

<== Serena

West of Derth, nestled between the mountains and the foothills, just south of the ancient maze built by a mad king, there is a door frame. Once, there was nothing to mark the spot, but the tenuous ceasefire between the people of Angolwen and Zigur has led to this once secret location being one of the worst-guarded secrets in all of Eyal - perhaps except Gabrielle's.

With the right spell, walking through the door would take you from this empty spot to a plaza in the centre of Angolwen, the centre of magic in Maj'Eyal. Neatly paved pathways, geometric gardens, and fountains that defy the laws of fluid dynamics - nowhere else on the continent was magic as overt and embraced as it was here.

Almost every mage lived here, learning and researching under the eyes of their superiors, who lived under the constant fear that one of their charges would begin the next Spellblaze. Ultimately, they answered to the Archmage Linaniil, a human who had somehow persisted for over two millennia. Many believed she survived purely through force of will, although rumours of dark secrets refused to fade.

The city had four quarters, four being a number of quite some significance. Technically, each quarter was divided into three, but the city really wasn't large enough for twelve sections. Besides. 'Twelfths' just didn't roll off the tongue the same way as quarters.

The teaching quarter usually held a half-dozen classes at any given time, but there were only two on this cloudy day. One was a guest lecture from a tempest - the tempest, in fact - while the other was run by an old geomancer named Durton, who had taught stone magic for the last seventy years on this day, and would be damned before he'd change it for some twenty-year old lightning mage.

His class was fairly small this day, containing only the fourteen students with as little respect for storm magic as Durton himself. The rest of the learning population of Angolwen, as well as a decent proportion of those who had theoretically finished, were watching a young woman named Kirsten. She wore robes of sky blue, her hair being a deeper, azure shade, and carried a simple staff that resembled just a carefully carved stick.

"And that's why we know that lightning magic is dangerous." she was saying, her quiet voice carrying well over an attentive audience of several hundred. "More lightning mages have lost control of their senses than those of any other discipline - not counting necromancy, I guess, since none of them had senses to begin with. Even blight magic seems to have less of an effect on those that use it, maybe because people know better than to trust something referred to as blight and corruption. But lightning is thought and action as one, an upwelling of energy. It's easy to get dragged along by the moment, and then realise what you've done when it's too late."

Her tone had become very formal, and there was a general feeling of an unasked question. Everyone there wanted her to talk about it, but none were willing to ask. In the fourth row, two women, one with brown and one violet hair, exchanged worried glances.

“...so. Perhaps that’s why lightning is fairly easy to wield. If you use shapes, it tends to be straight lines, or jagged lightning strikes. If you use emotion, it’s generally based on excitement. Colour manifestations range from purple to yellow, and I know one adventurer with green lightning, although there’s a reason for that. Lightning lacks inhibitions and wants to be used, but... well, as cliché as it sounds, be careful it doesn’t use you.” she says, with a helpless shrug at the overused phrase. “Now... for the part most of you actually care about... Miss Brasla has offered the services of her Crystals, for the purposes of a demonstration.” as Kirsten named her, a short, stocky elf with silver hair waved cheerfully from the side of the arena. The atmosphere rose, even though the question hadn’t been asked - and, now the moment was over, probably wouldn’t be asked. After all, a notable portion of those there having attended mostly for the prospect of seeing a fully realised mage in action.

Kirsten picked up her staff, rising to her full height as the short woman pulled out a glowing piece of crystal. Rather than standing herself, she just raised the crystal, and a dozen strange creatures burst into reality around the arena. Each one was a strange quadrupedal thing, hunched over, and made entirely of translucent, coloured crystal.

With a deep breath, an aura of electricity began to surround the tempest fizzing and sparking, until a jolt of power leapt from her to the nearest of the crystals, an unfortunate crimson specimen that exploded in a burst of energy, the fragments melting into mana.

It was like a signal. Kirsten snapped her staff forward, a bolt of lightning leaping to a red crystal, interrupting the blast of flame it was beginning to form. Moments later, a blast of acid flew for her, thrown by a black crystal. She moved sideways, not jumping so much as floating, buoyed by the wind, before she retaliated with a sphere of lightning. Before it landed, she turned, raising her staff to block a bolt of darkness, the black crystal shattering behind her. A second fireball flew for her, and she phased away, teleporting into the midst of a trio of the crystals, a burst of static shattering two, the third being struck by a jolt from the vicious aura about her.

She was smiling now, a peaceful smile as she raised the staff, a single blast of lightning striking one crystal, then arcing to three more of the unfortunate creatures.

Taking a deep breath, she was interrupted. With a burst of power, a pale blue crystal appeared next to her, and a wave of water exploded from it, throwing her to the ground. A jolt from her aura stunned the creature, sparks wriggling about it, shocking it over and over. As she jumped back to her feet, it finally succumbed, exploding with a burst of energy.

A darker blue crystal vanished from its spot on a low roof, reappearing nearer to the tempest and throwing a sphere of lightning for her. She pointed one hand at it - and as she did, excess power finally forced itself into the shape of wings upon her back, the aura of power growing

stronger and thicker. From her finger issued a bolt of lightning that tore right through the sphere, dissipating it on the way to the unfortunate crystal.

She turned, seeing a pale green crystal, and smiled, before looking to the audience.
“Anyone want it?” she called.

There was a pause, and a bolt of lightning came through the aisles, blue power tinged with darkness, striking the crystal and detonating it with a burst of power. Kirsten looked down the aisle, and blinked. Then she gave a slight bow.

“I’m honoured, Inquisitor. Do we know your guest?”

“Not yet.” said Gabrielle, hand moving protectively to Kilia’s shoulder, as the shadow-girl lowered a hand that still sparked with static.

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“So... you wanted to speak with me?” the tempest asked, when the crowds had largely left. The three of them had retired to a smaller room indoors. Gabrielle nodded.

“I’m afraid so. I wanted to ask you about Natasha.”

Kirsten’s eyes flickered. Then she sighed.

“...was it her?”

“Was what her?”

“Who killed Myssil. There are rumours flying around that it was everyone from her to Linaniil to you, but...”

“...yes. And I’m sorry.” the Inquisitor seemed uncomfortable. “She helped tutor you, didn’t she? It can’t be easy to have this happen again.”

Kilia saw the Tempest’s tiny flinch at the word ‘again’, and wondered what she didn’t know.

Gabrielle clearly noticed it too. “...she’s been on my watch list for some time.”

“I’m not surprised.” Kirsten murmured. “She was always... she always said the ziguranth were a problem.”

“It’s not a recent development then... she favours arcane spells, but do you know what else she can do?”

“Um. Well, she has some basic competence with fire and lightning, if I remember right. But she doesn’t use them if she doesn’t have to.”

Kilia wondered why Gabrielle had bought her here, although she certainly didn’t object. She’d been trying to get around to visiting the city of magic for years, and it was as beautiful as she could have imagined - certainly a contrast to the long term encampment of the rhaloren. But since the inquisitor had saved her in Zigur, she hadn’t left the older mage’s sight.

“That’s what I assumed.” Gabrielle sighed. “As far as I’m concerned, she’s crossed a line. I’m going to recommend that she not be allowed back here, unless it’s in chains.”

“I’m not surprised.” Kirsten said, quietly. “Well. I suppose I’m surprised it took so long. Is there

anything else I can tell you?"

"I don't think so. I'll be around for the next day or so, I need to make preparations. I'd like to take Kilia to meet Linaniil, for a start."

Kilia blinked. Linaniil? *The* archmage?

"Oh." said Kirsten, eyes flickering to the girl and then back. "Is she... she seems young, I mean..."

And Kilia was very confused to see the faintest of blushes on the Inquisitor's face.

"No! No, no. I just felt that... well. I haven't asked her yet, but... I thought she might be my apprentice. She has an understanding of every discipline under the sun, from what I've seen. I wouldn't be surprised if she managed mind magic before any of our researchers do it."

It was Kilia's turn to blush, although she wasn't sure why shadows were still capable of flushing red. A cruel twist of fate, clearly.

"Oh! Sorry. I... I just wondered." the tempest said, hastily. Gabrielle nodded, as if to brush it away, and stood, turning to Kilia.

"So... I should have asked you before talking about you. Would you consent to being my assistant? I think you could be excellent at it, and since Zigur has already given you safe passage, you'll be able to accompany me safely."

"Your... assistant? You want a..." Kilia's voice faltered, not knowing what she was. "...a rhaloren?"

What she had been was bad enough as it was.

"It doesn't matter who an inquisitor is. Just that they are there and that they see to the borders of reason."

Kilia nodded slowly.

"...I would be honoured."

==> Brasla