

Subterfuge

“Get up you worthless mage!”

Perhaps you failed to notice Eric, but I've been shot.

“That’s Lord Eric, cretin,” Eric said as he kicked the grey cloaked body. Eric had never grown used to the buzzing in his head when Thoth-Eran “talked” with him. Every time his head felt like he had drank too much the night before. Eric bent down, yanked on Thoth-Eran’s closest shoulder and saw an arrow was indeed lodged into his stomach, his cloak resembling a grey pin cushion housing an oversized pin. The pain was evident on Thoth-Eran’s face and Eric was surprised how much this pleased him. He had heard something whistle by and dove for cover, but there were no areas for ambush, and it seemed to just appear. Likely magical which seemed somewhat fitting, but he still needed the mage alive for a little while longer.

He looked up the slope to the designated precipice about one hundred paces away. Damn. They had come so far. So many preparations and precautions taken to break Thoth-Eran out of Kalyn's jail and keep him protected to summon the Nameless One. To be shot this close. Kalyn must be laughing somewhere.

Eric cupped his ears, but could not hear any sign of pursuit. He sat on a nearby rock and drank heavily from his canteen as the late afternoon sun beat down.

“How did they know to shoot you? We’re identically dressed.”

Unclear. Perhaps your sword gave you away. I advised against it.

“What? Now it’s my fault? Wait, don’t answer. I can’t stand you in my head.” The bulge of the sword underneath the cloak would be detected by a discerning observer. That must have been it. They knew that starting out and took the risk. But what was the alternative? Escort

Thoth-Eran unarmed all this way. Not likely. He took another long drink and looked down the slope. One way up and one way down.

“It seems as if your little trick has thrown off Kalyn’s pursuers for now. I thought the binding completely nulled your power.” He savored the light breeze that swept over them and dried his sweat.

Thoth-Eran had rolled over and leaned on his side. He stared at the canteen.

That was not power, but mere parlor tricks. If I was not bound... .

“Yes, yes I know if you were not bound you would have turned us all to worms, punished those who bound you, and rescued your daughter. For you are the great Thoth-Eran, Master of the Five Circles, Lord of the Labyrinth, and so on. Bloody hell Thoth I’ve heard that for weeks. Give it a rest!”

He thought he heard something coming up from slope, but couldn’t be sure. “It’s no wonder tongues are cut when your kind chooses the way of the Labyrinth. If not, you’d keep flapping your gums and never learn anything.”

Eric looked at Thoth-Eran in his eyes and forced his hands to remain steady. His eyes moved to Thoth-Eran’s chest where the binding had taken place and pictured the medallion that had been fused with flesh. He smiled as Thoth-Eran looked away.

Eric stood and from the high vantage point looked down at the smoke he knew came from cities burned by Kalyn the Righteous. Righteous my ass. Righteous as long as you were subservient and willing to lick boot. Show any resistance or independent thought and Kalyn the Righteous became Kalyn the Merciless. Gods how he hated his sister. She would soon unite the

fractured kingdoms and bring order to chaos. He didn't mind bringing order to chaos, as long as he did the ordering.

Once Thoth-Eran summoned the Nameless One, he would drive a knife into the mage's heart and order the Nameless One to crush Kalyn and her council. As the only living heir he could assume command and take over Kalyn's rule. None could deny him that. At least that's what Thoth-Mikal had told him and he was as trustworthy of a mage you could find.

"Get up mage. You told me we need to do this before the sun sets and it's getting late. Up or I swear I'll kick you to the precipice if I need to and when this is over I'll make your daughter's end last longer than your pathetic beard."

Eric, we have company.

"How many times have I told you, it's Lord..." Eric felt the ground shake and saw dust clouds coming towards them.

Battle stags, three of them.

Eric drew his longsword and threw off his cloak. Thoth-Eran had managed to make it to his feet, but was leaning heavily on his staff. They were riderless, which helped keep things simple, but it made them faster. Three? Dammit, one he could handle, two perhaps, but three? Against three he would need all the luck that had been deprived of him for all his thirty years.

The battle stags charged in a V shape with the largest one in the center. The formation was unnatural, too tight. If Eric sidestepped the lead stag and sliced down all the while avoiding those great horns, the preferred method when dealing with battle stags with a sword, his side would be fully exposed to the other two regardless of which way he chose to step. As they got

closer, Eric thought besides the red eyes, foaming mouths, and menacing horns, they were actually quite beautiful creatures.

He picked up his staff and threw it javelin style at the lead stag. Without breaking stride the stag whipped his head and the staff went sailing over the edge of the cliff.

He gripped his sword in two hands, jammed the hilt against his hip and prepared to take the charge when a ball of flame passed over his shoulder, singeing his hair and struck the ground in front of the lead stag. The stag carcass, now missing the first half of its body, created a small ditch as its momentum continued it forward to stop five paces from Eric. The one on the left had been blown off the cliff, and the one on the right was missing half of its body and managed to stay upright for a few seconds balancing on its remaining two legs before it keeled over.

Eric blinked several times until his vision returned and heard the sound of a body falling behind him.

Kick away Lord Eric. I am truly spent.

Eric turned around and knelt next to him, “How? How could you do that bound?”

Even bound a reserve remains. For obvious reasons mages have kept this to themselves.

The greater the mage the greater the reserve. Mine is now completely spent.

Eric put his cloak back on, “The sun is almost set.”

There is time. You must perform the summoning. You know how. We prepared for this possibility.

“Yes, the gods know how many nights you trained me. I think I could write that Summon rune in my sleep.”

Just as we trained, simple evocation paired with drawing of the rune. You must hurry. My daughter's life depends on your safe return.

“Yes, it does so you had best guide me through this to ensure I’m successful.”

Eric picked up Thoth-Eran’s staff, gave him his canteen, and ran to the precipice. After I’m finished no need for that mage to slow me down, he thought. He stood at the edge and drew the rune as he recited the invocation exactly as Thoth-Eran had taught him on those countless nights. The sun dipped below the horizon.

In the dark sky before him he saw the Nameless One appear surrounded by constellations. The air turned cool paired with a sudden absence of sound. The feeling he experienced the first time he was on a boat surrounded by the immenseness of the ocean was a shadow compared to how he felt now.

He began to make his request when he felt something in his head.

Eric, there's something I should tell you. The rune you drew isn't Summon, it's Sacrifice. Farewell.

The buzzing that normally accompanied conversation with Thoth-Eran grew in intensity until it became a hot needle piercing his skull. The last thing he saw was Kalyn smiling at him.

Thoth-Eran strode down the slope. It was dark, but he could see the path clearly. No need to maintain the arrow illusion, not that it would be difficult. Thanks to the Nameless One, he was now unbound and could maintain that illusion and a hundred others like it without breaking a sweat. But he wasn’t going to. He had people to turn into worms, suffering to impose on those who had bound him, and a daughter to rescue. After that replace Kalyn and her small council.

Ahead of him he sensed a score of Kalyn's elite warriors riding battle stags up the slope. This was going to be fun.

The End