

Chapter 8: Power

It was sunset by the time Talitha finally allowed Solthia to pull her to her feet and out of the prayer circle. The holy crystal glittered softly in the fading light of the Prime Aspect, which was too weakened by the night of Chaos to be diffused into individual beams of aspected light.

Lorand waved as they passed by arm in arm on the second floor of the clinic; he had spent most of the afternoon examining patients under Drifffin's direct supervision, and would continue doing so well into the evening. As Talitha had expected, the Healer was quick to take Lorand on as an apprentice, given that the clinic was open at all hours and short staffed. Her best friend had eagerly accepted Drifffin's offer of additional shifts in exchange for accelerated instruction in Healing and a small stipend of silver.

She was happy for Lorand—happy that at least one of them would be able to help their families. If he worked hard, he might be able to pay off another of the Coll debts by spring. By next year, she was sure he'd have enough gold to buy the entire Coll farm outright. As Master Lugal often liked to say, Lorand Coll was a once-in-a-generation kind of talent. With this new apprenticeship, he was all but guaranteed to succeed.

So where did that leave her? She had escaped Widdertown, true, but there was no cure for her grandmother. Perhaps she could save up enough coin to send for Grami; she was sure Drifffin would agree to take her in at the clinic.

Emerging from the bustle of purposeful activity in the clinic's triage chamber onto the quiet streets of the Air district was a relief. She had lost track of Delin some time during the day—she had a faint recollection of Drifffin assigning the noble to assist a High talent working in the trauma ward—but a quick scan of the area confirmed he was nowhere close by, so she was finally able to relax and let down most of her shields.

She left the mental shield around her thoughts in place. Solthia still wore the same mask of absolute control as she had in the morning, but she'd slipped up enough for Talitha to pick up on the other aspirant's exhaustion despite her projected aura of unassailable confidence: there was a slight sag in her normally straight posture, a faintly perceptible drag in her strides and the early signs of a burgeoning headache.

There wasn't much Talitha could do about the exhaustion—she had never quite mastered the trick of channeling her own energy into someone else—but headaches were another story: that was the one ailment she could generally banish despite her lack of Healing talent. Since Solthia still held onto her left arm, Talitha reached over with her right hand and lightly brushed two fingers against the noble's temple. The effect was immediate and small but noticeable.

"Thanks," Solthia said. "You didn't have to."

"Sure I did," she said. "It's the only useful thing I've done all day."

Lanterns lit up the path ahead of them as it wound its way slowly uphill towards the Fire gate. Talitha thought of the crush of people that waited on the other side—full of men who had barely washed off their sweat from the fields or docks before making their way to the nearest tavern for food, brew and company. Drunkards with grasping hands that were quick to pull at her skirts, slide around her waist or squeeze and pinch uninvited, then strike with angry fists when she inevitably refused to permit their invasion.

It was a familiar battlefield that she faced every day and—lately—frequently sought over and over again at night. Despite the ever present patrols of guardsmen and her aspirant's uniform—either of which should have been enough to dissuade unwanted attention in and of themselves—Talitha always drew leers, no matter the hour.

So when she did get the kind of attention that she liked, why fight it? The bunk inside a captain's cabin was cramped, true, but it was more comfortable than the hammock she'd been assigned as a passenger. And if Gerdol had offered to keep her company when they were both feeling lonely over Midwinter, what was wrong with that? She had taken her closum years ago at the very first sign of her monthly bleeding, and she chose her partners with care. Who would care what one aspirant did or did not do while she was living in the big city of Gan Garee?

Besides, normal rules didn't apply to Highs and Talitha was a High—the world just didn't know about it yet.

Yes, she was mad at Lorand for being judgemental, but if she was honest with herself, he had a right to be worried. There was a part of her that agreed with the things Lorand had thought but not said aloud—the part that had internalized the insults that the likes of Mollit and Suso had thrown around back in Widdertown.

You're the problem, it whispered. That's why they look at you that way. You can try and hide behind whatever clothes you like, but it won't matter. They know you for what you truly are.

But she couldn't help seeking out the elegant residence tucked away at the end of Seeleem Street, Wishfon White—close to the public garden and the concert hall. She loved to linger, secure within her hidden perch high up in the trees across the street, and watch the people who came and went at all hours—especially after dark. At night, the small mansion—her Earth senses had counted over twenty rooms on top of living areas and servants' quarters—glowed with the warmth of candles, music and laughter from its otherworldly inhabitants: silk-clad apparitions who held their visitors in thrall with mystical powers that were altogether different to talent.

Over that luxurious, gilded, heavenly realm of worldly pleasures reigned Jovvi Hafford, the Highest of them all.

And she had invited Talitha to join them.

Even now, as Solthia tugged her through the crowded streets of the Fire district, she felt herself being drawn towards the residence.

Did they really need to go back to the Guild House now?

Her stomach growled in protest. She ignored it. Maybe she could go up to the door and knock. Jovvi had said that she would be welcomed at any hour—and dinner time was certainly an hour.

The thought was so tempting that her feet had actually started towards Wishfon White before she was conscious of it.

“Where are you going?” Solthia asked. “The Spirit gate is back that way.”

“Sorry,” she said. *Almost forgot she was there.* “It’s just... the city is so beautiful. I want to wander around for a little longer. You can go back first, if you want. Don’t feel like you have to wait for me or anything; I know you’re tired.”

The other woman—girl, really, since she hadn’t yet reached her majority—regarded Talitha quietly with eyes the color of new spring grass; eyes that were far too perceptive for her fourteen years. If Talitha hadn’t been an Earth magic talent, she would have assumed Solthia was sixteen as well—the noble certainly had the height, graceful bearing and poised maturity expected of a woman. Next to her classmate, Talitha felt like an overgrown filly: leggy, flighty and prone to tripping over her own feet.

“It is a rather long walk back, isn’t it?” Solthia asked. “Wonderful and varied as the Guild House’s buffet selection might be, I’m so hungry that I’d rather not wait. There’s a lovely little

dining parlor around the corner—let’s eat there instead.” She held up a hand to forestall any protest. “My treat. For getting rid of that awful headache.”

Talitha smiled. “How could anyone say no to that?”

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Ginge, the proprietor of *The Plump Pheasant*, looked like he might have been the dining parlor’s namesake: the moment Solthia entered, the stout man dropped everything to waddle over and greet her immediately.

“Heiress Noll! Welcome, welcome! It’s been far too long since we’ve seen you. Please, come this way, this way!”

He led them through a hallway carpeted in a lush deep red and up a narrow set of twisting stairs that he navigated with the ease of practice, though Talitha was sure he would get stuck at three different points. The stairs opened onto a private balcony that overlooked the first floor at the top with a small round table set for two with fine crystal glasses and silverware.

“Now, what would please the Heiress and her companion this evening?” their host asked as he pulled Solthia’s chair out for her. “We have fresh caught lake trout as well as redfish from the oceans by Port Entril. The house special?”

“My friend is new to Gan Garee,” Solthia said with a nod at Talitha. “I think a sample of everything on your menu would be delightful.”

“Of course, of course!” Ginge bobbed his head, and his three chins wagged with the same excitement. “Might I also suggest some matched wines? Our cellar has recently been stocked with some very fine Denigan vintages...”

After a long and bewildering exchange that involved Ginge extolling the virtues of what seemed to be an exhaustive list of wines—Talitha hadn’t known there was more than one

type—Solthia selected two of them along with a third he hadn't mentioned. The host promised both food and wine would be quick to arrive and then retreated down the stairs with another round of respectful head bobs after Solthia requested privacy.

Personal service from the owner? A private dining balcony? Everything on the menu? Matched wines? Chaos, how expensive *was* this place? Talitha craned her neck over the railing and pretended interest in the dining room below. No written menu with clearly advertised prices anywhere though she spotted the source of the delicate music: it came from a large triangular frame of polished spruce that stood in one corner, its strings being plucked by invisible hands.

"Out with it," she said. "What do you want from me, Solthia?"

The other aspirant looked surprised. "I just thought it would be nice for us to spend some time together. That's all."

She glowed a faint purple but had no shield and wasn't projecting any thoughts or emotions. No change in the rhythm of her breathing or the tempo of her heartbeat. Not even the slightest change in the sweat glands on her palms.

Everything her Earth senses could detect said that Solthia was telling the truth.

And that made Talitha even more suspicious.

"At a place like this?" She waved around at the intricately patterned rugs and masterwork paintings in golden frames on the walls lit by the wall lanterns and the scattered brilliance from the crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. "I'd bet everything I *don't* own that tonight's meal costs more than my father's farm makes in a year."

"I—" Solthia reddened slightly. "This is my favorite dining parlor. It's respectable enough that my parents wouldn't complain if they heard about my visits but not so popular that

I'll risk running into people from court. And on the off chance that one of them might happen to come here, Ginge always saves this balcony for me so they can't find me."

That was too convenient a story to be true.

"You're lying," she said. "Why?"

Noble heiresses didn't just befriend farm girls from the back of nowhere. Technically as fellow aspirants they were of equal rank, but Talitha had *seen* how the other noble aspirants acted, particularly Delin. And she'd never forgotten the instructions that she'd overheard Solthia's mother giving three months ago.

So she'd accepted the baited offer of friendship—it would have been foolish to turn down Solthia's overtures and to be honest, it was a nice change from being hated by every other woman—but the whole time, Talitha had been waiting for the hook.

It had come sooner than she expected, though the fact it *had* come was no surprise. She didn't mind, really. Being propositioned was nothing new.

"I thought we were friends." Solthia said.

"Don't see how that's relevant."

"I'm *not* lying. You scanned me, you know I'm not."

"You are. You're lying with the truth."

Solthia was silent, so Talitha waited.

Everybody in Widdertown—except for her family and Lorand—had always wanted *something*: her talent, her body or for her to stay away from someone or somewhere. And things didn't tend to go so well when she preempted people; they didn't like it. They resented her when she showed that she knew their motives. They preferred it when she pretended she didn't know what it was that they wanted from her. It made them feel like they were powerful and in control.

That was the lie they liked to tell themselves. Talitha knew better.

When someone wanted something from her, their very desire made *her* powerful. *She* became the one who was in control. Became like the Fates, able to grant or deny their wish at her whim.

As she waited, the first course—along with the accompanying wine—arrived and settled in front of them by itself: Ginge had taken Solthia’s request for privacy very seriously. She kept her eyes on the noble as she picked at the delicate assembly of foliage on her plate; it was drizzled with a colorful sauce that was sweet but had a tart aftertaste. She tried some of the wine—it was the same shade as Solthia’s hair and had a light, fruity flavor—and it left her tongue feeling parched.

Eventually, Solthia spoke. “I was hoping you could help me.”

Which of the three will it be? Talitha wondered. Her talent, her body, or something else?

“Normally I would ask my mother for this kind of help but I... I can’t.” she said. “Not for this. So I thought maybe I could ask you for some advice as a friend instead.”

That was unexpected. Talitha frowned. “What could I possibly help with that a noble Adept in Spirit magic couldn’t?”

“I have no doubt that she could,” Solthia grimaced. “I just can’t ask her. I think it would hurt her if I did. Already, too many people are dredging up old rumors—it’s undermining my father’s position and I can’t help but think it’s deliberate.

“My mother and father were in the same intake of aspirants. They fell in love and got engaged very quickly. But he was supposed to marry someone else—someone from another noble house. People said that he should have done as he promised and kept my mother as his commonborn mistress. It’s what other nobles do.

“My mother refused though. She was strong—strong enough to think that she could win in the competitions. If she won, she’d be the Seated High in Spirit magic, and nobody would think their match disadvantageous.”

“But she didn’t.” Talitha said. She tried some more of the wine. It still had that faint trace of bitterness. Maybe it was an acquired taste.

Solthia shook her head. “She came close. Close enough that Father married her anyway, saying that her strength and skill ought to be enough proof of how worthy she was for anybody. Except it wasn’t. People started saying that she... that she was misusing her talent on my father. That he didn’t really love her, she just made him think he did, so she could marry into nobility. Not just any nobility, but high nobility. By then, my uncle had already been made a High Lord.”

Talitha nodded. That made sense to her; it was what everyone feared most about Spirit magic users. All of the talents could be dangerous in one way or another, but Spirit magic somehow seemed worse. You could be threatened into doing something with one of the normal elemental talents but at least it would be your choice to give in; Spirit magic could take that choice away completely. And they didn’t even need to resort to that extreme in most cases—a Spirit magic user could just read your mind and find other ways to manipulate you into doing something instead, or they could influence your emotions directly so you *wanted* to do whatever it was that they wanted you to do.

What a *wonderful* talent! What would her childhood have been like, if she could have made Widdertownfolk see past her Astindan looks? What would it be like, to be able to just... turn off someone’s interest in her, like blowing out a candle in a dark room? If she didn’t need to resort to violence to make men respect her when she refused them?

If she could tell them *no* and they would be forced to leave her alone?

Talitha would give anything to have that ability.

“They put her on trial and everything,” Solthia said. “Gathered witnesses who were willing to give testimony under Puredan. Barred my uncle, my father and the Seated High herself from the trial, saying that they couldn’t be relied upon to give impartial testimony due to their relationship to her.

“In the end, she was acquitted by a full panel of five judges but I guess it didn’t matter. The rumors are back.”

“I’m sorry,” Talitha said, and she was. What Solthia had described was like Widdertown bullying but on another scale altogether. “But I don’t see how I can help with that.”

“Oh no, not that. Nobody can help with that,” Solthia said. “But if our family becomes powerful enough, the rumors will go away. They would have to. What do you know of the Advisory Board?”

“Only what they teach in the Guild schools.” Talitha shrugged, as invisible servants delivered the second course, along with a new glass of wine. This one reminded her of flowers for some reason. “The Advisory Board runs the Empire on behalf of the Seated Blending. There’s five Advisors—one for each aspect—and they have jurisdiction over established laws that relate to their area of delegated authority. Your uncle, for example, is the Advisor in charge of the Empire’s intelligence, law enforcement and diplomacy efforts, which are mostly carried out by Middles and Highs in Spirit magic.”

Solthia nodded. “And what of how they’re chosen?”

“It’s a hereditary appointment for life, isn’t it?” Talitha asked.

“Not exactly.” Solthia said. “Under the law, Advisors select and train their own successors though the Seated Blending must confirm the appointment of an Advisor. Anyone of

at least Middle strength in their aspect could be chosen. Though most do choose their own heirs, if they are suitable.”

Suddenly, things clicked into place.

“You want my help to seduce Delin.”

“Yes,” Solthia said. “Even though he’s in disgrace with his father, it’s unlikely that will last. High Lord Advisor Moord has trained Delin from childhood to succeed him and his other children are dead. If another succeeded him, it’s unlikely for Duchy Moord to be counted amongst the high nobility after his death, and he is a proud man.”

Against her better instincts, Talitha blurted out the question. “Did you truly mean it, when you said that we were friends?”

“Of course I do.” Solthia looked hurt. “You really don’t believe me?”

“Noble heiresses don’t befriend farm girls from Widdertown,” Talitha said. “I’ve never met somebody who was nice to me and didn’t want a thing from me in return. Except Lor,” she added. “But he’s like family.”

“You and Lorand are the only true friends I have,” Solthia whispered. “Everybody else looks at me and all they see is Heiress Noll, the niece of High Lord Advisor Noll, daughter of his chief secretary and Adept Noll. I’m not even a person to them; I’m just a means to an end. You could put a straw dummy in my gowns and they would act no differently. Everything they do or say, it’s because they hope I’ll mention it to my father, or my mother, or my uncle.”

The conversation lapsed as the third course arrived and they ate it while listening to the ethereal music of plucked strings.

“Nothing that I’ve tried has worked,” Solthia said. She kept her eyes on her fork, turning it over and over in her fingers. “I can’t get him to show any interest in me. But I’ve seen the way he looks at you. He’s always looking at you.”

“You have Spirit magic,” Talitha said. “Why can’t you just yank on his emotions? That’s frowned upon, but not illegal. It would be like using face paints or clothing to enhance your appeal if you did it subtly.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Spirit magic is like Earth magic; I have to be in close range to affect someone’s emotions, all the time.”

“You’re in the same intake and your room is next to his,” Talitha pointed out. “I don’t see the problem.”

“Well, yes, I could generate a field of desire around me so that’s all he ever feels when he looks at me. But I have to be awake to do that, it takes a lot of control to target and shape the field tightly so it only affects Delin in that specific way and for that kind of field he has to actually look at me for it to work. Which he doesn’t do very often.” Solthia sighed. “And that’s assuming he’s not shielding. If he is, then I have to use enough strength to get past the shield as well—and he would know.”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Talitha stabbed a piece of fish as she thought. All of the courses so far had been good, but this fourth one was divine—she had had no idea that it was possible for raw fish to taste so good. “I can see why you might think it would be easier to ask me what I’m doing instead.

“But here’s the problem.” Talitha dropped her fork and looked at the other woman. “I’m not *doing* anything, Solthia. I never have. Men—all men, but especially men like Delin—they

always look at me like that. They don't see me either," she added, looking down at her empty plate. "Just my body."

Solthia gazed at her, looking a little stunned.

Talitha looked back at the other aspirant wistfully. "I wish I had your talent," she confessed. "If I did, I would make them stop looking at me."

"Thank you," Solthia said softly. "For listening. And for being honest."

Talitha shifted uncomfortably on her chair. "I should tell you that I knew because we overheard what your mother said on the first night."

"Oh, I know," Solthia smiled as she reached for her dessert.

"What? How?"

"Lorand," she said. "He has the worst case of guilty conscience ever, he kept thinking about it the whole first week."

"Is this related to whatever is going on between him and Delin? And no, I'm not going to ask you to tell me what it is, *again*." She sighed. "I tried asking him last night and he ran away in a panic."

Solthia didn't blink, but she looked like she was trying a little too hard to pretend ignorance.

"Oh come on," Talitha scowled. "This is an unfair advantage."

"Not everyone is as skilled with shields as you are." The other aspirant shrugged, then chose her next words carefully. "It's not that he doesn't want to talk to you about it. He's just confused and he needs some time to sort out his feelings."

Feelings.

“That’s it!” Talitha snapped her fingers. “What do you sense from Delin, when he looks at me?”

“Not much as you might think I would,” Solthia said. “He grew up in the capital, so he generally stays shielded. All I get is an overwhelming sense of desire. Not just carnal lust; but something more complex. An urge to prove something, to know something; a need for victory. But you didn’t need me to tell you that.”

Talitha nodded, her thoughts racing. “What about when he looks at Lorand?”

“Same thing.”

“And when he does look at you?”

“When he does look at me, he doesn’t shield at all.” Solthia shuddered. “He... he deliberately projects fantasies at me. Graphic ones; so vivid that he has to have imagined them hundreds or thousands of times.”

“Or lived it,” Talitha said quietly. “With other girls.”

“Sometimes he tries to... add to them, with Earth magic. Make me actually feel every sensation that he imagines me feeling in those fantasies.”

“Chaos,” Talitha shivered. “And your family still wants you to marry him?”

“I know it seems bad.” Solthia winced. “But noble marriage contracts have protective clauses in them.”

“A contract isn’t going to save you from Delin’s attentions on the wedding night.”

“True,” Solthia conceded. “But if he breaks the Five’s fundamental laws around uncoerced consent, then I have the right of self-defense.”

“You have to be conscious to defend yourself.”

“Spirit magic gives me a little more control over that.”

“You don’t know that,” Talitha said. “And this time, you really are lying.”

“I... yes.”

“And just then, when you were describing what he thinks about doing to you...” Talitha trailed off. “You looked like you were going to be sick. With your talent... I’m not sure he needs to actually touch you. Just knowing—experiencing—what he’s thinking might have the same effect as the real thing.”

“...I know.”

“Fates!” Talitha swore. “Are you sure you really want to do this?”

The question hung in the air as the remains of their desserts were cleared away and the wine bottle helpfully refilled her empty glass when she wiggled it.

“No,” Solthia said at last. “But whatever happens, a union between Duchy Noll and Duchy Moord will only help my family. So I have to try.” She gulped down the rest of the wine in her glass and motioned for a refill as well.

“Alright,” Talitha said reluctantly. She cupped her wine glass with both hands, thinking it through. “Delin is a man who has to be in control. He’s spent three years at the university in Regisard, dissecting things in experiments, trying to uncover things we don’t understand about power and talent. In his world, everything can be simplified into models of cause and effect.”

“How am I supposed to use that?”

“Give me a minute, I’m getting there,” Talitha said, sipping her sixth glass of wine. She liked this one—sweet but powerful—it burned her throat on the way down. “Why did he leave the university?”

“Officially, it’s because he finished his studies.” Solthia said. “Unofficially, he was—”

“What?”

“I shouldn’t tell you,” Solthia said. “It’s not that I don’t trust you. It’s just that it will only get you into trouble if anyone finds out that you know.”

“Doesn’t matter. I know him; I can guess. He was expelled, wasn’t he?” Talitha drummed her fingers on the table. “For suspected misuse of talent or something similar. Hurt—or killed—somebody. Or some *bodies*. But not anybody important enough to stop his father from calling in favors to keep his Guild record clean.”

The other aspirant inclined her head by an infinitesimal fraction.

Talitha nodded once in satisfaction. “That makes sense.”

“I don’t see how,” Solthia said, her brow furrowed.

“You and Lorand look at people, and wonder how you can help them. True Healers, the pair of you. I saw it this morning at the clinic,” she said, saluting Solthia with her glass. “I should have thanked you earlier. I didn’t because I thought you only did it because you wanted something from me.”

“Well you were right,” Solthia admitted.

“Guess I was, but not in the way I thought.” Talitha took another fiery sip. “So thank you. For being my friend.”

That brought a wide smile to the other woman’s face.

“Now Delin,” Talitha continued, her tone serious. “He looks at people, and he wants to know what makes them break. He likes to find out how far he can push them before they fall off the edge. And the further he can go, the more excited he gets.” She paused, letting that sink in.

“That’s why he spent the day in the trauma ward,” Solthia said slowly, then she looked up. “That’s why he keeps staring at you and beating up Lorand.”

“Yes.” Talitha said. “You’ve been trying to shape yourself into what he wants, but that’s going about it the wrong way. Be someone who doesn’t want him, so he can revel in the process of *breaking you* until you do.”

“Chaos,” Solthia whispered. “You’re right. But that won’t be enough, will it?”

“Not if you’re aiming to get a permanent alliance out of this. To do that, you’ll need to convince him that the only thing that could destroy you, is marriage to him. Those clauses in the marriage contract that your family is counting on to protect you?” Talitha shook her head. “He won’t agree to the marriage if those are in there. The only way he’ll go through with it, is if he can be absolutely assured that you’ll be completely in his power. And that—” Talitha said as she downed the rest of her glass, the wine settling as a comfortable warmth in her stomach “—is when you’ll have complete power over him.”

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An hour later, Talitha stood in front of the residence at the end of Seeleem Street, Wishfon White. Solthia had walked her there and squeezed her hand for luck, then returned to the Guild House with promises to reassure Lorand’s worries if he asked after her whereabouts.

While the lanterns at the front of the mansion were still lit, the hour was late enough that light no longer shone from behind the velvet curtains that veiled the windows on the ground floor, though candle light still glowed faintly around the edges of the curtains shading the windows on the upper floors.

Talitha strode up the fine gravel path to the front door and—fuelled by the warm courage in her stomach—grasped the heavy gold door knocker in one hand. It was an intricately carved pouting mermaid whose bare torso was covered by her long flowing hair. The raps that sounded as Talitha tapped the mermaid’s tail against the door were as loud as thunder.

Jovvi Hafford herself answered the door with a devastatingly warm smile. She wore a beautiful gown of lilac silk tonight, in a simple but daring cut that left her arms and shoulders bare. A shimmering shawl—made of such a gauzy fabric that it was translucent—floated around her statuesque form.

“Why, hello there,” she said, in her low, throaty murmur. “How good to see you again, dear.”

Affecting a boldness that she didn’t quite feel, Talitha took a deep breath and asked. “Could I come in?”

“That depends on why you’re here.” The older woman looked at her with consideration. “What is it that you want?”

“You said to seek you out if I was tired of being an aspirant and that I would be welcome here at any hour.” Talitha’s words rushed from her mouth, in a single breath. “That you were an independent woman, running a very successful business. Could you... would you take me? And teach me how to be like you?”

Teach me how to embrace and wield this power that I have. And to be proud, rather than ashamed, of it.

“I certainly can,” Jovvi said, as she moved to one side of the doorway and held out her hand.

Talitha took it, and—feeling the silky smoothness of Jovvi’s perfectly manicured hand against her own callused fingers—stepped into another world.