

A.C. DONAUBAUER
The Order – Book 1

The Order - Book 1

A.C. Donaubauer

First published as ebook in August 2015
Paperback
2nd edition

Copyright © 2019
Astrid Donaubauer-Grobner
Waltenhofengasse 3/3/3302
1100 Vienna, Austria

The author online:
www.ac-donaubauer.com
www.facebook.com/acdonaubauer

Cover: Biserka Design

Editing: Jürgen Donaubauer, Hannes Ohrlinger
Proofreading: Philip Scott

Video trailer: imageIn Media

ISBN 978-3-904142-05-2

To Jürgen - my friend, my lover, my partner.

Thank you for giving me wings and roots.

CHAPTER 1

Eryn

The air was chilly and smelled of the snow that was yet to come. This winter was already harsher than the last few she could remember, even though it was only beginning.

Eryn watched her breath condense in pale clouds before her face and looked up at the star-strewn night sky. Though it was a sight to behold on such a clear, cloudless night she looked forward to returning home to a cosy fire and a warm drink. She hated the cold, always had. Her time of the year was the hot summer months, no matter how exhausting many tasks became in the heat. It certainly was preferable to this chill.

Hugging her bag of roots close to her side, she hurried through the dark main street of the little town. She was supposed to have been back before dark, but the roots were hard to find this year. She suspected that some of the villagers went out themselves to look for them to sell on the markets.

Her father would already be waiting impatiently and be looking out the window every minute or two. He kept pointing out how dangerous being out in the darkness alone was for a fifteen-year-old girl, and Eryn always suppressed a sigh when he started one of his tirades about the many hazards that lurked around every corner. Her late arrival would earn her another one, she was absolutely sure.

Just two more houses and she would reach the narrow path that led to the secluded little house she shared with Treban, her father.

Treban was the town healer, an excellent one, whose reputation had spread all around. The ill and injured came from remote places to seek his help, hardly ever in vain. He took great pride in his work and had never sent anyone away because he or she didn't have the means to pay.

However, those he treated nevertheless were always eager to find a way to compensate him, even if it took them a while to do so. It was not wise to make a bad impression on somebody like her father; it might be they had need of his services again one day. Sometimes packages arrived with written notes that thanked him, blessed his

generous heart. Her father never kept any records who had paid and who hadn't. He simply didn't care about that.

He said that healing was not just something he did to put meat on the table, but to serve and take care of people who would in turn take care of him. While to some his altruism seemed rather naïve and they sneered at him for it, his attitude did not keep him from seeing people the way many of them truly were. He just had made the decision himself not to be like them. He was a man who wanted to believe the best, but was very well aware of human nature at its worst.

And Eryn knew that this was exactly why he kept trying to impress on his daughter the need to keep herself safe.

A twig snapped somewhere behind one of the houses, but this was just one of the noises that accompanied life in the countryside. She told herself it might have been a small animal or just somebody who was taking in some chopped wood for cooking.

Nothing to be nervous about, she assured herself, cursing her father for making her see danger in every shadow, portent in every noise around her.

The next sound was closer, behind her.

She swallowed, took a deep breath, turned around – and sighed with relief when she spotted Krion, the baker's son. He was a few years older than her - a tall, good-looking young man who always had a smile and a wink for Eryn when she came into his father's shop for bread.

He had started flirting with her some time ago and Eryn felt flattered by his attention. Some of the other girls her age and older had tried to catch his eye, and she was very pleased that he had singled her out. At least, she hoped she was the only one he flirted with... Finding out that this was just how he talked to all the girls as soon as he had a quiet moment with them would devastate her.

A few other boys had started noticing her, but none of them left her stomach feeling tied in knots like Krion.

She beamed when he came closer, as she always had to when she beheld him. "What are you doing out in the cold? Shouldn't you be home?"

He smiled, bright teeth glinting in the darkness. "I could ask you the same, little Eryn. It's dangerous out here in the darkness."

She rolled her eyes. "You sound like my father!"

He laughed. "Why don't I accompany you home so nothing happens to you that would upset your father?"

She felt her palms starting to sweat. He was offering to escort her home! She would walk with him all the way to her house, having him to herself! This meant he liked her, surely? He wouldn't walk with her if he didn't care for her, would he? Or did he do it because this was the kind of chivalrous thing that was just like him?

He waited for her answer. "You are not afraid of me, little Eryn, are you?" he teased her.

Afraid? She was almost dizzy with happiness and smiled. "No, of course not. Thank you, I would like that very much."

They walked in silence until they had left the town behind them and reached the little path that led to the healer's house.

"How do you like working with your father? The healing? I mean; your father is teaching you to be a healer, isn't he?"

She nodded. "Yes, he is. I like it a lot. Sometimes it's really hard to stay up all night to help somebody who needs to be cared for and watched over and then after only two or three hours of sleep to carry on with your daily work - though luckily enough, that's not too often. But seeing people come in and feeling really bad and then watching them leave looking so much better is really great." Don't babble, she warned herself, you'll just drive him away.

He stopped before the curve that would bring the house into sight. He came very close, putting his hands on her shoulders and pulling her even closer. Her heart skipped a beat. Would he really kiss her? Her face felt hot despite the cold. What a shame that she could only see his silhouette in the dark.

His lips were cool as they met her own, cold lips, but his tongue was warm. She slipped her arms around his middle and leaned into him, melting.

When she felt his hand on her breast, she pulled back and brushed it aside firmly. He put it back and made to pull her close again.

"No," she said breathlessly, shaking her head in the dark.

"Why not? You do like me, don't you?" She could hear the smile in his voice.

She pushed harder when he grabbed one of her wrists to stop her from retreating. "I don't want this, let me go!"

"All of a sudden you're playing hard to get? We both know that's what you are doing!" He sounded irritated, as if he had not really expected any resistance. He seemed to consider it a personal insult.

Instead of answering she tried to kick him where her father had shown her. He barely avoided her foot and cursed when she kicked his thigh. When he grabbed his leg with both hands, Eryn turned towards the house and started to run.

She felt his clutch at her elbow after only a few steps... it almost made her stumble backwards.

"Let me go, you brute!" she screamed, fervently hoping for her father to hear her and come to her rescue.

He slapped a hand over her mouth and pulled her down onto the cold, hard ground, fumbling with one hand to pull up her skirts. She squirmed and writhed under him, kicking, trying to bite his hand, to get him off her. She felt his cold hand on her stomach, working its way down, and felt tears running down her temples. Tears of betrayal, of anger at herself, of utter despair at her helplessness.

Then suddenly his weight on her was gone from one moment to the next. She heard him yelp in surprise and heard what sounded like somebody being hit. There was a sickening crack of what had to be a broken bone and then she heard Krion's voice retreating, wailing curses.

She didn't see the man, but recognised her father's scent of herbs before she felt his warm hands close around hers to pull her up and back on her feet.

"Father," she snivelled, "he wanted to..."

"I know exactly what he wanted," her father's disconcertingly calm voice interrupted her. She recognised the barely contained wrath in it and pushed closer when he put his arm around her shoulders to lead her back to the house with him.

"The roots..." She stopped, trying to see where the bag had landed. Her father saw it first and bent down to pick it up before he put an arm back around her shoulders to pull her close again.

"Come, girl," he said. "You need to get inside. You are cold as ice."

Cold was exactly how she felt, chilled through and through. It went deeper than outside temperatures could reach. Not even the welcoming fire she could soon see through the windows of the house promised any relief.

She expected him to reprimand her, scold her for her carelessness in walking alone with a boy in the darkness, but her father said nothing. He merely took the cloak from her shoulders and neatly hung it on the hook at the door beside his own. He had not worn one when he had come for her.

Then he took her hand and led her to his comfortable chair in front of the fire. He went away again and she heard the clinking of earthenware. When he returned to her side, he crouched in front of her, pressing a cup with a clear, dark, sharp-smelling liquid into her hands and brushing away the tears that kept running down her cheeks as she sat, wordless, in the chair.

She made no move to drink, so he lifted her hand with the cup until she took a sip. The sweet liquid burned its way down her throat and made her cough. She almost instantly felt the warmth spread in her stomach.

She looked up into her father's face that swam in and out of focus between tears. She didn't speak, still waiting for his tirade that must begin.

For a few long moments they just looked at each other, then her father finally spoke, but to her surprise not to reproach her as she had expected. "I am sorry, child. This is my fault."

She stared at him, feeling as if she was trapped in an absurd dream. "What?"

He shook his head. "I should have warned you. I should not have sent you out for the roots when it gets dark this early. I should have gone instead. I..."

She grabbed his hand, finding it unbearable that he of all people was blaming himself for what had happened. Or rather, for what he had prevented from happening.

"You *have* warned me!"

"No." He freed his hand to rake it through his greying but still full hair. "I did not warn you about *him* in particular."

She had not thought that she could freeze even more inside. "Him in particular?" she repeated almost inaudibly.

"Last year I was called to a young girl in town. She had been waylaid and..." His voice drifted off. "She said it had been the baker's son," he continued after a while. "I've kept my eyes and ears open since then to learn about it in case something like that happens again. And now *you*, you were almost..." He broke off again.

Too stunned to speak, she sat rigid, only one thought circling in her head: the young man she had been falling in love with was no more than an animal who made a habit of forcing himself on helpless young women. Every last bit of regard that might have survived his assault dissolved, evaporated to be replaced by something hard and cold.

"I will make him pay for this," Treban hissed out from between clenched teeth.

She looked up at her father, surprising him when she said, quite calmly, "No." The tears were still drying on her cheeks, but the glimmer in her eye had turned from injury to cold steel hardness. He was about to object, when she just said, "I will."

* * *

When Eryn rose the next morning, she was surprised at how late it was. The sun was well up already, and normally her father would have woken her quite some time ago. She was grateful that he hadn't. The night had not been a peaceful one; it had taken her hours to fall into a restless sleep, despite her father's nightcap.

When she dressed and went downstairs she saw him sitting in his chair, staring into the fireplace. He had let the fire burn down - only a few glimmering bits of wood remained to give off a little warmth. He looked up when she approached him.

"Sit, Eryn. There is something I want to talk to you about."

She turned around and fetched a chair from the table to sit opposite him. Then she waited for him to speak.

"I should have done this some time ago already, but I have always deferred it in these last few years, not wanting to see that you are growing into a woman instead of continuing to be my little girl." He sighed. "But still, knowing what kind of people are out there I should have been keener to do it when you were little."

Eryn frowned, not having the slightest idea what he could be talking about.

"I see I am confusing you," he smiled. "You know how the internal organs of a woman work. I showed you several times, you have even healed minor problems yourself. You are blessed with the gift, my dear girl, and this makes it possible for me to do something that will make sure that nobody can ever do to you what this beast tried yesterday."

She looked slightly uncomfortable.

"Don't be afraid, Eryn. I am talking about a magical protection that prevents any man or object from entering your body unless you wish

it. I can place it there without any pain and it will never be a burden to you. You alone will decide who may pass beyond it."

Unlike other girls her age, she had no problem talking about matters such as this with her father. The human body was nothing mysterious or shameful, for her it was like an open book. The magic she could perform enabled her to just close her eyes and look around, to see how everything worked, find out what didn't and administer whatever was needed, either a nudge of healing energy or a herbal cure.

"What happens if somebody tries it without my permission?" she asked curiously.

"It would be a rather painful experience for whoever tried it," he smiled thinly with a slightly malicious glint in his eyes.

"Anything that would leave permanent damage?" she asked hopefully.

"You know very well how I think about using our abilities to harm people," he said with an undertone of warning.

She sighed. Of course she knew. It was that just sometimes it would be so much more satisfying to be allowed to cause a little discomfort at least. An itch here, a rash there... Where was the harm?

When they moved here about five years ago, after migrating from one place to the next for about the same length of time, she had needed to adapt to a completely different life from the one she had known. She was the awkward new girl that the other children had teased and called names. A little revenge every now and then would have been nice - especially as they wouldn't have guessed where it came from.

She had been confused when her father had told her that in this country there were no women with the gift, only men. When she had asked him why, he had told her that he didn't know.

The next unusual thing had been all these people with the same light hair colour. She dimly remembered that her own natural colour was a lush, dark brown. Here one didn't find a single person with dark hair. Her father had magically altered their hair colour from a rich, shimmering brown to one of the many shades of blond here.

Keeping it blond, however, had not been so easy. The change was not permanent and as soon as her body did not actively provide the magical energy, the hair changed back again to its original colour. It had taken them weeks to train her subconscious to keep supplying the necessary stream even when she was asleep. She had been and still was too young to learn how to do it herself. It was a highly complex technique.

But the memories of life before coming here had faded so much in these last ten years that she remembered hardly anything now.

"Do you agree?" he father spoke impatiently into her thoughts when she didn't respond.

"Yes." She didn't really need to think about it. Her father wouldn't propose it if it were dangerous or unnecessary. "How does it work?"

"I will place some protection around your lower abdomen that will remain as long as you have life force in you to power it. All your fluids will still be able to leave your body without any problems."

"Nobody can remove it?" she asked.

"Only a magician stronger than myself. And there shouldn't be many of those around," he added, with a confident smirk.

Eryn wouldn't know, she had never seen any other magicians, but he himself knew that he was extraordinarily strong. Which was why he had lost his companion to a stupid game of power and had to flee with his daughter into another country where he lived a simple life, hiding his and his daughter's abilities, passing as no more than a well-educated apothecary. The fact that Eryn was beginning to show the first signs of being an apt healer herself didn't pose any danger, even if, thanks to her hidden abilities, she did turn out to be uncommonly good at it.

Everybody here knew that women didn't have any magical powers, after all.

* * *

Eryn took a deep breath when she looked out the window and saw Prowel, the baker come down the path that led to their house.

"Father," she called out urgently, "Prowel is on his way here. He doesn't look happy."

Her father went to the door and opened it abruptly before the baker had a chance to bang the fist he had lifted against it. He all but stumbled inside.

"What do you want?" her father asked calmly.

"You!" Prowel pointed a finger at the healer, "You have broken my son's arm!"

So that had been the cracking noise, Eryn mused. She smiled, knowing that carrying bags of flour would really hurt for a while.

"He attacked my daughter." Still no sign of emotion.

"He told me all about it – kissing her is no justification for your breaking his arm, you ignorant fool!" The baker had started shouting.

Not a good move, Eryn mused. Her father did not respond well to loudness. That he was dead set against harming people with magic didn't stop him from doing so physically if necessary. He might seem bookish in his grey robe and long hair, smelling of plants, but he chopped his own wood, did all repairs in and around the house. He was in very good shape.

"Kissing is not what I saw. How could he when his hand was covering her mouth to keep her from screaming?" Now she could hear steel in his voice. "You know very well what he was trying to do and what he's done in the past. If you do not put a stop to this, nobody in your family will ever receive any medical help from me again."

Prowel's entire head had gone completely red. "I demand that you come at once and take care of that arm that you broke!" It clearly was an immense effort for him to keep himself from screaming.

"I just told you that you and yours are no longer entitled to any healing from me. Leave now. Don't come back before you have taken care of this." He made to close the door but the baker drew back his fist. As he made to punch the healer in the face, he felt himself dragged forward and then a sharp pain erupted in his back where he hit the floor. When he was able to move again he staggered to his feet and out the door.

Stumbling on unsteady legs, he turned back to the house and raised his finger. "This is not over, *healer!*" He spat out the last word and wobbled back to the town.

* * *

People talked, of course. The baker's son had his broken arm in a sling around his neck, telling everybody who wanted to hear it, as well as those who didn't, that he had obtained the injury when he had jumped out of the way of a cart that would otherwise have surely killed him.

But the reason for the gossip was rather why he had not seen the healer to tend to it. The baker could surely afford to pay for medical treatment for his son, especially as Treban's rates were more than reasonable and he generally accepted payment in kind. But Krion declined with a depreciating snort, declaring it was just a scratch and that the quality of the healer's services was grossly overrated anyway.

That made people's ears prick up. Talking about their healer in a derogatory way was not something that was done. It was an unwritten law. Not only was there hardly ever a reason for it, but it was also a great stroke of luck for the town that the man had decided to move there and provide affordable, high quality medical services when he could instead easily have made a fortune in a larger city.

It was further noticed that neither the healer nor his daughter seemed to come to the baker's shop any more to buy bread. When they tried to get some information out of Treban he would just reply in his usual good-natured way that Eryn had developed a liking for baking, and thus he indulged her by letting her experiment. And now they had so much bread and cake at home all the time that there was no more need to buy any.

Many were satisfied and, just as he had intended it, amused by the little story. Others, however, knew Eryn a little and not entirely unjustly hardly took her for the baking kind.

Whenever Eryn saw Krion somewhere in town she forced herself not to avert her eyes but meet his coldly and steadily. First he had sneered when he encountered her somewhere, clearly confident in the knowledge that he had done something punishable and had got away unscathed, but after a while his bearing seemed to be confused. She

wasn't acting as he was expecting her to: no sign of timidity, anxiety or even hatred. Just coolness.

For many weeks, ways of punishing him were coursing through her head, some of them public, others in a private setting, some which left no visible marks, others which were bloody and for everyone to see, some dealt with the aid of magic, others with nothing more than a heavy object hitting his easily harmed places.

Her father would object to her using magic, she knew. She understood his philosophy of not using a powerful advantage to harm others, but it was not as if Krion had the same scruples that kept him from using his physical strength against somebody weaker than himself. Why did he deserve any lenience – especially when he had already got away unpunished with hurting a woman before?

She almost bumped into Krion when she crossed the road lost in thoughts of how to torture him. He was with a group of boys the same age, most of whom she knew.

"If it isn't the healer's daughter," he drawled. "I have heard that you have discovered a liking for baking. Not to compete with my father and me, I hope?" His companions looked uncomfortable when he laughed. One didn't mess with the healer's family, it just was not prudent. But while they didn't join him, neither did they try to make him move along.

"Well, what can I say?" she smiled sweetly. "The bread has just not been up to standard lately." Touch me, she thought. Give me an opportunity to harm you while you are trying to harm *me*.

But he merely ground his teeth together and glared at her through narrowed eyes. She wondered how she could ever have found him appealing.

"Forgive me, my high-born Lady, that our humble country baking is not to your distinguished taste."

She saw that he had clenched his fists. Good, she thought gleefully. Just a little further now...

"Oh, don't worry about that. I know you try as hard as you can," she cooed patronisingly. Krion quickly cut off a boy's snicker with an angry glare.

"How is that arm of yours doing?" She made her voice ooze with a delighted malice, this being the last thing she could think of that might provoke him enough to lay a hand on her in bright daylight.

Triumph surged through her when she suddenly felt the fingers of his intact hand dig into her upper arm. It was no direct skin contact, but better than nothing. A few thin layers of fabric were no trouble. She could work with that.

She stretched her inner senses and used the diagnostic skills her father had taught her to look inside his body, following the weak pulse of energy she had sent up the arm that held her. Concentrating on his forearm she slowly instructed his body to reduce the substance of the healthy, strong bone inside at one particular point. Not entirely, nothing

he could feel, but enough to cause the next extra strain to make it snap.

It was the exact reverse technique for healing a bone, yet worked a lot more quickly. Funny, she thought, how doing damage was so much easier than mending it.

His friends had finally decided that he was going too far and had grabbed his shoulders to pull him away from her.

"What are you doing?" she heard one of them whisper. "Are you totally mad?"

Krion just freed himself from their grasp and turned around to stalk away wordlessly.

She hid a smile when she watched him disappear into the tavern, closing the door behind him none too gently.

* * *

The door to the little house was pushed open violently and banged against the wall with an ear-splitting crack. Eryn flinched and looked up from the dried herbs she was sorting on the table.

Treban looked furious. He was beyond angry, she could tell it from the way the blood pulsed through the bulging blood vessel at his throat. That did not bode well and there was only one reason she could imagine that might have put him in such a mood.

"What do you have to say for yourself?" His voice had taken on a threatening, forced calm that barely contained the rage that she could see in the eyes glaring at her. He still stood in the door frame. It didn't even occur to him that she might not know what he was talking about.

So Krion had finally broken his other arm as she had intended. And now she had to pay the price for her revenge: facing her father.

She covered the herbs on the table with a clean cloth to stop the cold breeze that came in through the open door from whirling them around. Then she swallowed and rose. Better to do this standing up.

"He has received what he deserved," she said quietly, knowing for sure that he would not take this well.

"What he *deserved*? What he *DESERVED*?" He flung the door shut with a forceful movement of his hand, making the little picture frames with the dried herbs on the walls tremble slightly. "You should be glad I don't bestow upon you what *you* deserve! You are no better than that animal! You used your power to harm somebody who was helpless to defend himself against it! I am ashamed of you." The volume of his voice had subsided with every sentence until he had almost reached his usual pitch.

She flinched at his words, even though she had expected them almost word for word. The lessened volume had not made them easier to listen to. Quite the opposite. She waited silently for him to continue. He didn't look as if he was finished yet.

"I told you of the dangers of misuse, of how power like ours can corrupt souls. How people who think they are superior thanks to their

abilities can cause immense misery for themselves and those around them. You just made the first step towards that abyss." He sounded empty, resigned. She was almost relieved when his anger flared up again.

"Did you listen to nothing I have told you?" He had stepped close to her and accompanied his words with smashing his fist down on the table hard enough to make the herbs jump. And Eryn.

She swallowed hard and remained standing in front of her father, lowering her gaze under his furious one. This was not the first time she had seen him this incensed, but never before had she been the target. She wondered if he was going to hit her for the first time.

He took a step back as if to keep himself from doing just that. Then he turned around. "I can't look at you just now," he said and opened the door again. "We will talk later." And he was gone.

Eryn stared after him feeling her mouth dry. She wondered if she should run after him to apologise and beg him to forgive her. She decided not to for two reasons. Firstly, he was certainly not in any mood to accept an apology right now and secondly, it would be a lie.

She was positively *not* sorry for what she had done and she was convinced that she had not set foot on a dark path that would lead to perdition and damnation. But she was sorry about her father's grief and felt the rejection burning inside her.

She would make up for it somehow. Maybe cooking him a good dinner would be a start. She put on the cooking apron and started cleaning vegetables.

* * *

Eryn kept glancing towards the door whenever she thought she heard a noise from outside. Her father had been gone for many hours and it was already dark outside. Was he angry enough at her to stay away from home for the night? She hoped not.

Trying to keep herself busy she continued working on medicines, decanting herbal concoctions into small glass vials, grinding herbs into a fine powder to be mixed with hot water directly before use and tipping it into small leather pouches.

Her father would be pleased with her efforts, she knew. She had saved him several hours of work, after all. And she hoped that would make him better disposed towards her and forgive her more easily. Of course he would see right through her reason for working on the herbs, but that didn't matter. He wasn't usually one to spurn a sensible attempt at bribing him when it was done well. He had that kind of humour.

She was almost finished when she saw torches emerge from behind the hill that hid most of the path to the town. She counted five of them. Her heart started beating harder in her chest and she felt unease creep up on her. Where these men from the town bringing her drunken father

home? The thought was dreadful, but the nearer they came the more she hoped that this was all it was about.

When they were close enough for her to recognise the men's faces, she opened the door. Her father was not among them.

They looked at her, their pale expressions masks of grim misery. She could read in their eyes that something was terribly, horribly wrong, and tears sprang to her own even before the oldest of them, the glass-maker who supplied them with vials for their medicines, began to speak.

"Your father is dead, child." His voice sounded rough and sad.

Her vision blurred behind tears and the sudden pain in her chest forced her to her knees. She felt two pairs of hands at her shoulders, lifting her up and guiding her back inside the house into her father's chair in front of the fire place. Fighting for air, violent sobs burst from her.

Gone! No - this couldn't be. He couldn't be lost forever when they had just talked a few hours ago. The last words between them... His had been that he was ashamed of her, and her last words were spoken in defiance of his beliefs. Never again a chance to set it right, she would have to live with this burden.

She didn't know how long she had sat there with the men trying to talk her into sipping the strong drink they held to her lips.

When her sobs had lost most of their force, the glass-maker exchanged a look with the others before he spoke again. "Your father was killed, Eryn. Prowel stabbed him in the back with a knife. He accused your father of breaking Krion's other arm. He must not have been right in the head."

She stared up at him, hardly comprehending the words she heard. When the full meaning of the message sank into her consciousness, coldness gripped her and slid deep until it had reached the very core of her being, deeper than warm blankets, fires and potent drinks could ever reach.

Her father had warned her that nothing good could ever come from using magic against the unprotected, the ones unable to defend themselves. He had been right, she realised with a dreadful, numbing clarity.

Her actions had cost him his life.

CHAPTER 2

Enric

He sat on the roof of the bakery nearest to the palace, watching the sun rise. That was not typical for him. He usually avoided rising before the sun unless there was no other choice. He wondered if today's exception might have something to do with what awaited him in a few hours, but dismissed this quickly. He blew a strand of his slightly overlong hair out of his blue eyes. Not wearing it the way he was supposed to was a minor act of rebellion he delighted in. One of many, in fact.

A few passers-by looked up at the young man in his early twenties who had chosen such an unusual spot for staring up at the sky, but moved on when they recognised the robes the young man wore. Magicians. It was best not to interfere with whatever they were up to.

All his fellow magicians who had finished their training with him this year would be tested to gauge their magical strength and then apply for a suitable position in the Order. In an institution where hierarchy was defined by the amount of magical strength a man could wield, this was practically an evaluation of personal worth, Enric mused. He had never been a friend of evaluations, be they magical or intellectual.

And thus he had never been a particularly attentive student. He had enjoyed the comfort his status as magician conferred. He came from a family of wealthy merchants and had not exactly been raised as a pauper, but joining the Order had still been a step up in living circumstances.

His parents were thrilled when they discovered his abilities and had sent word to the Order immediately. He was twelve years old then. Amazing, he pondered, how mind-numbingly tiresome the ten years since then had been. Not that he would have preferred spending them with his father, though.

His parents' excitement and pride had quickly turned into anger and frustration when they kept receiving reports of his less than productive attitude. His father, a merchant through and through, had tried hard to sell to him the idea of being an important man with important duties, making his family proud, accomplishing great things. Which was all to no avail.

The Order of Magicians was dedicated to the defence of the kingdom, even if only history teachers knew about the last time there had been an actual need for that. The fighting skills training had been fun, Enric had enjoyed it even if Lord Orrin, his teacher, was not exactly thrilled with his laziness and lack of respect.

The rest of the lessons from the last years merged into some kind of blurred sphere of information. He graduated one year late, as his approach to learning had not exactly been an ambitious one and he'd needed to repeat several exams.

Today was the day when his place in the Order's hierarchy would be decided. He was not tense as such - more curious. He knew that he was stronger than most - if not all - of this year's graduates, but it would be interesting to see how far up he could make it. Not too far, he hoped. The more responsible positions came with requirements. He was not a great fan of requirements, rules and the like.

Most of his teachers had reprimanded him for his laziness when it was apparent that he had a talent for magic and its use, but didn't want to bother with spending the time and energy that would have made him proficient. They tried to impress on him that magic without the knowledge of when and how to use it would hold him back, but he had never planned on going far.

A nice position as a clerk or assistant in the Order would suit him just fine. Something that left him enough spare time to pursue his interests: hunting and spending time with his friends.

* * *

He stood together with a group of young magicians his age. Most of them were edgy. Some of them admitted it openly, others were trying to hide it with grandstanding or rudeness.

"Not much to be afraid of, eh, Enric?" his good friend Kilan asked. "You are pretty much the strongest one this year, I imagine. Maybe there is a nice place waiting for you in the upper ranks?" He spoke the last words with a smile, knowing fully well that this was not at all what Enric was striving for.

"Yeah, wouldn't that be nice," Enric replied without enthusiasm.

Kilan was the next who was called in to be tested. It didn't take him very long to return. He looked pleased.

"Category D. Not too sloppy," he grinned. He had known that there was no way for him to make it any higher than C, and he had hoped not to be classified lower than E. So the golden middle was absolutely fine.

"Congratulations, mate." Enric turned when the double doors were opened again and his name was announced. "See you in a moment."

He walked into the hall and bowed before the assembled magicians who in turn inclined their heads.

Enric let his gaze wander over the ten men. He knew them to be selected from the different strength categories, the strongest one of

them Lord Poron, a B as far as he knew and the second strongest magician in the Order and thus the kingdom. He fit the picture of second in command nicely, Enric had always thought. He had to be in his sixties, his thinning hair bound together in a short tail at the nape of his neck, his eyes intelligent and sharp as if he was constantly analysing the world around him.

Several of the magicians were known to him by sight only, a few were his former teachers.

Their expressions were not exactly enthusiastic when he entered. With the exception of Lord Orrin, his fighting instructor, who had been the only one who had never taken any cheek from Enric, none had very fond memories of him.

"Shield yourself," Lord Poron's instruction echoed off the high stone walls.

He did so and moments later the first bolt of energy hit his barrier. Two more were sent his way without any effect. A second magician, his old history teacher if he remembered correctly, joined his colleague and started attacking Enric's shield. Nothing happened.

More magicians joined them, one after the other, until seven of them shot strikes in quick succession. Enric saw them frown. Then Lord Poron lifted his arm to stop them. He breathed in, pointed the palm of his outstretched arm at him and fired a clear bolt at the shield.

It didn't penetrate the barrier. Lord Poron looked pale and troubled and motioned for the scribe who was there to note down the category of each magician. He whispered something into the young man's ear, who then went off at a swift pace.

Enric waited, still holding his shield in place. This playing around was a waste of time - why didn't they start the real thing so he could join his friends for a cool drink?

"Am I finished? Can I leave? What category am I?" he called out to the assembled magicians that had started whispering amongst themselves and occasionally gave him an apprehensive glance.

Lord Poron walked towards him. "We must ask you for a little patience, young man. We need to wait for somebody. I am sure he will arrive soon."

Enric frowned in puzzlement. "What is this about? The others before me were in and out in a matter of moments. I am not in any kind of trouble, am I?" He couldn't remember having done anything recently he ought to feel guilty about.

"No." Lord Poron's smile seemed rather forced. "No trouble, rest assured." Then he returned to the other magicians, leaving the young man standing alone in the centre of the great hall, waiting.

Not much time had passed before the double doors opened again and the man who came in caused Enric's brows to shoot up in surprise. It was Lord Tyront, the big man in the Order. What was he doing here?

Lord Tyront was in his mid-forties, a tall, formidable looking man with first streaks of grey visible in his beard. His pale blue eyes darted

to Enric instantly and stayed there when he approached him without talking to the other magicians first.

When he was only a few paces away he stopped and raised his booming voice, "Shield yourself, boy."

Enric did so hastily and took a step back, whereupon a volley of strikes was sent from Lord Tyront's palm at his barrier. They were stronger than what had been thrown at him before, very much so. The older man continued to send bolts towards him, increasing their strength with every salve. Soon his shield started to waver and he quickly poured more energy into it to keep it intact.

Lord Tyront stopped, looked at him thoughtfully and then without warning unleashed a white flash that cut through Enric's barrier and threw him on his back.

The young man swallowed an exclamation of pain. It wouldn't do to show any sign of weakness in front of the Order's mighty leader. He struggled back to his feet and frowned at the man who had struck him. Surely that had not been necessary.

When he looked at the magicians in the back, he saw a few mouths hanging open, others were pressed into a thin line. One thing they all had in common: stony silence.

"Am I done *now*?" He demanded from no one in particular.

Lord Tyront smiled without humour. "Oh no, my young friend. You are not done. In fact, I think you will not be done for quite a while."

Enric stared at him in puzzlement. "What?"

"Category A," the leader announced loudly for everyone in the hall to hear. "We have a new second in command." Then he turned around and left the way he had come.

Enric stared after him uncomprehendingly, even after the heavy doors had closed behind him with a loud boom.

He shook his head. Something had to be wrong with his ears. Category A? What nonsense. Nobody was that strong, apart from the Head Magician, of course.

But the way the magicians gawked at him in disbelief let the truth dawn on him gradually.

They had called for Lord Tyront because Lord Poron, the second-strongest magician in the Order, had not been able to break Enric's shield. All colour drained from his face when he started to grasp the full impact of what had just happened.

"Oh no," he moaned, closing his eyes.

* * *

Tyront sighed and felt how the tension was slowly building behind his forehead when he read the reports about his future second in command. The boy had been causing him headaches for weeks now.

Considering Enric's past education it was hardly a surprise that he had not responded very well to the training plan that had been assigned to him and cooperated no more than was necessary to avoid the

accusation of outright disobedience. It had been nearly one month now, and it didn't look as if his attitude was about to change anytime soon.

Not only did he have to learn a whole lot of new things and improve sets of skills, but he was also meant to repeat every single test he had passed barely or in which he had merely scored average marks during the years of his magician training.

In his new position he was supposed to be a role model, a respected pillar of the Order, a well of wisdom and knowledge and, if need be, a strong commander to lead others into battle. He needed to leave behind him the lazy scallywag image he had cultivated in these last years.

Orrin was the only one who had something remotely positive to report about him. So at least the fighting was going comparatively well. Unfortunately, that was only a minor comfort and by no means enough to consider the training in its entirety a success.

His thoughts wandered to Lord Poron, his current second in command. As was to be expected, he was anything but thrilled about being displaced in general and particularly by somebody like Enric. He was not the vengeful type, Tyront mused, and wouldn't make life harder than necessary for his successor. Pity, he thought. A reason to fight, even if only against a disgruntled predecessor might have provided the motivation for finally making an effort. It seemed like he would have to take care of that himself.

It was time to have a little chat with Enric.

* * *

Enric swallowed when he read the note on the soft, expensive looking light brown paper a servant had delivered only a minute before. It didn't say much, only *My quarters, nine o'clock. Lord Tyront.*

That was in less than one hour. Not enough time to prepare sufficiently, but enough time to become really nervous. Which was probably the idea, he suspected.

There was not much doubt as to the reason for this summons. His progress, as he was very well aware, was anything but satisfactory, which was fine for Enric as he had never wanted the honour that was forcefully bestowed upon him.

The Order's leader would hardly be pleased with how things were going. Being called upon to justify his poor performance had really only been a matter of time.

So far Lord Tyront had not shown any interest in him since the day of the testing. This message was the first time he had seen or heard anything from him. Obviously the great Lord only gave his attention when something was amiss. Like now.

Enric looked around in his new quarters in the King's palace, still feeling a little lost. They were to his former abode what a sapling was to a tree. Four large rooms, all to himself. And a lot more than he really needed. But being high up in ranks was not about only having what

was required, was it? His quarters were supposed to reflect his importance, be representative.

Representative they were, he sighed. Yet the question was what they represented. Certainly not his personality.

The apartment was furnished elegantly and luxuriously, leaving nothing to be desired. The parlour alone was larger than the two rooms he had lived in before. And he was assigned his own servant who cleaned, fetched his food from the palace kitchen and took care of his every whim.

Enric had always been one to enjoy luxury, but not to a degree to motivate him enough to make the effort they expected. There was too much attached that he simply didn't want. All this responsibility, the consequences if he failed, the hard work to get there... No.

That was not what he had planned for himself. What he had wanted, and still did, was a nice, uncomplicated, comfortable life with none too hard work, enough time for his friends and being more or less left to his own devices.

His friends. That was another matter that worried him. Most of them had kept away from him since the big announcement. And even with those that still met him, the frequency had decreased considerably. Even his closest mate, Kilan, who was used to dealing with influential people thanks to his father's position, had started withdrawing noticeably.

Enric stared out of the window unseeingly.

How was it possible that he of all people had turned out to be the second-strongest magician in the kingdom? What a joke.

* * *

The door opened after Enric had finished knocking. An elderly male servant bowed slightly and stepped back to let him enter the parlour - a room that looked very much like his own apart from the clearly visible female hand that had been at work here.

Lord Tyront rose from his seat by the window and looked his guest up and down. He didn't bother with a greeting of any sort but motioned to a dark red settee in front of a small round table.

"Sit."

And a good evening to you, Enric thought, annoyed, but did as he was told.

"Please leave us alone now," Tyront addressed the servant and waited until the man had retreated. Then he turned back to Enric and scowled at him.

He remained standing and began without introduction, "Your performance keeps falling short of my expectations. Justify yourself." Even though the words were harsh, his tone was not.

Unconsciously Enric sat up a little straighter, an ingrained habit from his days as a boy when he had been expected to show respect when he was scolded.

"I'm sorry, Lord Tyront."

"No, you are not. I didn't ask you to lie to me, I asked you to give me a reason."

"I... I have to admit, My Lord, that I am not very happy with the current situation."

Lord Tyront sighed impatiently. "Stop pussyfooting around, boy. Say what's on your mind."

The young man lifted his chin defiantly when he said, "I do not want to be forced into this position. Neither have I asked for it, nor am I interested in it."

"A clear statement, finally," the other one commented dryly and finally took a seat opposite his reluctant guest. "What is it that puts you off?"

Enric sighed and lifted and dropped his arms several times in search for words before he replied, "All of it."

"Would you care to elaborate? This is not exactly helpful," the older man said patiently.

"The responsibility. I mean, what exactly qualifies me to take a position to command much older, more experienced magicians than myself? This doesn't make any sense! What if I do something wrong or make a wrong decision? The consequences!" His voice had become agitated.

"What qualifies you is firstly your superior strength, as it serves the Order's primary purpose of defence and secondly, the knowledge and special training you are receiving." Lord Tyront's voice was calm. "What else?"

"The work. I want to be independent, not being told what to do and work all night long for nothing, no time for myself and..." He stopped himself.

"And your family? Like you father, the successful merchant, who always worked almost around the clock to chase the next business opportunity? Who left you and your siblings in the care of an unhappy companion unless he had demands you had to obey?"

Enric stared at Lord Tyront. How could he possibly know about that? He had never told anybody about it, not even his closest friends. He felt exposed, vulnerable, as if his private life had been trespassed on by this man whose face was of course known to everybody in the city, but who was basically no more than a stranger to him.

Lord Tyront continued while he remained silent, staring gloomily at the carpet. "And you just contradicted yourself. If commanding other, older magicians is such a great issue for you, why would you worry about being told what to do yourself? You can't have both, positions of neither giving nor receiving orders are not in accordance with the nature of our institution. Or of our society, for that matter. Though being high up in the hierarchy considerably reduces the number of people that may order you around."

"There is you. And the King," he replied sullenly. "There might not be as many above me, but the ones that are left do not respond well to having their orders questioned."

A problem with authority, Tyront thought. But that was no surprise after insights which recent and older reports had given him. "True. There is not much room for questioning the King's orders. But I assure you that *I* will listen to what you say and might even act on it if it is halfway sensible. It is, in fact, your duty to advise me."

"Me, advise you?" Enric shook his head in desperation. "How can *I* advise you?"

"You will start by growing up and working hard to meet the Order's and my expectations." His words contained only a hint of threat. "You will learn to think before you speak and act. You will show respect and demand it in return. Before that you will have to turn into somebody who *deserves* respect."

"I don't want this," the young man whispered.

"The trouble is that nobody asks us what we want," Tyront replied sympathetically. "But let me tell you something: Men who strive for great power are usually the ones least suitable to wield it. Hunger for power is not a requirement for this position, quite the opposite. This is the great thing in your favour, my boy." He leaned closer and caught Enric in a penetrating stare. "Dealing with your issues is something that you will have to come to terms with by growing up quickly. You might consider the upper ranks as a bunch of harmless old men, but let me tell you that weaklings do not survive long among us. The air is thin up here, as you will learn soon enough." And then he uttered what he was confident would work: a challenge.

"Are *you* weak, Enric?"

CHAPTER 3

Handed Over

12 years later

Eryn climbed up the steep, for want of a better word, *path* and pulled a cloth out of the canvas bag she had slung over her shoulder across her chest to wipe her perspiring forehead. Collecting herbs was usually a task she enjoyed but not when it was that hot and there was no shadow in sight.

Unfortunately, the plants she needed were rather high up and required a lot of direct sunlight, so there would not be a cool spot coming along anytime soon.

She stopped to pull out the sturdy leather drinking pouch filled with water and took a generous swig. It was lukewarm and not exactly refreshing, but served well enough to moisten her dry throat.

Judging from the receding tree line to her left side the rest of the way would only take her another hour. She walked a few steps to a nearby boulder and sat down to rest for a short while. She knew better than to overexert herself in this heat.

The memories of the first time she had walked this way more than fifteen years ago came suddenly and unbidden. Her father had been with her that autumn day, constantly asking her to identify this tree, that flower, testing her as to the procedures of turning them into medicines, correcting her if she got a detail wrong or supplying bits of information that had slipped her mind.

Father. The pain of loss had dulled over time, so had the desperation of guilt. Twelve years had managed that. She had fought to keep the pain alive, it was the only thing that still linked her to him, the only person in almost all her life that had been close to her. But it had become more and more difficult to keep it with her, to fight the dulling effects of time.

At first, looking at his books, his drawings, the things he had built to conjure up memories had worked perfectly well. Tears had welled up in her eyes in seconds and had provided the illusion of closeness, no matter what the hurt.

Today the pain was almost beyond reach, and so were many of her memories of him. But there still was the emptiness, the loneliness.

At the age of fifteen she had been little more than a child, and twelve years later she still would have liked to have had somebody older and wiser around, somebody close to her she could fully trust.

She had stayed in their small wooden house at the edge of the forest, carried on her father's work as the town healer as well as she could. This was her duty, her penance, her life's purpose. She would continue his mission as long as she was able to.

The last time they had walked this very path together had been a few weeks before he had been killed. They had replenished their herb supplies and she had been thinking about Krion, planning to eat up all the bread so she had a reason to return to the baker's shop soon.

Krion. She shivered. He, too, was part of her penance. Facing him regularly in town after all that had happened, that they had caused together. Her father was not the only one who had died that night.

What the men that had come to her house to tell her the terrible news had not mentioned was that the townspeople had lynched the baker after they had found him crouched over the dead healer's body, still holding the bloody knife in his hand.

Justice had been swift and final. Or what the townspeople had considered as such.

She had been torn between amazement at the reverence people had felt for her father and horror at the merciless slaughter of a man they had known all their lives.

Not one, but two men had died due to what she had done. And nobody but her knew about it. Her father had always been adamant about her never revealing her gift of magic to anybody, and other than his directive of never using magic to harm anybody, this one she had never broken.

She wondered if Krion had ever felt any guilt about their fathers' deaths, or if she was the only one carrying that burden.

It had been several days after her father's ashes had been given to the wind that she had sought out Krion in his bakery. She had gone there after dark when the bakery that was now his had been closed for business for the day. The picture of his face when he had opened the door at her knocking was one she would probably never forget. Shock and horror had contorted his features.

At that moment she had realised that he was terrified of meeting the same fate as his father, being considered the cause of the whole situation by the townspeople. He had let her in without a word and she had entered, not afraid any more of what he might do to her alone.

She had turned to him, stepped really close, and grabbed his collar to pull him down to her height so close their noses had almost touched. His eyes had been puffy from crying and she remembered wondering at it as she had in her mind deprived him of the ability to feel anything remotely human, made him into a monster. She remembered the sour smell of days-old sweat on his skin, a sign of him having neglected his hygiene.

She had stared him in the eyes and told him that, should she ever hear that he had so much as looked at a woman against her will, she would come for him and maim him permanently so that two broken arms would feel like a warm embrace by comparison. Then she had left, not at all gratified by the additional fear she had seen in his eyes, a fear she had put there.

It had worked. Not a single incident of that kind was told to her in all these years.

So she had been faced with the challenge of following in her father's footsteps at fifteen, years before she would have completed her training. Reading Treban's books had helped her to improve her medical knowledge, but he had been very careful and had not kept any magical books that might have led to the discovery of his powers. So her magic training had stopped with his death. She had considered experimenting on her own, but discarded the thought over and over again for fear of discovery. One never knew who was watching, her father had always said.

Eryn sighed, snapping out of her reminiscent mood. She took another gulp of the tepid water and tucked the water pouch away. There would be another five hours of daylight, and she planned to be back home before darkness, which she wouldn't if she kept sitting around. There was another hour to walk yet, about one or two hours of collecting plants and another three hours of walking back.

At first the plan had been to start her journey in the morning but there had been a patient, and then another and before she knew it the afternoon was there and she had hastily packed her herb-gathering bag and left.

If she found enough herbs, she deliberated, she might be able to prepare enough medicine to get over the next three months. She would have to talk to the glass-maker about the last delivery of vials and how the opening was too narrow for the viscous concoctions to get out again without the aid of a thin wooden stick.

She cursed when her shoe got caught in a tree root and she almost fell forward. A quick grasp at a thin tree prevented her from landing on her knees. Leaning on the tree she wiggled her foot to free it from the root and sucked in a sharp breath when she heard the brittle wood crack and break, dropping her down the steep escarpment.

Frantic grabs at trees, roots and rocks rushing past brought her no more than scratched and bloody palms. She opened her mouth to scream but not a single sound came out.

Please - no head injuries, her last thought was before her head hit the moss-covered rock that stopped her descent, and then she lay motionless on the shadowy ground.

* * *

Firelight blinked through the trees as seven men walked through the forest, each of them carrying a lit torch and searching the ground

for any sign of their healer. She had been gone too long. She was a careful person, always leaving word when she was off to one of her gathering trips, letting one of the women in the town know where she was headed and also telling them when to expect her back.

When she wasn't back five hours after her designated return, two groups of men had set out to look for her. The smith frowned when he saw a brown boot stuck under a tree root.

He called for his companions. They discussed the broken tree and what looked like a trail where a person might have slid down the bank.

Treading carefully, half of them climbed down and soon found the motionless figure of a woman. They recognised her face easily, even though one temple was covered in blood. They would have sworn that this was the woman they had known since she had been a child and who had been offering her services as a healer for many years.

But there was one little detail that left them utterly speechless and more than a bit scared: Her hair, that now held a mix of earth, small twigs and leaves, looked different. It had turned from shiny blond to dark brown.

* * *

She tried to turn her face away from the sunlight that shone directly on her face, penetrating her lids. The movement was painful and she moaned softly while she slowly opened her eyes. Pain in her head, more pain when she lifted her arm to cover her eyes.

She closed them again and did a quick survey by sending a pulse of magic through her body that brought back information on the damage it had taken. A sprained ankle, a broken arm and an injury to the head. Nothing too serious that couldn't be repaired in a few minutes, even if it would take a few pauses to recover in her current state.

Finally she opened her eyes fully, staring up at a stone ceiling that did not at all look familiar. Her eyes wandered slowly to the source of the light, a small window high up in the wall – with bars in it. Her gaze darted to the bare stone walls and the heavy door with a small barred window in it.

She was in a lock-up, she realised with a jolt. Why ever would anybody lock her away? Especially as she was injured from the fall!

"Hello?" she called weakly, her voice rough.

"She has woken up," said somebody at the other side of the door. "Inform the mayor."

Then there was silence.

She must have drifted off again, because the sound of a key being turned in the lock gave her a start. Three men and a woman entered, the mayor, the smith, the smith's oldest son and the mayor's companion. They looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite decipher.

"Why am I here?" Eryn croaked, causing the mayor's companion to fetch a glass of water and hold it to her lips before stepping back hastily.

Her voice sounded clearer when she asked, "What is the matter? Why did you lock me up?"

Instead of an answer, the mayor handed her a small hand mirror.

Eryn gave a small yelp of horror when she saw her own face framed by a tangled mass of unfamiliar brown hair. She almost dropped the mirror and touched her head, feeling the familiar texture of her hair mixed with the leftover debris from her slide in the forest. It didn't feel any different under her fingers and yet the change was plain enough to see.

Thoughts began racing through her already throbbing head, increasing the pain. Why had this happened? How was this possible? Her father had trained her hard to prevent exactly that from happening, so why had it for the first time in all these years stopped working?

Then the truth dawned to her. Because she had not been merely asleep but her consciousness had drifted far deeper, too deep to respond to any training or ingrained habit. Her carelessness on the path had damaged far more than a few bones and tissue. She had lost the protection of being the same as all those around her. Now she was different. Different was dangerous.

"We have notified the King of this," the mayor said gravely.

"The King?" she replied weakly. "But... why?"

"You know well enough why. You are not from here. The King needs to decide what must be done with you."

"*What must be done with me?*" Her vision started to blur, the headache kept increasing even further from a dull throb to a hammering. "What do you mean, what must be *done* with me? I have taken care of this town for the last twelve years," she sobbed, helpless against the tears of anger, fear and desperation that ran down her cheeks. "After everything that happened I stayed here, and this is how you thank me for it?" She tried to stand but sank back on the hard bench.

"It was not easy for us," the smith spoke this time. She heard regret in his voice, saw it in his eyes. "We have always considered you one of us, we don't want to lose you. But..." He just pointed at her hair, helplessly searching for words that didn't come.

"The punishment for harbouring spies is death," the mayor said, his voice hollow. "We can't risk that. What will happen with you is no longer in our hands."

When Eryn raised her knees to her chest to bury her face in them, they left quietly, wondering how it could feel so wrong to do the right thing. And following the law had to be the right thing.

* * *

Two days had passed since they announced to her that the town was giving her up to the King when she heard the commotion. The window was too high up in the wall to look out. They had provided food, water and had brought some of her clothes to change out of the dirty, torn, bloody ones. She had not exchanged a single word with anyone. Not that they had been eager to converse with her.

Healing her injuries had taken her longer than she had anticipated. Of course she could only take care of the invisible damage inside her, healing the wound on her head completely and thus exposing herself as a magician would make the colour of her hair her smallest problem.

She had desperately tried to come up with some possible use of magic that would free her from her cell, but healing was not exactly an offensive skill. Well - only if one didn't consider the damage it could do to the human body, of course.

But she had no idea whether or how heavy stonework or wooden doors could somehow be removed, turned into air, made to fly away or do whatever else would help her get her out of the cell.

She braced herself when she heard several pairs of feet approach. No show of fear, she reminded herself. She wouldn't give them the satisfaction of seeing her afraid.

The key in the lock turned and shortly after the mayor entered and was followed by two men dressed in what clearly were uniforms of some kind. They exchanged a glance and nodded, obviously confirming to each other that this was definitely the woman they had come for.

Then one of them stepped closer to her, lifting his hands in which, as Eryn noted only now, he was holding a pair of steel manacles. She considered refusing out of pride, knowing fully well that she had no chance of succeeding. But being dragged kicking and screaming was not how she wanted to leave here. She wanted to go away in dignity, showing them that in contrast to their cowardice she knew what courage was. That what they were doing to her was by no means more than she could deal with.

Raising her arms she allowed the man she considered a soldier to shackle and lead her out of the holding cell. In front of the small building a coach was waiting. She had seen several coaches in the past. Wealthy people from further away places in need of medical help tended to arrive in them.

This one was different, though. It had the usual wooden doors but they were on the outside reinforced with metal bars and sporting a large lock. Well, she thought, at least they didn't intend to throw her over the back of a horse like a sack of flour.

Only now did she notice the crowd that had formed around the coach, watching silently from a safe distance. She let her gaze wander over their faces, fighting hard to keep her emotions to herself, presenting to them no more than an expressionless mask. She saw the glass-maker, looking pale with his mouth set in a thin line; the smith with his arms folded, frowning; Krion, with a pretty young woman beside him clinging to his arm, looking serious when instead she would

have expected smugness. Eryn wondered if the woman knew what she was getting herself into with him.

She was led to one of the coach doors and climbed in, before they could use force and escaped the sight of these people that had handed her over just like that, before they could see the tears she could no longer contain.

One of the soldiers or whoever he was got in after her and sat down on the opposite bench to keep watch on her. She didn't care if he saw her tears as long as the townspeople didn't.

Her father wouldn't have been surprised at this, she thought, and felt tears well up again. After all, he had worked hard at preventing it, never taking any unnecessary risks of exposing his magic power. He had been very aware of the downside of human nature.

* * *

Two days of travelling in the dark coach, one of the guards always with her, gave her plenty of time to think of what might await her in the city and let her imagination run wild with unpleasant options such as being locked up for the rest of her life, tortured to obtain whatever knowledge they might suspect her of possessing, or even sent into slavery. Or a nice combination of two options. Every combination would work, except for one and three, which probably excluded each other. An imprisoned slave surely wasn't really useful.

Apart from her mind's exploration of the potential horrors to come, the journey was not exactly an exciting one. The King's red crest tended to keep trouble away so there was no entertainment such as highwaymen or other criminal elements.

They spent the nights at inns, each time in a room with two beds, one for her, the other for one of the soldiers to rest while his colleague stayed awake on a chair to watch her.

The soldiers were not very talkative, which was fine for Eryn as she herself was not in a sociable mood. What was more important to her was that they kept their hands to themselves and never even once touched her in what might have been considered an inappropriate manner. Wasn't discipline a beautiful thing in a soldier, she mused.

Unfortunately, it did not only keep their hands *off* her but also their eyes *on* her at all times. There was no such thing as giving in to the urge for a quick nap to give her an opportunity to try and climb out the window silently.

How immensely inconsiderate of them.

Day three brought them into view of the royal city of Anyueel, capital of the kingdom of Anyueel. Nobody ever referred to the country as anything else than *the kingdom*, though. Probably because there was no need to distinguish between the names of countries when there was no contact with any others. And it would only lead to confusion about whether somebody was referring to the city or the kingdom.

Eryn had never before been there and stared at the grey stone wall that surrounded it. It was larger than she had imagined. She could see a tall building towering over countless roofs. Surely the King's palace, she guessed.

Many dark columns of smoke rose into the air from a great number of chimneys.

She watched the city draw nearer and nearer, and it was not long until the coach stopped in front of a large gate. She heard the soldier on the coachman's seat exchange a few brisk words with the guards on duty before the vehicle was set in motion again.

Eryn tried to take in as much as possible from the little window when they passed the gate. Her heart sank when she saw that there was not only one thick stone wall but another one a few paces inside as well. The outer gate had two heavy looking doors on mighty metal hinges, and the inner one could be blocked by a portcullis that was currently open and had a great number of metal spikes pointing downwards like a dire warning. She imagined what they would do to the bones and tissue of a person or animal caught under them and shuddered. Very probably more than one or even two healers could repair in time.

Then the coach stopped in front of the tall building she had spotted from the coach window before and the vehicle's door was opened.

The soldier sitting opposite her motioned for her to get out first, just as he had done every time in the last two and a half days. She supposed that they were trained not to present their unprotected backs to a prisoner. Which certainly made sense.

Heads turned on the large square in front of the palace when she emerged from the coach and countless eyes were drawn in amazement by her unusual hair colour. She heard whispering from different directions and saw children's fingers pointed at her.

The soldiers were about to lead her into the building, but two men in dark brown robes approached them from across the square with quick steps. Both of them were rather young and one had lifted his arm to stop them.

When they were within earshot, one of them called, "We will take her. She will be questioned by the Order."

The Order wanted to talk to her? That was a surprise, a worrying one. Her father had frequently expressed his views about it in the privacy of their home. They had not been fond ones. A bunch of oafs, he had called them, who rather played around with their magic, fighting each other instead of doing something useful with it.

Her heart had started beating faster. Why would they take her to the magicians? They couldn't possibly know about her powers, could they? Had she revealed anything in her sleep in these last two days? Or when she had been locked up in the town?

The soldiers nodded and followed the men into the palace. Were these two robed men magicians? Was that how they dressed?

The shadows inside the building made it hard for her to make out her surroundings at first. When her eyes had adapted to the change in light she saw that she was in a large entry hall with various columns, each as thick as an old tree and at least as high. Four corridors started between two columns and stretched away.

The robed men turned into the first one on their right and then stopped in front of medium-sized double doors that seemed almost too modest for this place.

The slightly taller one of the men opened both doors and motioned for the soldiers to bring Eryn in. She swallowed and was pushed forward when she didn't move of her own accord.

This was very likely the room she would be questioned in. Looking around she noted with relief that no torture devices were visible at first sight. It was a rather large room with a single chair at its centre and a massive table at one end.

At the table five robed figures of different ages were seated. One of them was completely grey and looked to be in his sixties, the others seemed much younger and between their mid-twenties and late thirties. They were all clad in brown robes that made them look oddly indistinguishable from each other.

They didn't rise when she entered. She reminded herself that the respect that she had enjoyed as a healer for the last one and a half decades was not what she could expect here. In this place she was no more than a stranger suspected of being a spy.

The soldiers escorted her to the chair, pushed her down on it and left without a word. The two magicians that had led them here took up position in front of the door.

She'd had plenty of time on the journey here to consider what to say when the time came. She decided to stay as close to the truth as possible. Surely the mayor had informed them about everything he knew about her. Which was not a lot. There wasn't really a reason for her to lie to them; her story was harmless enough and she knew only little about her own past before they had left their home country. She didn't even know exactly where she was from. The only thing she had to keep hidden was her magic, the rest didn't matter.

If they saw that she cooperated, would they let her leave again? Where would she go if they did? Returning to the town was hardly an option. How could she bear living near them again?

No, she decided, she would return at night to get her things and then never look back. She could settle anywhere else - healers were not exactly in great supply in this country, so it shouldn't be too hard to find a place where her services were valued higher than the colour of her hair.

"What is your name?" the oldest one asked into her thoughts.

"Eryn," she replied obediently.

"Where are you from?"

"I am not sure. I think from the west."

The old man frowned. "How can you not be sure where you come from?"

"Because I was no more than a child when we left."

"We?"

"My father and I. He brought me here."

"Where is he now, your father?"

"He is dead. Has been for twelve years."

"Why did he bring you here?"

"I don't know."

They started muttering amongst themselves. Then one of the other four asked, "So you have no idea where you are from and why your father brought you here? This sounds rather implausible."

Eryn remained silent and just looked at them. Protesting would hardly win her any points.

"Where is your mother?"

"She is dead. Has been since before we left."

This went on and on. They seemed very interested in her father and how it was possible that the townspeople had never seen her brown hair before her accident in the woods. Now the dangerous part started. She needed to diffuse any suspicions about magic.

"My father knew how to mix a powder that made it possible to change the colour of our hair. He just wanted to live in peace and not be troubled," she explained calmly.

"Why had your hair then changed back to its original colour when you were found?" another one enquired.

"Because I was climbing a path up a hill for several hours and it was very hot. My sweat must have removed most of the powder."

She had been prepared for that one and was relieved to see that they seemed to accept her explanation.

"We heard that your father was a healer."

"Yes, he was a very fine healer."

"Apparently he was not merely fine but extraordinary."

"Yes, he told me that he had been trained for many years back home."

"Ah yes, the mysterious home you don't remember." The old man smirked and then continued, "You took up your father's work as a healer after his death."

She nodded. "Yes."

"He trained you, then?"

The hours seemed to stretch. They took turns in asking her questions, sometimes they wanted to hear again what she had answered before and she wondered if they were trying to make her contradict herself.

The afternoon had already started to turn into early evening when the oldest of the robed men rose and stepped towards her. She was exhausted, thirsty, hungry and sick of this whole situation. But she had sat through it and now it looked like this would finally come to an end.

"There is only one thing left," the man said, coming closer. She eyed him nervously. What did he want now?

"What?" she sighed with tiredness.

"Just a little test if you are telling us the truth."

She frowned. "What test?"

"I will ask you some of the questions again. This time I will use a little magic to keep your mouth from saying anything untrue."

Her head started reeling. That did not sound good, not at all. She pulled her arm away when he made to take it, jumped up and backed against the wall.

"No, I don't want this," she shouted. "Stay away from me!"

The man stepped closer, cornering her. "I'm afraid you don't have much choice in the matter, considering why you are here."

He grabbed her arm and gripped it tightly so that she couldn't free herself.

She forced the panic inside her down. Maybe it wouldn't work on her. Would she be able to use any magic of her own to block his? But how? She had never even heard that such a thing was possible, let alone how to counter it.

She felt the trickle of warmth from his palm move up her arm.

"Now, tell me again why your father brought you here," he demanded.

She shook her head, desperately. "I don't know! I really don't. I think he was hiding." That was not good. She had not intended to say that last bit.

"Who from? And why?"

"I don't know!"

"Was your father a spy?" The grip on her arm grew stronger.

"No!"

"Are you a spy?"

"No, I am not!"

If his questions kept following this path there would not be any imminent danger of revealing her secret.

The next one, however, destroyed that illusion quickly.

"Was your father able to use magic?"

She drew in a sharp breath and was about to negate it, when her mouth refused to let out the words. The man's eyes flashed in triumph.

"Aha!"

That was enough! She kicked him in the shin and ripped her arm away from his grip. He cursed under his breath and instructed his colleagues, "Hold her!"

Fresh, hot panic welled up inside her. She breathed hard and retreated slowly into a corner, watching the magicians approaching her steadily. She kicked the first one to come into her reach in the knee and made him jump back hastily with a yelp of pain.

"We should probably stun her. That might be safer," one of them said. "A weak stun should keep her conscious and able to answer our questions."

Moments later something shot towards her and hit her directly in the chest, making her gasp for air.

The magician frowned, shaking his head. "That should have taken her down! She should not be standing anymore!"

"It must have been too weak," another one said and this time she saw how the bolt of energy curved towards her without being able to avoid it. This one hit her in the stomach, nearly doubling her over.

She stared at them uncomprehendingly at such unprovoked readiness to hurt her, hate, fear, desperation erupting from a tight knot inside her. When another one lifted his palm, she raised her arms protectively in front of her and prepared for the next impact, willing herself not to feel the pain it would cause.

When indeed she didn't feel anything, she looked up again and right into seven astonished faces staring at her. Then suddenly half of them raised their hands and unleashed streaks of magic against her, but they were somehow stopped and dispersed in front of her body without hitting her.

She searched frantically for an explanation of this unexpected phenomenon and after a few seconds noticed a faint shimmer in the air right in front of her. She raised her fingertips to touch it and hastily pulled them back again when she felt a slight charge tingle on her skin.

Somehow she had managed to protect herself with magic! And it seemed like they couldn't get through to her.

Now all of them aimed their palms at her, letting loose strikes. Every single one of them was stopped before they could harm her. They tried again and again, but to no avail.

They looked pale, she saw. Afraid? She didn't want to wait around to find out but instead inched slowly towards the door, which two magicians still guarded with panicked expressions.

"Run! Get Lord Enric! NOW!" the old magician's voice boomed urgently.

The two of them were frozen in shock for a moment longer, then took off instantly, leaving the door open behind them. Eryn slipped through it and started to run, aware that the magicians were following her closely.

She turned left where she remembered the entrance had been, slithering along the smooth floor. She had to get out of here quickly before they managed to stop her somehow.

She heard another volley of bolts hit her shield and looked back to the men who quickly ducked into a niche as if afraid that she would return the attack.

Realisation dawned on her. That was exactly why they were hiding – they had no idea she didn't know how to return the attacks! For all they knew she could be shooting back any moment.

She had almost reached the large entrance hall when several more bolts hit the barrier without any sign of disrupting it. She wondered why they didn't stop when it was obvious that it had no effect on her.

Then it suddenly occurred to her that it *had* an effect. They were stalling her. Hadn't they sent for somebody? A lord or some such? And it was working, too: she had slowed down each time they had attacked her.

Determined not to accommodate them any further, she hastily grabbed the heavy iron ring to pull one door wing open when she heard a loud, authoritative voice behind her shout, "Cease your attacks!"

A quick glance over her shoulder revealed the source of the voice. A man in his mid-thirties, tall and slim, clad in blue robes approached her briskly, apparently not fearing an attack like the others.

He radiated confidence, wore it like a second skin. And he looked determined. He stopped between the pillars, raised his palm and without even a moment's hesitation released a strike of energy.

She stared in utter disbelief at his resolutely set face, the lips pressed into a thin line, the frown between his brows, taking in all these meaningless details with impossible clarity, and slowly folded at her knees.

The pain where his bolt had hit her right in the chest was already being dampened by the blackness that had her in its grip even before she hit the floor.

CHAPTER 4

The Testing

The young King watched both of them incredulously, his blue-grey eyes narrowed. "What was that?"

The older of the two robed figures, Lord Tyront, spoke again, "The captive, she has magic abilities."

The King shook his head in disbelief, making the few blond curls that escaped the short ponytail at his neck dance with the movement. "How is this possible? There has not been a gifted woman in more than three hundred years... You are absolutely certain?"

Well, Enric, the younger magician thought laconically, at least the boy knew his history even if his lack of trust in his highest-ranking magicians left a lot to be desired. He still found it hard to look to this man of twenty-five years and see the sovereign of an entire country.

But thinking back, King Folrin had been twenty-two years old when he had taken the throne after his father's death. Exactly as old as he himself had been when he had been elevated to the place at Tyront's right hand.

The King's advisors Marrin and Loft exchanged glances and Loft then enquired, "How strong is she? And how old?"

It cost Enric quite some effort to refrain from rolling his eyes in annoyance. Subtlety had never been one of Loft's character traits. He was obviously already planning to strengthen the royal bloodline with a magically gifted heir to the throne – despite the laws against it and their historic foundation. The idea was doubtlessly to help the future rulers to more independence from the magicians and thus weaken the Order.

Politics, Enric sighed within himself. He was not a great fan of it, but one could hardly survive in his position without paying close attention to it. Tyront was much better at it, but then he'd had two decades' more experience.

"She must be a few years younger than Lord Enric and is unusually strong," Tyront answered. "It's hard to say exactly how strong she is, but she withstood several magicians who tried to stop her."

"How then did you manage to subdue her?" Marrin enquired.

"Lord Enric was able to penetrate her shield and stun her."

The King nodded slowly. "So at least we know that she is not stronger than the two of you. That is a great relief."

"Yes," Enric agreed, "but there are probably not too many of us stronger than her."

"How many of your men did she hold off?" Loft asked.

"Seven," he answered and was secretly delighted at Loft's obvious discomfort. He just didn't like the man.

"When she is so hard to control we should probably kill her if she doesn't cooperate."

Enric forced himself to remain impassive. Ever-so-careful Loft, if something or somebody couldn't be exploited in a way that fit his limited view of the world, then one better got rid of it quickly.

"That might be premature and rather extreme," Tyront retorted with a disapproving frown. "This is the first time in many generations we have encountered a female magician. This is a very rare chance for us, there is so much we can learn."

"Well," Loft conceded airily, "there is always the chance to shackle her in gold to make her cooperate."

"Being shackled in gold will hardly make her cooperate. It will just make her helpless, angry and bitter," Tyront said mildly. Enric envied him his patience.

The King started to show first signs of impatience. "Well, if she is so strong, she might be dangerous to us. Can we find out how strong she really is? Don't you usually test young magicians by setting them against a few older ones to gauge their strength?"

Tyront nodded. "Yes, though we don't let them fight, as fighting skills and experience can still lead to a stronger magician's defeat. The one to be tested raises a shield and magicians then try to break through it. And according to the amount of strength necessary to do that the magician will be classified and then assigned his place in the hierarchy."

Marrin pursed his lips. "This would mean that she might be entitled to a high position among your magicians if she is as strong as you suspect."

"Only if she willingly joined the Order."

"You can hardly consider this seriously! She might be a spy, a criminal!" Loft flourished his hands in wide dramatic gestures.

Tyront's quiet voice gave away nothing of the anger churning inside him. "She has been questioned as to that and has answered truthfully. We used magic to make sure of it. We would be honoured to have her. It has for five hundred years been our duty to protect the kingdom. Pushing strong magicians aside is not how we have accomplished this in the past. Strong magicians mean a strong kingdom."

Marrin silenced his colleague with a piercing look before he could reply and said, "As your Order's first duty is the protection of the kingdom, fighting skills have always been a priority."

Tyront saw where this was heading. "Yes, we would have to train her so she could join us. Though of course there are two major considerations. First, is it wise to train a captive in the art of fighting

and second, will she agree? We did not exactly make a favourable first impression on her, I dare say." Not entirely without reason, he had to admit. People did, after first being interrogated and then struck down, have a tendency to react in a *slightly* irritated manner.

Marrin nodded. "Well, I don't really see how the second point can be much of a problem, as people are queueing to be accepted into the Order rather than trying to avoid it. But for reasons of safety I admit to having objections to training a captive who would in time easily be able to defeat many of the other magicians. Letting her escape is too dangerous already, let alone when she is trained." Then another thought came to his mind. "You said she had a shield up? Does this mean she already has the mastery of combat skills?"

Enric shook his head. "I don't think so. She never once returned the attack. The shield seemed to be more a matter of luck than skill, from what I was told. She was clearly surprised that she could conjure one and even more so that it was tough enough to withstand so many of us."

"She discovered shielding *by accident*?" Marrin was obviously not very happy about that.

Tyront tried to conciliate him, "This is not unusual. When under considerable stress, magicians sometimes instinctively discover certain skills that ensure their survival."

Marrin shot him an annoyed look. "Don't use your placatory voice on me. I am well aware of how rarely this happens. The last time was twenty years ago, when a certain young boy," he nodded at Enric, "had a chance epiphany of how to look through solid stone walls by making them transparent. Though I fail to see how his survival was dependent on that skill at that time," he added dryly.

Enric grinned at Marrin. He remembered it well. They had found him out when he and Kilan had used his newly acquired skill to satisfy their adolescent curiosity about the other sex. Watching through walls at the women bathing had been a marvellous but brief pleasure before they had been caught and disciplined. What he had realised only too late was that if they were in a position to look inside, those in the bath were just as able to spot him and his friend. Still, he hadn't regretted a moment of it.

The day he was tested and named second in command of the Order couldn't have been a very joyful one for Marrin who had always considered him a bad influence on his own son.

Enric remembered seeing him cover his eyes in exasperation when the results were announced twelve years back. But since then they had learned to work together and even respect and rely on each other to a certain degree.

Marrin tried to maintain a serious expression but could not suppress the slight smile and humorous glint in his eyes completely.

The King folded his arms. "Then the next step would obviously be to test her strength. Where is she now?"

"She is still unconscious from Lord Enric's stun, but we expect her to wake within the next three hours. We should be ready to test her by then."

King Folrin nodded. "Good. I want to see this. We will do it in the throne room." He lifted his hand when Loft took a breath to object. "And don't tell me it's too dangerous. I dare say she will not be stronger or faster than all present magicians together, even in the unlikely case she decides to attack me."

* * *

Eryn woke with a light headache. It took her a few seconds to figure out what had happened. She remembered magic flying through the air, towards her. The first strikes hitting her full on and bringing her to her knees, the subsequent ones being unexpectedly deflected by what turned out to be a magical barrier she herself must have raised. Her slow retreat, when she had realised that the confusion and urgency on the robed figures' faces meant that they couldn't stop her. Her relief that she had been able to withstand their attacks and then, all of a sudden, the tall figure in dark blue robes who had entered the hall, targeted her with a stare and barked a command that had the other magicians stop their attack. Then he had unleashed a single pale bolt of force from his palm that had curved towards her and right through her barrier.

Her last memories before collapsing on the cold stone floor were of pain and of the tall man moving towards her with long tense strides while the world around her was beginning to tilt.

They had put her in what appeared to be a cell. The windows were barred and apart from the plank bed she sat on, the only other thing to break the monotony of grey stone around her was a wooden door with a small barred aperture at eye level.

Only then did she look down and saw the golden manacles around her wrists. Golden manacles? Why would anybody chain their captives in gold? It was too soft a metal and, of course, too expensive. Was this meant as a blatant demonstration of wealth?

But maybe there were not solid gold but just covered with a thin layer thereof. Still decadent, but a lot less costly. She tried to scratch away a little with her fingernail to check, but to no avail. Was gold even soft enough for that? She knew that a few metals were.

She examined the shackles and was surprised to find no seam or clasp. How had they got them onto her wrists? Had they forged them on? There were no burning marks or the like on her skin, so if they had, the smith must have learned to do this with immense precision.

A few calming breaths released enough tension for her to focus on the internal damage survey she tended to do whenever she fell or was ill.

But this time there was nothing, complete emptiness. The signals her head sent downwards did not trigger the usual response. She felt

her heartbeat quicken. What had they done to her? Had it even been them or had she lost her magic for some other reason? Was it maybe a shock reaction or some such? And if yes, was the effect reversible? Would her powers return to her or be gone forever?

She forced herself not to give in to the panic that wanted to burst out. First she would try to get somebody to talk to her and ask a few questions. There would very likely be enough time to panic after that. And maybe create panic, as well.

She slowly got up from the bed and carefully approached the door. Just as she was about to raise her fists to bang them against it, the key in the lock was turned from the other side and she jumped back a step when it opened wide. Two men in dark grey uniforms embroidered with the royal crest beckoned for her to step between them.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To a room where you can wash and change your clothes."

That didn't sound too bad, she decided. It would probably not make much sense to ask them why her magic was gone. They either wouldn't know or not be allowed to tell her. So she followed the first guard silently while the second one trailed behind her.

They left the underground prison and entered what had to be the passageways of a palace. They stopped in front of dark wooden double doors and opened one wing for her to enter.

"Come out again when you are finished." With this they all but pushed her inside.

This was something completely different from the cell before. It was a luxurious room for a high-ranking guest with tall shining furniture and a bed that would comfortably provide sleeping space for a family of four. The tall windows let in the dull light of a rainy evening.

On a small round table underneath a broad mirror framed in the same dark wood stood a large bowl filled with steaming water, as well as a piece of soap, clean towels and a hair brush. On the bed lay a dark green linen tunic with brown leggings and a pair of black leather boots stood on the floor next to it.

Further investigation of the room showed another small table with a tray of food on it. She dismissed the chunk of bread, meat and vegetables. Eating was the last thing on her mind.

It seemed they wanted her presentable, so there was a good chance she was meant to meet somebody who could answer her questions.

Looking around to make sure she really was alone, she quickly undressed and started washing. The manacles were an annoying obstacle but she managed to work around and under them. A look into the mirror made her sigh at the dusty ruffled mass of hair that seemed now rather grey than brown. She washed it as well as she could and then dressed in the clean clothes. With nimble fingers she braided the freshly combed hair into a long plait that fell down her back. After a last glance in the mirror she decided she was ready and opened the door.

* * *

The entire room filled with fair haired men of different shapes and ages fell silent when the guards opened the doors to lead her in. She swallowed and looked around. The giant hall had to be three stories high. A quick assessment showed that it had to be the throne room and the young man with the small band of gold around his head standing on the dais surrounded by a group of people seemed to be the throne's current occupant. King Folrin.

Robed figures stood to one side of the hall and kept talking excitedly among themselves. She could read different expressions in what she estimated had to be at least 30 pairs of eyes. Some showed curiosity, others worry, many eyed her suspiciously and a few seemed nervous.

A man with grey streaks in his yellow hair, clad in dark red robes approached her and dismissed her guardians with a nod. Then he turned to her. Pale blue eyes inspected her and he seemed satisfied with what he saw.

"My name is Lord Tyront," he introduced himself. "I preside over the Order of Magicians in this kingdom. We have brought you here to test you."

"What?" Her voice echoed eerily through the large room.

"We will test your magical strength."

Her eyes wandered once more over the assembled figures and an unpleasant suspicion started to rise.

"How?"

He followed her gaze. Her last encounter with magic had been only few hours ago, and it had been far from pleasant, he mullied. She would undoubtedly not be enthusiastic about having it repeated like this. But that couldn't be helped.

"You will form a shield in front of you, just like you did last time. My magicians will try to penetrate it and from the amount of strength that is necessary to break it we will see how much power you have."

"There are a lot of you," she said dryly, hoping that sarcasm would cover the panic that threatened to overwhelm her. "I suppose this time I will take a lot more damage. There is no more power in me."

He smiled. "No, this time we will be more... careful. As for the other..." His hands reached up to her manacles and opened them with a quick stab of energy.

She inhaled deeply as she felt the familiar flow of energy return into her.

"How is this possible?"

"Gold has a naturally balancing effect on magic. This in combination with the right enchantment effectively blocks the magical abilities of the wearer."

She then closed her eyes and did the internal examination that had not worked in the cell. Everything was as it was supposed to be. He could see the relief in her eyes when she opened them again.

"I thought I had lost it."