

CHAPTER 1

“Sorcerer Kalath, why have you woken me?” High Priestess Caitlan pulled on a gold silken robe, the same color as the mana emanating from her skin, and crossed her arms over her chest. Her eyes bore into him expectantly.

“I apologize for the intrusion, especially at this late hour, Priestess Caitlan.” Sorcerer Kalath paused, pulling the cowl hood of his robe from his head, uncovering the light blue hues of his own mana. He did not want to tell her what he had just seen amidst the black waters of his scrying bowl, but he had to. “The prophecy has begun.”

The revelation stunned her to alertness and she frowned. She took a step backward. “How can we be sure?”

“I have seen the manifestation of the first prophecy with my own eyes.”

“Whom is the prophecy centered around?” Priestess Caitlan ran a thin, well-manicured hand nervously through her brown hair, and picked up a glass of water from the foyer table. She took a sip.

“Tnasha fen Schoitt.”

In response, the glass slipped from Caitlan's pale hand, falling to the marble floor, shattering. “But *she's* an *untrained* sorceress.”

“Indeed. However, her natural abilities for sorcery surpass even yours. Trained, she will become a formidable adversary, and a sorceress to be feared. Even by us.”

A low, resolute voice rang out from behind them. “Then she must be destroyed.”

Kalath and Caitlan turned to the entryway. High Priest Graneck stood in the dark doorway. His silver mana moved around him in agitation.

Kalath responded first and quickly, knowing Graneck had always feared Tnasha’s anomalous mana. “We cannot destroy her, Graneck. She’s the one who can save us. In destroying her, we would be killing ourselves. Besides, I was only speaking figuratively when I said we should fear her. She will never sway her allegiance against Danaria and her own family.”

“The question is whether or not she can complete the tasks prescribed by the prophecy and bring us peace.” Caitlan stared off into the darkness.

“Surely there are others of our kind more qualified.” Graneck leaned against the doorframe. “She’s a young and inexperienced neophyte sorceress, and a poor warrior at best.”

Kalath tipped his head in thought, searching for the words that would put Graneck’s fears at ease. “Perhaps she is. Even so, she has proven her resolve and fortitude. Her bravery is admirable.”

Graneck rolled his eyes. “She was kidnapped by Kersians during what *should* have been a simple rescue mission.”

“Ah, but she escaped the clutches of two adept Kersian sorcerers,” Kalath said in defense.

“Who got away...” Graneck shook his head and stepped into the hallway next to Caitlan, who looked small and frail next to her husband’s tall, sturdy frame.

“Only because one of the Kersian sorcerers has the ability to appear and disappear as he pleases.” Kalath found himself half tempted to turn and leave, but the situation was too important to allow a man like Graneck to deter him.

Graneck grunted disapprovingly. “What, exactly, happened on Zul?”

High Priestess Caitlan said nothing. She bent down and began picking up the shards of broken glass. With shaking hands, she tossed the shards into a silver bowl on the foyer table.

“It looks as though you’ve picked it all up, Caitlan. Let the servants finish it. Come. We should retreat to one of the sitting rooms where no one can overhear.” Kalath outstretched a hand, helping Caitlan to her feet. Together, the three sorcerers slipped down the slumbering dark halls of the Temple Dagon, to a quiet sitting room near the kitchens.

Once inside, Caitlan closed the heavy door behind them. She took the chair across from Kalath, motioning Graneck to sit. “She was captured by the Kersians and then?”

Graneck sat down with a heavy sigh, shoving both shoulders into the thick cushions behind him. “Yes, then what happened?”

“She escaped, along with the Warlord Kyran’s daughter, losing her amulet in the process.”

Caitlan gasped. Graneck snorted.

Kalath pulled a pipe from his robes and began filling it with a sweet smelling tobacco from a small leather pouch he carried. “Somehow the first Kersian sorcerer did not realize Tnasha was a sorceress until she escaped. She hides her mana well. But she had assistance from her friends.”

“She needed assistance. Need I say more?” Graneck was obviously displeased.

Kalath ignored him and continued. “They decided not to come back to Danaria, and came to me instead. Tnasha was injured from the fall that led to her capture in the first place.”

The high priest and priestess remained silent with their eyes fixed on him. Kalath lit his pipe. “For brevity I’ll tell you that while she healed and rested I made her read several magical texts those few days she and her friends stayed with me.” He paused and stared into the flames of the hearth remembering. It seemed like it just happened yesterday and the memory of it sent a shiver down his spine. “I also discovered the Sorcerer Morvack had her amulet, and it healed the deadly wound given to him by the human soldier Kolgern, one of Tnasha’s friends. I was the one who told Tnasha that she had to go to Zul to retrieve the amulet.”

Graneck snorted again. “Stupid girl.”

“Hold your tongue, Graneck. Perhaps you should place yourself in her position. What would *you* have done?” Caitlan

raised a thin eyebrow in warning, waiting for her husband's answer.

He smiled. "I would have *never* been caught to begin with."

"Nonsense, Graneck. This entire situation, this war, has thrust Tnasha into its grasp without her consent. Don't you see?" Kalath took another puff from his pipe and leaned forward, catching both their eyes with his own. "She had very little control over the events that have transpired. While she and two of her friends, Kolgern and Alena, left for Zul, I was escorting the Warlord Kyran's daughter, Rassia, back to Danaria where she belonged. We had the misfortune of running into the Kersians, and being taken captive by the Kersian sorcerer Morvack. Were I younger I may have given Morvack a stronger fight. But I am old, and my mana is degenerating even as we speak..."

"I assume the rumors that you have been to Zul are true then?" Caitlan asked.

"Yes. They wanted to employ my scrying abilities in hopes they could defeat her. They wanted to use Rassia as a sacrifice. Kolgern and Alena were the ones who freed Rassia and me from our prison inside the manor of Gavgal. I don't know the specifics of what happened in the Kersian temple. Tnasha conjured something that terrified Gavgal and Morvack, enough that they retreated, giving us all time to escape. Mostly unscathed."

Caitlan trembled. Kalath could tell she did not want to ask, but he knew Caitlan and knew how the priestess' mind worked. She would ask about it for years if he didn't tell her.

She asked again. "What did she conjure?"

Kalath took another puff from his pipe and watched the thick white smoke rise. He knew when he told them, Caitlan and Graneck would be even more frightened. "It came naturally, I assure you. As natural as the prophetic dreams she has begun having. The dreams, except for the last, have come true."

"That's not what I asked, Kalath. What was it she conjured?" Caitlan's voice threatened anger, her long nails bit into the arm of the chair and her brow furrowed in expectation.

“It was a serpent conjured by invoking Dagon in Aithian’s name.” Kalath’s eyes traveled from the priest to the priestess, wondering what their reaction would be.

Caitlan’s face went white. “By Natyis, it is happening. The first prophecy has come to pass.”

“It seems so.” Graneck stared into the hearth’s flames, as if searching for something. He swallowed – hard. “We should prepare for the second prophecy.”

Caitlan nodded. “Tnasha must retrieve the Raven’s Claw. It’s the only way.”

Kalath stood. “Gavgal and Morvack already have plans to retrieve the staff. As do others. I have seen this in my visions, and so it shall come to pass. The journey will be dangerous for everyone involved.”

High Priestess Caitlan’s eyes turned gold, with mere slits for pupils. Her eyes fixed on Kalath’s. “She will take four companions with her. A protector, a guide, a warrior, and a scout. But first, she will require additional training.”

Kalath nodded. “I shall see to that myself.”

“Where is she now?”

“For obvious reasons King Aragel of Sherok became involved in this last engagement. The Kersians convinced Exavia to usurp Sherok’s throne. I trust you’ve heard about this?”

Graneck nodded. “I heard something about that, but I was not given a detailed account.”

Kalath continued. “Tnasha is currently with the Danarian troops who accompanied Prince Aragel back to Sherok. They should be on their way back by now, along with Warlord O’Schoitt.” Kalath knocked the dottle from his pipe into the hearth and tucked the pipe away.

Caitlan turned to Graneck. “Summon Tnasha fen Schoitt to the temple immediately. Inform her family, the members of the sorcerers’ council, and all high commanding officers. The four must be summoned as well. You know who they are...”

“But Caitlan, she, and the others are still days away.” The annoyance in his voice made it clear that Graneck did not like how his wife hurried him.

“And yet the warrior’s blood still runs red.” Her eyes went distant again. “We must make haste. There is little time.”

In the mid of night Priestess Caitlan made her way to the ritual chambers to pray while the sorcerers Kalath and Graneck left the temple Dagon behind them in preparation for the arrival of the neophyte sorceress and her companions.

CHAPTER 2

Tnasha leaned forward in her saddle and snatched the note from her father's hands. "It's mine."

"I just wanted to see who it was from." Warlord Termark O'Schoitt tossed up his hands in defeat.

She bit her lower lip, turned the parchment seal side up, and pointed at the imprint. "Temple Dagon. It's probably one of the priests or priestesses trying to convince me to join the temple again."

Termark laughed. "Probably."

The horses they rode ambled along the main road leading directly to Central Danaria. The air was thick with the dust kicked up from the horses ahead of them. They were in no hurry to arrive. After riding for several hours, Tnasha's ankle hurt. It seemed reasonable it would be sore after all she had been through. Her friend Kolgern rode behind her with several of the other soldiers. Occasionally the soldiers' voices rose above a whisper, but for the most part, they kept their conversation to themselves.

Once they reached a break in the canopy of trees above them, she lifted the note skyward, hoping the sunlight would reveal the note's contents. It didn't. With a sigh of resignation, she cracked the wax seal and unfolded the parchment. Half grinning she read it aloud in a boisterous voice. "Sorceress Tnasha fen Schoitt, You have been summoned by the High Priestess Caitlan to the Temple Dagon in Central Danaria *immediately*. The matter is of *utmost* urgency. Please respond

promptly. Sincerely Yours, High Priest Graneck, Scribe of Temple Dagon.”

Kolgern grinned and looked around as if making sure Alena was not there to smack his good arm. Tnasha smiled. He was safe, for Alena had ridden ahead with Warlord Kyran and Rassia. She watched him as he cradled his sore, but mostly healed arm and rubbed around the bandages. She wondered if he would ever admit to loving Alena.

He looked at her, his eyes lost in thought. “I wonder why this is suddenly so urgent?”

Tnasha shook her auburn head of hair. “It can’t be that serious. Last time I received a note like this Priestess Areia was trying to get me to join the clergy. It was urgent as well.”

Termark cleared his throat. “They have probably heard by now that you were on Zul and managed to get away from two adept sorcerers. They’re wondering how you did it.”

“They probably know now that you’re one of the greatest sorceresses that ever lived.” Kolgern burst into laughter and added, “By default perhaps.”

“Thank you.” Tnasha leaned forward in her saddle in a mock bow. Behind them almost a hundred soldiers took up the rear. Fifty more, or so, rode ahead. Tnasha turned to her father, wondering what he was thinking behind the mask of reserve he always wore. The question blurted from her lips before she could stop it. “Do you think I’m defective?”

With wide brown eyes, Termark gave his daughter a startled look. “By Natyis, no! Why would you ask such a question?”

“Just making sure,” she said, frowning.

“Shouldn’t we *hurry* back to Danaria?” Kolgern asked.

Tnasha rolled her eyes. “Hurry for what purpose? So they can try to recruit me into the temple faster? That’s pointless.”

Just then, another messenger riding at a full gallop past the front company of soldiers came to a halt in front of the warlord. Termark O’Schoitt allowed an annoyed sigh to emerge from his lips. “What now?”

“Maybe they want to recruit you into the temple, too, Lord Termark.” Kolgern tried to keep a straight face.

Termark took two notes from the messenger. He kept one and passed one back to Kolgern. Termark wasted no time opening his. "It's from the High Command. General Daxin." Termark smiled and chuckled. "It seems the temple has gotten to Daxin as well. This is an order for the legion to return to Central Danaria to deliver you immediately to the temple for debriefing with High Priestess Caitlan. The order is countersigned by approval of the High Council, and the Sorcerer's Council."

"By Natyis, Tnasha. They must really want you. I wonder what mine says." Kolgern warily looked at the envelope. Afraid to open it, he held it at arms length.

"Just open it," Tnasha said. She ran a hand through her long mess of tangled hair and nodded at him. "Well? Open it!"

With the seal cracked and the parchment unfolded, he begrudgingly read the contents. A look of confusion passed over his face. After refolding the note he looked up to find questioning eyes on him. "I've been summoned to the temple as well."

Tnasha wrinkled her nose. "Hmm. That's *very* strange."

Termark agreed. "Perhaps it is more important than we initially believed. You did, after all, have contact with Kersian sorcerers. As did he. It seems reasonable they would want to know any details that may provide a future tactical advantage." Termark looked at her expectantly.

Tnasha noticed her father's eyes on her. She had not ventured to discuss, at any great length, the details of what had happened on Zul. Her friends, too, had remained silent about the incident. "Perhaps they would be interested in knowing that Gavgal has the ability to disappear and reappear in another place? At his own will. He can also take other people with him when he disappears."

"How do you know?" Kolgern asked.

"How do you think he and Morvack got away from me? If it weren't for that bit of sorcery I would have had them both." She frowned and clenched the reins in her fists.

Termark turned to her. "That information, Gavgal's disappearing trick, would be an important detail they would need to know. That would mean he could come into Danaria as he wished and take any woman or child he pleased."

“He wouldn’t do that,” Tnasha said matter-of-fact.

“You can’t be certain of that, unless you know something?” Termark asked. He looked into her eyes.

Her father often said she remained a mystery, even to him. She shrugged. “It would be too soon for him to retaliate by abducting people. If I get exhausted after a simple incantation, I can imagine if he used his ability for such feats of magick, he would be so exhausted he might go into a death-like sleep until his mana could regenerate. He might even require elemental balancing.”

“Rassia told me Morvack can do wind magick. That’s how she and Kalath arrived on Zul before we did. He can also send lightening from his hands, and he reads minds. I don’t think he has as much ability as his brother though,” Kolgern said thoughtfully.

“He’s probably not as well trained, but it sounds to me as though he has plenty of ability,” said Termark.

Tnasha inhaled the fragrant, warm spring air. It was moist and sweet, smelling of flowers and damp earth. Summer would be here soon. The dense forests of the Danarian terrain surrounded them in a tunnel of blue and green foliage. The sunlight broke through in spots, bringing a cascade of light onto the road every hundred foot lengths or so. “We can’t really hurry back. The horses need to be rested.”

Her father nodded. “The High Priestess and the councils will have to be patient and wait. We will get there quickly, just not as quickly as they would like.”

Kolgern exchanged glances with Tnasha. “How quickly, General, Lord Termark?”

Termark turned to Tnasha’s thin blond friend, who looked more like a ruffian rather than a trained Sirus soldier. “We will resort to short breaks to rest and water the horses, but we will ride through the night. We should be home by morning.”

“I can barely contain my excitement,” Tnasha said, annoyed. “I thought we weren’t going to hurry?”

“We are certainly not going to race home to Danaria and put over one hundred horses in danger of exhaustion. There are two things to remember, Tnasha. The first is to follow orders, so long as they are reasonable and do not put a legion in danger. In

that case, you must make modifications to keep your losses to a minimum. In this instance we must worry about the horses. The second is to realize that orders are not given without good reason. Especially in concurrence with the High Council. Perhaps something bad has happened.”

Tnasha's stomach turned sour. Her imagination began to race. What could have happened for the High Command, the High Council, and the High Priestess to collaboratively request their immediate return? With this in mind, she voiced her thoughts aloud. “I doubt they're so interested in how we escaped the Kersian sorcerers.” Then the thought hit her like a giant stone in the chest. She turned to her father. The hair on her neck stood on end. “What if the Kersian sorcerer, Gavgal, has already retaliated?”

Everyone nearby shifted his attention toward her, astonished. An uncomfortable silence befell them.

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