



Rhys crouched at the shadowed edge of the thinning forest and stared up at the imposing castle carved into the rock near the apex of the mountain. A single path led from the forest up to the curtain wall and iron gates that barred entrance to the kingdom he believed to be Caeli.

Twilight descended as he studied the terrain. He sensed a few deer as they passed through the trees and the occasional bird, but little else.

Rhys frowned. Once he left the shelter of the trees, he would be in the open until the time he reached the gate. There were no large boulders or rocks to cover behind in case of attack. No trees to shield him from arrows. As a warrior, he hated stepping into the open when potential danger lay near. As a mage, he had an advantage the average human did not.

Sending his senses seeking out, he probed the surrounding area for magic. He felt nothing other than the power of nature. The energy of the plants, animals, and sky that wove his world together and maintained order. Unfortunately, he couldn't search out magic at much of a distance without revealing himself. It would have to do.

Rhys backed further into the trees, away from any who might keep a well-trained eye on the forest. Before he could approach the kingdom of Caeli, he must send word to Nikolai and Raina. If he were to meet the same fate as Stefan, he would leave a map to find him. It was the only hope he had in case the worst should happen.

Meus and Omen munched on grass out of sight of the main path. Neither horse paid him any heed as he approached. Rhys opened the leather saddlebag strapped to Meus and retrieved a few pieces of parchment, some wax, a quill, and the stub of a candle. He found a rock with a bit of a flat side and knelt next to it. He lit the candle and set it upon the rock to provide enough illumination to work by. Calling upon his magic, he fed it into the quill and began his first letter.

To Nikolai, he wrote of the mountain pass and the way to locate them should he and Stefan both disappear. He described the dangers of the town of Sarkany and the tavern, along with the discovery of Omen.

The next missive was to his sister, Raina. Rhys grinned as he tweaked the magic, using a spell specifically for his sister. He'd been practicing this particular spell, hoping for just such an opportunity. How he loved to tease her.

With a chuckle and a murmured incantation, Rhys cast the spell. When Raina received the letter, it would read itself to her using Darius's voice. He only wished he could be there to see her face.

His heart warmed. Raina was the only family he had now and he wanted only her happiness. She'd been mortified when Rhys revealed he knew what was in her heart. But how could she keep such a secret from him when he knew her every facial expression? They'd had only each other for so long. He'd known the moment she realized that she loved King Darius. One day, his king would have to see the gem before him. Indeed, Rhys often wondered if Raina wasn't the reason the king had shown no interest in marrying yet.

He brushed his thumb over the parchment and began to write. He instructed Raina to alert Darius to what he knew of Stefan's disappearance and where to locate them if needed.

Rhys paused, reluctant to scrawl the next words of his letter. Drawing on his resolve, he told her about the ward in the forest. In the time since he'd left the ward, he'd seen no one, but knew better than to cling to false hope. Raynard would send someone for him. For her safety, he ordered Raina to stay within the shielded walls of Elandra. He would take what shelter he could within Caeli.

He signed the letter, knowing that his safety would be short-lived. He couldn't stay in Caeli forever. Eventually, he would have to face Raynard. Rhys didn't need to see the future to

know the verity of it.

Sealing both letters with a daub of wax, he held them aloft, one in each hand, and envisioned each recipient. Silver light sparked on his fingertips and lit up the parchment pages. Both letters dissolved in a shower of silver sparks.

The last piece of parchment was the most important. Adjusting his magic a final time, he wrote a missive to the royal family of Caeli. The spell wove around the quill, changing his script into that of Nikolai's. It provided Rhys with permission to petition the king or queen of sovereignty on behalf of King Nikolai of Semar, who sought his only brother.

Once finished, Rhys daubed wax onto the parchment and held his hand over it. His magic stirred, leaving Nikolai's royal seal imprinted neatly into the wax. This alone would get him past the gates. He only hoped that once inside Caeli, that he could find Stefan with little incident.

Rhys removed his vest and slipped a clean tunic over his head. One that covered the intricate tattoos that scrolled down his arms and labeled him a mage. He didn't have the gift to disguise his white hair and silver eyes, but hoped that the missive would be stronger than the guards' suspicions of his heritage. Slipping his leather vest back into place, he tied the laces and tucked the missive within. He could delay no longer. Snuffing the candle, he tucked it and the wax away. He mounted Meus and tied Omen's reins to his saddle, then led the horses out of the trees and onto the path.



“Don't forget the false hedgehog.”

Raina sighed and set the small blade aside from where she'd been chopping the false hedgehog, a small white mushroom, into pieces for her spell. “Zeph...”

“You forgot the last three times. I am simply trying to remind you.”

She wrinkled her nose, making a face at him. As a non-corporeal entity, Zeph couldn't see her. Being blind, she couldn't see his reaction anyway. The action made her feel better all the same. "I am preparing it now."

"You're distracted."

Her shoulders sagged. "I am worried for Bastien. He's not been the same since he returned from Aquina to attend King Lorcan's midsummer celebration."

"You said you couldn't sense danger, only fate surrounding the celebration."

"True." Yet she couldn't shake the sense that something wasn't right. Bastien seemed more aloof than normal.

Like her king, Darius, she hadn't trust Lorcan. Not that she'd met him. But the whispers coming from the kingdom of Aquina didn't sound positive. And when Bastien returned with the tale of King Varic's return to the throne, it seemed they'd been right to question Lorcan's motives.

Raina turned away from her chopping board and counted the few steps that took her to the worktable. She stirred the mushroom bits into the dry mixture of herbs within the small cauldron. "I've added the false hedgehog. What is the next step?"

Zeph was quiet. She frowned and turned her head toward where she'd last heard his throaty voice. They'd been friends for years and normally, she couldn't quiet him. His friendship was invaluable. Not only did he read the spells from her books to her, but he listened when she needed to talk and laughed with her over his pranks. He loved to move items around her worktable just to get a rise from her. Nothing that would make her trip or find harm, mind you. Just enough to remind her that she belonged in this world. That not having sight didn't make her less than the people around her.

"Zeph?"

“Raina... it is not Bastien you worry over. Have you spoken with Darius?”

Heat flooded her cheeks and she was grateful that he couldn't see her. “Not since a few days past when the guards from Aquina came. Why do you ask?”

“You know to what I refer.”

She cleared her throat and tucked a stray hair up into the haphazard bun at the base of her neck. It dropped down her back again.

“You must tell him,” Zeph pressed.

“To what end?” she said, spinning around to face his direction. “He could never...”

Her words trailed off as the pungent smell of magic permeated the air. A moment later, the soft pop and thud of a message appearing and dropping onto her worktable filled the room.

“Your brother writes,” Zeph said.

Raina snorted. She didn't need Zeph to tell her that. Her brother was the only one who sent messages in such a way. “Will you read---“

“I think there is no need---“

The sound of parchment opening met her ears. Moments later, a silky, decadent voice filled the air.

Raina's heart dropped to her toes and bounced back with a pounding flutter that nearly brought her to her knees. She swore as heat flooded her cheeks for the second time in just minutes. “Does everyone know?” she demanded to no one. “If he wasn't my brother, I'd turn him into a toad and feed him to a wild animal.”

Zeph laughed.

“Start over,” she commanded Rhys's missive. Unfortunately, she'd missed the beginning of the message in her embarrassment over Rhys's joke.

“Yes,” Zeph purred, sounding closer. “Raina would hear the words again and again.”

She swore anew, wishing she could whack him with her staff. Sadly, it would pass right through his form.

The letter instructed her to give Darius a message and hinted at some danger that King Nikolai's brother, Prince Stefan, may have found.

"He could have sent the missive directly to Darius," she said when the message finished reading aloud in Darius's husky voice.

"Ah, but if I know Rhys, part of his ploy was to put you in Darius's path," Zeph said. "He may have wanted to keep the other portion from Darius. It is not good to alert a king that you perhaps bring trouble to his gates."

Raina bit her lip, wishing she were more than a mage, and a Nemesi at that. And that Darius was less than a king. Maybe then... No, there was no future for them. She tucked the wish away where it didn't pain her and took up her staff. She must find Darius to share Rhys's news.

"Shall I burn the missive?" Zeph asked.

Raina gripped her staff and shook her head. "If you were corporeal, you would have permanent bruises on your shins."

He laughed. "I take that as a no, my lady Raina."

She smiled despite herself. Zeph knew she wouldn't part with the letter. Not when she could now hear Darius's seductive voice any time she wanted. She had Rhys to thank for that. Tucking the fallen strand of hair back into her bun yet again, she opened her chamber door and sought out the man who owned her heart.