

KYPER

By Quinn J. McCauley

—Chapter 1—

Smoke

The streets of Ferro were dusty, loud, filled with the sounds of shouting and pans clattering. The heat made Serin's cloak damp with sweat turning it from dark blue to grey as sand and dust clung to it. It would have been intolerable if not for the smells in the air. In Ferro it seemed every other building was a restaurant or cafe and there was a food cart on every corner, sometimes multiple arguing loudly over territory. Where there wasn't the smell of food there was the smell of incense and hashish, so thick that you could almost cut it. The two had been trudging through the busy streets for what felt like hours, but Serin knew it had probably been less than one.

"Okay, this is the place"

An unremarkable building by the looks of it, a small beige house crammed into what looked like an endless row of similarly beige structures. The two stepped through an already open door and into a dimly lit musty room, in the back behind a cracked and worn table sat an old man smoking a pipe. Johan greeted the man sitting at the table and Serin did the same instinctually. They took seats across from the man.

"To what do I owe the pleasure? Two mages come just to talk to me! I must be pretty important." the old man said with a snide grin.

"As important as any other suspect," barked Johan, his weathered face wrinkling in disgust. Suddenly the open door slammed shut and a gust of air moved through the room. The old man's smile faded as he adjusted his posture.

"Look I'm no fan of mages but I've never done anything to offend you so what do you want?" He said dismissively.

"Tell us why you took your boat to Scroll last night."

"I didn't take my boat anywhere last night." The old man scoffed.

Johan slammed his fists, shot up and grabbed the old man's throat knocking the table onto its edge in the process. "TELL US NOW!" Serin jumped out of his chair startled by the sudden aggression.

"ALRIGHT ALRIGHT I HAD A PASSANGER—" The old man began to choke for air. Johan released his grip causing him to slump back into his seat. Serin hadn't even noticed Johan raise him up.

"A passenger.. a young woman.. she wanted transport to scroll, she paid well.. better than most." The old man said while rubbing his throat.

"Did she say why? Why did she want to go to scroll!"

"I DON'T KNOW. I swear." The man whimpered.

Johan pinched his brow in frustration and let out a sigh, sitting back down. "Do you at least remember what she looked like?"

“Yes I do..”

Johan let out another sigh and turned to Serin “Write down what he tells you, I’ll be outside.”

Johan put his hands on his knees, got up from his chair and walked out of the house, suddenly looking exhausted. Serin recorded the old man’s recollection of the events, apologized for his partner, then opened the door to leave. Johan was sitting outside on the dirt back against the building. Turning his head and seeing Serin he rose to his feet with a grunt. “You recorded his account?”

“Yes”

“Alright, let’s get back to the boat.” The two walked back down the hill following the dusty cobblestone road as they made their way to the dock. Serin noticed a group of home guards walking uphill on the same road and felt thankful he was no longer fighting gravity. They boarded the small wooden schooner and hastily set off.

As they moved further out Serin looked off the side of the boat, the city’s uniform skyline faded into the horizon. Johan paced up and down the creaking deck with a furrowed brow, the breeze made his long brown and grey hair go in every direction in spite of his pony tail. Serin wondered what had Johan so worked up. What had everyone so worked up? The island had been buzzing since the theft. What was usually a sleepy place full of academics and bureaucrats had become a humdrum of meetings, shouting, pacing, and more meetings. Whatever was stolen must have been very important. Serin’s sun burnt face stung from every blast of wind and salt, he was exhausted and ready to get home.

As they neared the island Serin was taken aback, it happened every time he returned but he couldn’t help but be transfixed by the sheer basalt cliffs jutting out from the choppy sea. Each rock face was interlaced with old stone brick buildings and ancient monolithic structures carved directly into the cliff sides. At the top of the mountain sat the great hall, a massive black building whose three towers seemed to watch over the island. The town at the base of the mountain sat just inside a belt of formidable grey walls. As the ship came to dock Serin disembarked and headed away from the bulkhead, through the gates, passed the square, and to his apartment all the while racking his mind.. What did they steal?

The next day Serin followed his typical routine, breakfast, lectures, lunch, training, dinner, study, sleep. That’s how it was for all the apprentices on Scroll, every part of the day was planned out and any deviation would be seen as impropriety. Serin didn’t mind it though, he took pride in his schedule, his commitment to become a mage dwarfed all else. When it became too much he simply imagined himself as Johan, teaching an apprentice of his own, imparting pieces of wisdom, being cool and collected because he knew he could handle any situation, the privilege and status that came with being a mage of Scroll. After all, what more could an orphan like himself have hoped to achieve? The mages elevated him out of destitution; how could he not give his all for the order.

Serin walked from his lecture hall outside and down the two hundred and twelve steps to the dining hall; he’d done that walk so many times he knew the exact number. As he turned the corner he heard a yelp and was suddenly knocked to the ground along with another apprentice who landed on top of him.

“DAMN IT”

“Sorry Serin, but you have to come see!”

“What the hell is wrong with you! Watch where you’re going!” Serin got up, brushing himself off as he continued to scald Micah. “You know you could really hurt somebody being so care—”

Serin noticed it was not just Micah; dozens of apprentices and mages were flocking in the same direction with urgency. "Come on! We're gonna miss it!" Micah shouted as he ran off. Begrudgingly Serin ran after him, following until he ended up in a crowd looking out onto the plaza.

Shouting and jeering began from the crowd, Serin pushed further into the mess unable to see what was soliciting the crowd's reaction. As he pushed to the front of the horde he couldn't believe what he saw, the old man he had questioned in Ferro, bloodied, bruised, and in chains, being dragged through the plaza by several home guard, not long after there was a young woman in chains being shepherded the same way. Serin could not help but notice her beauty, even though she was dirty and beaten she had an aura about her, delicate and graceful.

"They caught the thieves!" Micah exclaimed.

"Them? Her?"

"I know, they don't look like criminals.. especially the girl. Guess you really can't judge a book by its cover huh?"

"Yeah.. I guess not." Slowly the crowd began to disperse, meandering off in every direction. But Serin stayed feet planted. "How could someone like that cause all this?" He thought. Micah ran off without a farewell and soon Serin found himself alone in the plaza unable to move. "What did she do?"

Eventually he was able to unstick his feet from the ground, turning away from the ornate square and walking back to the dining hall. The food was rarely palatable and today was no exception, salted cod and barley.. again. Serin sat on the long table beside Micah and the other apprentices but felt little desire to eat instead pushing the food around on his plate dissatisfied. He kept replaying what had happened in his head and wondered why everyone else looked so unbothered. Surely they must feel some sympathy for the prisoners even if they were criminals. What could they have taken that was so-

"Are you gonna eat that?" Micah blurted

"Umm no.. you can have it." Serin replied visibly startled

Unconcerned Micah proceeded to unhinge his jaw and shovel down Serin's food. The sight of it made Serin queasy as he pushed his chair away from the table and walked out the door. There was still an hour till training so he opted to mull about in the hallways. The building was one of the oldest on an island of impossibly old buildings, some even said the great hall predated the shattering, but Serin doubted that. The amber colored tiles that covered the floor stretched as far as you could see only interrupted by the occasional mosaic or carving. There was something oddly exciting about the empty halls, they were always so packed that it almost felt like a dream seeing them bare, it felt like he could do anything and it wouldn't matter. As Serin sauntered through the familiar yet foreign place he couldn't help but crack a smile.

Johan walked briskly down the hall, almost jogging, as he neared the council chamber he could hear the panicked bickering already. Johan stepped into the room and was immediately sequestered.

"Johan! Come over here if you would."

It was councilor Keramak and some of his lackeys, Keramak was a thin old man of average height with short grey hair that was becoming sparser and sparser by the day. Soon he would be the most senior councilor, assuming he doesn't die before Ronan.

"What can I do for you, councilor?"

"We were curious to hear about your trip to Ferro first hand, is it true that the description you acquired led to the arrest of two enemy spies?"

“I don’t know if it was just that, but the info we procured definitely helped. Was the flame recovered?”

“Unfortunately not. We can only hope it isn’t out of our reach by now. If the prisoners know where it is we’ll get it out of them, the home guard is quite skilled in that area.”

“What do we have in the way of search parties? Is the border to the lake lands secured?” Before Keramak could respond commander Fermen interjected

“We have patrols on every border, blockades on every port and river, we tighten the net every day. If the flame is still in Ferro we’ll find it.”

The conversation continued to drone on, even at a time like this the shmoozing and politiking never ended. Johan weighed the importance of being seen at the council meeting versus his own desire to escape the mess. He’d learned to shake the right hands and make nice with the right people, you had to as a mage, but he still hated it. If he could have it his way he would spend all his time either researching or in the field. Johan continued to mingle until the bell sounded.

“Everyone please be seated, we’ll be starting shortly!” Keramak announced, he had a surprisingly loud voice for a man of his age. The officers and bureaucrats took seats in the gallery while the council members each took their place at the round table.

Serin opened the door to his dorm and threw himself onto his bed, the room was small with just enough space for a bed and a desk. It had been a long day and even though there was still light trickling in from the window he fell asleep almost immediately. Serin opened his eyes and heard birds chirping, he didn’t even feel like he had slept just blinked and then it was morning. He dragged himself out of bed and shuffled his corpse toward the dining hall, evaluations had been moved two weeks and what time Serin didn’t spend thinking about the theft he spent studying. As he neared the end of the dormitory Serin squinted in preparation for going out in the sun but his eyes instantly opened wide when he heard a voice behind him.

It was William, a tall slim young man with olive skin that matched his sandy hair. William was always popular with the ladies to Micah’s chagrin and Serin’s amusement, it seemed like he dated a different girl every month.

“Where were you at lunch yesterday?”

“I wasn’t feeling great so I took a walk to get some air.”

“Sorry to hear that, hope you’re doing alright now.”

“Eh, I’ll be better when evaluations are over.”

“Ha! I hear that!”

The two continued onto the dining hall for breakfast. They would have liked to have Micah join them, but he normally slept until a few minutes before lecture, skipped breakfast, and still always managed to arrive late. The food was good today, they had sweet rolls and spiced tea, probably because of evaluations. Serin sat down along the massive wooden table that stretched the length of the stone floor. The room was one of the most beautiful on the island. Stone pillars lined the chamber reaching up to curved stonework and arches swept with golden light from the stained windows.

Serin and William walked up the two hundred and twelve steps, into the lecture hall and took their seats. Professor Landra began her monologue when just on cue Micah threw open the doors and ran frantically to the seat beside them. William couldn’t help but snicker. If it hadn’t happened every day this semester he would have had every eye on him, but at this point most people tuned it out.

The lecture ended, the trio exited the hall and began walking down all two hundred and twelve steps. They, along with some of the other apprentices, had made a habit of counting each one loudly as they descended; it was good fun and helped distract them from the pain in their legs. As they reached the bottom and turned to go to the dining hall Serin stopped.

“I’ll catch you guys later. I need to get some last minute studying in.” Serin explained

“You have to eat some time!” Micah shouted as Serin walked away

When he was sure everyone had filed into the hall Serin doubled back and began climbing the two hundred and twelve steps as fast as he could, almost falling on fifty seven. He jogged past the lecture halls and up another fifty or so steps and walked into the grand hall. The grand hall sat near the peak of the mountain, its inky black stone clashing with the overcast sky, the behemoth’s three towers were reminiscent of church steeples, each a different height. The central and tallest tower housed the councilors’ private quarters, the right most tower housed the treasury and archives, and the left most and shortest tower was used as the headquarters of the home guard as well as several master mages offices, Johan among them.

Serin slipped inside, walking fast but not so fast as to draw attention. He turned into a doorway and descended down a spiral staircase. As he entered he was surprised to see no guard stationed, he walked past the front desk and into the bowels of the dungeon. It was dark and hard to tell the inmates apart, the only light being what trickled in from the tiny windows that decorated the most fortunate prisoners’ cells and the light from lanterns and torches hung erratically on the walls. He scanned every cell as he passed until he found the right one, the one with the woman from the plaza.

Johan’s eyes scanned the room. Whatever this was about must be important, every high ranking mage was in one place, except for councillor Ronan. He was nearing death and had become too sickly to attend meetings, or do much of anything. Instead the fifth seat at the round table was filled by his son who acted as his proxy and would most likely inherit Ronan’s council ring. Councillor Keramak stood from his seat, puffed his chest and began to speak.

“Ladies and gentleman, thank you for being here with so little notice. As many of you already know, seven days ago an artifact of great power was stolen from our vaults, a weapon capable of shifting the balance of power in the world. We know the thieves were operating out of Ferro for some time before the theft itself and we know they fled there when they escaped. While the King of Ferro has allowed our home guard to conduct an investigation the king has been resistant to our other requests. With this information and additional pieces of evidence which I am not at liberty to discuss, we have determined that the kingdom of Ferro was aiding these villains and may even be in possession of the artifact itself. If Ferro really does have the artifact Scroll will be at their mercy. This is why effective immediately we will begin preparing invasion plans to take control of Ferro and recover the artifact before they are able to utilize its full power. You will all receive your assignments tomorrow morning, until then I expect each bureau to confer and prepare.”

The others at the round table rose from their chairs and all five swiftly exited the room followed by a throng of officers whose expressions ranged from terror to excitement. Johan pinched his brow as he shuffled out of the room, he didn’t know whether to be exhausted or anxious, war with Ferro would cause the deaths of thousands and would likely mean the mobilization of advanced apprentices before they were ready, that must be why examinations had been moved up..

As Serin ran back down the two hundred and twelve steps he felt like he was going to puke from the burning pain in his legs. As he reached the bottom he quickly slipped into the

stream of apprentices leaving the dining hall. Serin shuffled along trying not to breath too heavily while he wiped the sweat from his brow. Suddenly he felt an arm go around his shoulder before quickly jerking back.

“Ewww.. why the hell are you so sweaty??” Micah whined

“I uh.. forgot something in my.. room.” Serin said, pausing for breaths.

“Whatever, I need to meet with my instructor. Catch you later!”

Before Serin even had a chance to catch his breath and properly speak Micah was down the path and around the corner. Serin continued along the road with the rest of the cohort to the proving grounds to train. Normally instructors would meet with each of their apprentices once a week but Johan had taken a special interest in Serin and they met every other day, at least normally. Johan had not met with Serin since they returned from Ferro and was nowhere to be seen today. Serin went through the forms he had learned in today's lecture, he concentrated on the air between his hands, like a ball he turned it and formed it and squeezed it until the air was no longer air but an orb of fire, he pulled back and then cast the ball down range striking the target almost dead on. While he tried to be humble Serin couldn't help but feel satisfied with himself, most of the other apprentices could barely make fire and none could cast as accurately as him.

“Wow! You're so good at this!”

Serin turned his head, it was Lydia, a slender girl with long black hair and skin like she had never been outside before. She was top of the class and always managed to one up him, but her book smarts didn't translate to magical skills.

“Thanks, I appreciate it,” Serin replied.

“Would you mind if I watched while you practiced your forms?”

The thought of an audience made Serin uneasy but it was impossible to say no to somebody so polite.

“Okay watch this.”

Serin put his hands together and began to roll the air between them. He shaped it into a ball and concentrated on it, feeling it slowly heat up until the fire licked his palms. He pulled his arms back then heard something and turned his head.

“WOW! That flame is so big!”

Serin snapped his head back just quick enough to see the fire ball expand past his hands and burst, knocking him to the ground. Serin's face went red as he quickly shot up and brushed himself off. Lydia snickered and walked back to her lane. Serin finished his training for the day, trying not to think about how he embarrassed himself, got a few rolls and an apple from the dining hall then walked back to his dorm. Serin opened his door, walked in and immediately got to studying, eating his food while he worked. Just as he began to get into a groove there was a knock at the door, he muttered something under his breath, stood up and opened the door, it was Johan.

“Is this a bad time?” Johan asked.

“No, I can talk.” Johan walked in and took a seat across from Serin's desk, closing the door behind him.

“Sorry I haven't been able to meet with you sooner. I've been drowning in work since the theft. Look Serin, I'm going to tell you something and I need you to promise me you won't tell anyone, even those friends of yours.” Serin's hair stood on end.

“Sure. I mean, yes of course. I won't tell a soul.”

“You need to flunk your exam this weekend.” Serin was bewildered hearing this from his instructor. He had been working tirelessly to prepare and the thought of that being for nothing made him dizzy.

“Why? What reason could I possibly have to do that?”

“We’re going to war, Serin. The council thinks Ferro was behind the theft and we’re making preparations for an invasion. Every apprentice that passes that exam is going to the front. If things go wrong they’ll be cannon fodder. You all just simply aren’t ready to fight hardened warlocks and soldiers.” Serin began to sweat as he tried his hardest to keep down his dinner.

“But I have to tell William and Lydia! I can’t be responsible for them being killed!”

“LISTEN TO ME SERIN. You can not tell a SOUL. One top student failing will be suspicious enough, but three? If they find out we’ll all hang.”

“What did they steal!? What could be so important that they would send apprentices to their deaths for it!”

“I’ve already said too much. I don’t know when we’ll be able to speak again but I’ve already been here too long.” Johan stood up, grabbed the door knob and turned to Serin. “Not a soul.” He put his hood up and walked briskly down the hall and into the stairwell. Serin closed the door, curled up into his bed and began to cry.

—Chapter 2—

Fire

Serin woke with a jolt, his post sleep haze faded quickly into dread as he remembered his predicament. He melted out of bed and sat at his desk, palms pressed to temples collecting himself. The room was stuffy and smelled of paper, as he rubbed his eyes and wiped his mouth he could taste the salt still crusted onto his face. Walking down the hall he felt his head pounding, his mouth was dry and his tongue seemed to cling to his palate. Instead of following his normal route to breakfast he entered into the bath house. Serin undressed and turned the shower as hot as it would go, arms above him pressed against the wall, he hung his head, shaggy hair covering his face, the nearly scalding water running down his neck and back. He breathed deeply, feeling the steam rush past his teeth and into his chest as he tried his best not to think.

He had taken too long to get breakfast and would have to go straight to lecture. Serin slowly dragged himself up all two hundred and twelve of those god damn steps and walked into the lecture hall. As he entered and walked down the stairs he felt every eye in the room looking at him. Micah and William were already at the table. It was later than he thought. Serin sat beside his friends and noticed it was master Gregory giving the lecture today. William prodded his side.

“Where were you? Are you doing alright?” he whispered

“Yeah I’m fine. Just a late night is all.”

Serin didn’t even want to look at them. The only reason he showed up at all was to maintain appearances. He tried to focus on Gregory’s lecture, he was discussing the properties of enchanted objects and their creation.

“Enchanted objects such as the seals all master mages are equipped with require extraordinary power to create. Each and every seal took the full power of the council to produce. It took five of the most powerful mages to ever live close to an hour to produce each one! Think about that! Then think about the enchantments they could produce before the shattering! Back when there were entire nations of magic users! The enchanted objects of Old Costros are exceedingly rare and extraordinarily powerful! Entire tombs of spells used to create each one!”

Gregory continued on with his lecture but Serin could no longer remain focused. All he could think about was his friends being sent to war, and that girl. As the lecture ended and the apprentices began to file down the steps he didn’t even bother joining them. Once everyone had passed he turned up the hill and into the great hall, down the spiral steps, past the half asleep guard who waved Serin through like he had all week, down the hall until he reached her cell. He sat on the ground and slid half a loaf of bread and a jar of jam through the bars while he picked at the other side of the loaf.

This had been his routine for the past week and all week the woman refused to speak to him, he didn’t even know her name. But he sat there and talked like he knew her. He told her about his friends, Johan, and exams. Serin knew she ate the food because it was gone when he returned the next day but she wouldn’t take it until he had left. Curled into a tight ball she

remained. A ghostly pale figure in the corner of the dark cell. At times Serin wondered if she was even alive, but the slight movements of her chest showed him she was breathing.

Serin picked at his food, feeling disgusted, like there was some pressure that had to be released in his head. Before he had time to think he began monologuing.

“We’re going to war. At least that’s what my instructor tells me. He says we’ll invade Ferro. We won’t have enough men so they’ll be sending apprentices to the front to make up for it. My friends might die, I’ll die unless I fail the exam. Johan warned me but I wish he hadn’t.. I’m so full of guilt and shame, I have to abandon my comrades to be mainmied or killed or tell them and risk all my friends and Johan being hung. I’m trapped. I used to feel so much pride in being a mage. But lately, I don’t know, I wonder if I grew up believing a lie.”

The girl turned her head just enough to see Serin from the corner of her eye, then quickly turned back. Serin hung his head, he had not noticed her movement. Slowly Serin ripped chunks from the bread and choked them down, if he didn’t eat he’d get a headache. He finished, stood up and left, sooner than he normally would have. As he walked away he heard shuffling and the sound of a glass jar scuffing against the floor as it was moved. The apprentice walked back down the stairs and rejoined the mob in the dining hall. He only had time to sit for a few minutes before the bell chimed and the mages filled off to the proving grounds.

As Serin practiced his forms he found in him a new ferocity, the thought that he might have to use what he learned to defend himself, his friends, or even to kill.. It set his teeth on edge but at the same time gave him focus. He formed a ball between his hands, felt the fire licking his palms, pulled back, then thrust into his attack with all his weight, inadvertently screaming in the process. The ball of fire was a blinding white and struck the hulking sand filled target so hard it launched back about 10 feet and ruptured on the front with a burst of smoke. Every head turned his way and every set of eyes seemed to meet his. So much for keeping a low profile he thought to himself regretfully. Turning and beginning to walk away, he heard the sand cascading to the ground from the shredded target.

“Serin, wait up!” It was Micah. “Hey man, are you sure you’re doing okay? I mean that fire ball was seriously impressive but.. I don’t know, it kinda freaked people out. And you were later than me to class today! What’s going on dude, you know you can talk to me.” Serin wanted so badly to tell Micah the truth, to tell everyone, but he knew he would only be putting them in more danger. There was a chance they would survive the war, but there was no surviving the hangman.

“I’m okay, I guess I just haven’t been taking care of myself lately. I’ve just been so focused on studying I must have forgotten I’m still human.” Serin tried to let out a laugh but gave up half way through.

“Look man, what you need is to cut loose. There’s a party down at the bulkhead this weekend after exams. Just stop by, trust me it’ll be cathartic.”

“Okay I’ll think about it.”

As he walked away Serin couldn’t help but wish he was more like his friend. Micah never cared all that much about being a mage. He was taken in by them, same as every appearance, but he acted like becoming a mage was just part of his life, not his everything like it had been for Serin.

The day passed by quickly and Serin soon found himself back to what had become his schedule. Wake up late, go straight to lectures, slink up to the dungeon. He walked down the cramped rough stone hallway stepping over scattered hay, past the cast iron bars that covered

each arched cell, and finally at the very end of the hall sat in his same spot and slid some jam and bread through the bars.

As he looked up from the food he nearly jumped. The girl was sitting on the ground facing him.

“Do you want to know what I stole?” She said with an unexpected levity.

Serin froze. Suddenly he began to panic. All he had wanted to know for weeks was exactly that. He wondered if this was all a mistake and if he should just leave now.

“Well? Isn’t that why you’ve been coming here? You’re curious right?”

Without thought Serin replied.

“I.. uhh.. yes. I want to know..”

Without hesitation she began her monologue.

“It’s a weapon of mass destruction, known as Pishtari’s Flame, it was created by the Dark mages apprentice of the same name. With Pishtari’s last act before his death, he infused all of his remaining power into the flame. It was designed to subsume the will of whoever it possesses and send them on rampage to destroy the Black Mages enemies.”

Serin was overwhelmed and could hardly think of what question to ask first. But he was able to eek out a response.

“So you’re a follower of this Pishtari? That’s why you stole the weapon?”

The girl quickly whipped her head back and began to cackle.

“You really don’t know do you? Do any of them know? Wow I never thought the mages weren’t privy to their own history!”

“What history! What do you mean?”

“You fool, you’re a follower of Pishtari! Every mage is! We stole the weapon to stop you people from using it!”

Serin paused briefly considering what he was hearing.

“I want to know. What history? What do you know about the Mages that I don’t?”

“I’ll tell you but first I have to know.. are you with me? Will you help me get out of here and protect the world from this weapon?”

Without thinking Serin nodded in agreement. A few days ago and he would never have imagined going against the Mages Guild but now everything was different.

“What do you need me to do?”

“This cell is enchanted. Entropy magic doesn’t work on these bars.. but I happen to know a thing or two about enchantments and I know this one could never hold up against a powerful seal.”

“Well I don’t have a seal yet, and standard mages’ seals aren’t all that powerful. So how are we supposed to get one?”

“Well luckily I brought one with me!”

“What? Then why are you still locked up?”

“Well I obviously don’t have it on me now. The first time I came here that was my job, I snuck onto the island with a specially made seal and used it to teleport the rest of the crew directly into the vault room”

“What? How is that even possible? The vault is guarded to the teeth hundreds of feet in the air!”

“Exactly, I scaled the tower and secured the seal to the outside of the vault room, the seal was designed to teleport you just a few feet ahead of it! It was my brain child, genius I know.”

“So you’re telling me I need to climb the vault tower?”

Serin's stomach dropped thinking about the undertaking.

"I left a set of climbing claws in the bushes right below the seal. If those are still there, so is the seal most likely. When could you get it?"

Serin furrowed his brow and stood up.

"We'll do it tomorrow. It has to be tomorrow."

The girl looked up with an approving smirk and rose to greet him.

"I'm Sierra by the way, and you are?"

"Serin."

The two shook hands through the bars each holding back a smirk.

Serin left the jail and quickly made his way to the proving grounds. There he saw Lydia and William chatting and decided to join them.

"Hey Serin!" Shouted William as he approached.

"We were just talking about you!" Lydia added. The comment made Serin a little nervous but he continued on the same.

"Hey you guys wanna practice together today?" Serin asked.

"Yeah sure I'm down, how about you Lydia?"

"I'm not sure I'll be able to do all that much but I'd love to!"

The three took turns discussing their forms and the topic of today's lecture. Serin felt melancholic knowing this may be one of the last times he would see his friends. But he decided to ignore those feelings for now and enjoy the moment. He felt a storm approaching, after tomorrow night nothing would ever be the same.

Serin stretched as he woke he felt the beams of sunlight warming his face as he moved his arms above his head. There was a lot to do but he decided he would sleep in a while longer; after all who knew when he would be in a bed next.

But soon it was time to get up, Serin dressed himself then walked over to Williams room and knocked on the door. William, who was much more awake than Serin, answered the door.

"You wanna get breakfast?" Serin asked between yawns

"Yeah sure," William replied.

The two walked to the dining hall and talked while enjoying the special breakfast that was always given the morning of exams. Hot cakes, coffee, tea, sweet rolls, sausage. It was a good morning and Serin enjoyed every second of it.

When they finished eating William and Serin found a bench outside the dining hall facing the plaza and helped each other study for the exams. Serin had decided that he might as well pass his exam if he was going to be gone anyway. When the time for the exam came and every apprentice filed into the exam hall Serin felt no stress, no anxiety about the exam. What once would have driven him to panic now had little effect on his psyche. He diligently answered every question, finding some humor in the futility of it.

Serin was the first to finish his exam. He rose from his desk and walked down the aisle doing his best not to disturb those still working. Placing the papers on the instructors desk he briskly turned and left the wooden chamber.

As he opened the door he felt the salty breeze hit his face. Serin took a deep breath and began walking with purpose. Up the two hundred and twelve steps and fifty more to the entrance of the great hall. But instead of entering the building he broke right down the ill-used trail that followed the wall all the way around to the base of the right most tower. There Serin looked around to make sure he was not followed, then he began to rummage through the shrubs that grew pressed up against the wall. Just as he was beginning to doubt Sierra's instructions he

noticed a slight gleam under some duff. He brushed away the leaves to reveal a set of four climbing claws.

With the confirmation that everything was in place he quickly back tracked and made his way to his room. He began to feverishly pack a bag with everything he would need, clothes , toiletries, and money. As he dug through his desk he picked up his notebook, bound with black leather the book contained years of lessons painstakingly etched into it. He briefly considered whether to take it before slipping it into the sack with the rest of his belongings.

Serin took the bag and jogged out of the dormitories. As he made his way to the start of the two hundred and twelve steps he made a slight detour to the bath house. He walked in and luckily someone was showering. Without hesitation he grabbed their apprentice cloak that was neatly folded on the bench beside the shower and quietly but quickly left the room. Serin felt bad about it yet he didn't have much of a choice at this point.

Securing the spare cloak under his own as he reached the bottom of the steps. Serin stashed his pack in some brush then began to climb the steps. The light became orange and red as the sun began to disappear.

"Right on time," he said to himself. He continued to climb the steps as the light faded more and more he heard instruments tuning and sounds of idle chatter over the breeze. By the time he was at the grand hall the chatter had become full-on merriment and the tuning instruments transitioned to a cacophony of fiddles and drums.

Serin turned right, down the path as the last light slipped into the sea. He could make out the torch light at the bulkhead as the source of the sound. The party was in full swing.

Serin arrived back at the spot and began to scrounge around for the climbing claws. There was only faint moonlight and he struggled to see what he was doing. Just as he began to worry he felt the cold metal. Serin secured the claws to his boots with their leather straps. He had only used climbing claws once before during alpine training with Johan, but that was years ago and he wasn't even all that good then. Serin secured the remaining two claws to his hands, removed his cloak and stared up the side of the hulking tower.

He took a deep breath and began to scale the rough stone bricks. Doing his best to maintain three points of contact he meticulously analyzed each jutting brick before deciding on a hold. He noticed scratches which he assumed was the path Sierra had taken and did his best to follow it. The moon slowly began to rise over the unusually calm ocean reflecting the light back at the island. Serin scratched at each jutting brick making sure the spikes were secure before his next movement. Luckily Serin was fairly light making the task a bit less demanding.

The air was clammy and seemed to coat his skin, the gusting breeze would have been refreshing any other time but now it caused Serin to tense with every pass. Before he knew it he was almost twenty meters above the ground. He clung desperately to the side of the tower looking for his next hold. Looking up he noticed a small bump on one of the bricks. "That must be the seal," he thought to himself. He was almost half way there.

As he reached forty meters he began to shake, sweat stung his eyes making it hard to see, the only relief coming when a gust of salty wind swept by clearing the sweat from his forehead while he held on for dear life. Serin could no longer hear the party, only his heart beating and the waves crashing between thumps.

Finally at sixty meters he was there. With his teeth he removed the climbing claw from his right hand and reached for the seal. He grabbed the smooth circular stone and gave it a tug, but there was no movement. A gust of wind passed by making Serin grit his teeth. He gave another tug, nothing. Finally he tugged again this time with all his strength, suddenly the seal

snapped off the stone. Serin flew back, causing his right foot to slip off its brick. He swung like a hinge with only his left hand and foot still secured. Desperately he scratched at the tower till his foot locked back into place.

He slipped the seal into his pocket and put the claw back onto his right hand. His heart was pounding so hard he couldn't hear anything anymore. His throat began to sting from the cold air. He scrambled back down the tower trying his best not to look straight down. Finally he reached the ground again, jumping down the last few feet.

He threw the claws off his hands and into the bush then collapsed. His knuckles had turned white and ached as he stretched them. The sound of his heart pounding was slowly replaced by sounds of the party which had become even more rowdy.

Serin removed the claws from his feet, put his robe back on and stashed the spare back under his arm as he began to move towards the dungeon. He passed the half asleep guard and made his way to Sierra's cell. As he approached he saw her pacing.

"Do you have it!"

Serin pulled the softball sized disk out of his pocket "Here, it wasn't easy to get." Serin extended his arm and Sierra took the disk without hesitation.

She held the disk with both hands inspecting it. "I'll have to make a few changes, shouldn't be long." Serin stood guard while Sierra placed her thumbs onto a symbol etched into the disk; he hadn't noticed it in the dark. She muttered strange words under her breath for some time, suddenly a soft blue glow grew from the center of the symbol till it was quite bright, then just as quickly faded.

"Stand back," Sierra said. Serin quickly obliged and moved a few paces away from her cell. She held the object with both hands, symbol facing away, feet firmly planted. A blast of light shot out of the disk carving a man sized hole in the cell bars with a thunderous noise.

Immediately an alarm began blaring. "Quick! Put this on!" Serin yelled, shoving the spare cloak into her hands. The two ran to the entrance but were blocked by the previously sleepy guard who took a wide stance.

"STOP RIGHT NOW!" He roared. Before Serin could even react there was a flash of light and the guard lay dead on the floor. Serin looked down at the body in horror, "We have to go! Come on!" Sierra shouted, yanking Serin away from the mangled corpse.

The two rushed up the spiral stairs and down the hallway without being stopped by any more guards. They quickly slipped out the main gate and began to sprint down the fifty then two hundred and twelve steps.

As they reached the bottom Serin grabbed his pack from the bushes and looked up the stairs. Home guard began filing out of the gate. The two turned and ran to the bulkhead. The sounds of music and laughter had drowned out the alarms and the party goers were none the wiser.

They pushed through the crowd of apprentices and junior mages. They could see the boat, a schooner just like Johans. Johan had taught Serin to pilot his so he felt confident taking this one. Just as they neared the craft there was a shout behind him.

"Serin! Hey, is that you!" He knew that voice anywhere, it was Micah. Serin turned to face Micah, Sierra did not stop.

Serin hugged Micah tight then patted him on the shoulder. "I'm gonna miss you man. Don't do anything stupid!"

Serin turned and jogged after Sierra. "What? Where are you going? Who's that?" Micah called out as Serin hopped off the bulkhead and into the boat. The two set off letting out all the

slack, Sierra held the seal high above her head, the air that had before been quite still began to rush past the boat filling the sails sending the schooner rapidly out to sea. As the home guard reached the bulkhead the sounds of music suddenly stopped, replaced by concerned murmuring.

Serin stepped up onto the gunnel, he formed a ball of air with his hands shaping it and focusing on it until he felt his palms begin to singe, he cast the fire knocking him off the gunnel, he landed on his feet with only a slight stumble. The ball of fire screamed through the air, striking one of the two remaining boats, blasting a hole in the hull and igniting the crater. Serin stepped back onto the gunnel and did the same to the other craft, collapsing its mast. The Home Guard had finally managed to push their way to the water only to be met by the smoldering ships. Soon the only sound was the noise of lapping of waves and all that remained of the island was a small flickering speck of light.