After this, I should spend some time in the gardens. Did you know that the reason a plant wilts after being transferred is that the root hairs are damaged?”

“Save me,” Reevea whispered, as she lowered her head into her hands.