



THE
EVERDARK
GATE

ELIZABETH K. BURTON

Also by Elizabeth K. Burton

Dreams of Darkness

Shadow of the Scorpion

The Ugly Princess

The Loremaster (writing as Dymitia)

The Sorcerer's Apprentice (writing as Dymitia)

Remembered Glory (writing as Dymitia)

THE
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The Everdark Wars Book 3

BY

ELIZABETH K. BURTON

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PROLOGUE

CHIEF ELDER ALDOBTRAS TO SEE YOU, YOUR GRACE.”

The Chief Elder of the Temple of Light sauntered through the door of Ganev’s office without waiting for an invitation, then paused to scan the room with narrowed eyes. If Ganev hadn’t been watching for him to do it, he likely wouldn’t have noticed—a king with his country falling apart under his nose had other things to think about.

He tensed, expecting Aldobras to acknowledge the man leaning against the wall by the fireplace—or who *had* been leaning there before he disappeared. However, although the Chief Elder was clearly on edge, he gave no sign anyone else was present.

Just as the Mage had insisted would be the case.

Aldobras’s showing up without warning and demanding to see him was a behavior that had become much too common these last few months. Ganev made a mental note to reward the guards at his door—facing down Aldobras and insisting he follow protocol took courage. As it was, he had planned to ignore the demand...until the Mage urged him to agree.

Aldobras looked almost nervous, which was a sharp contrast to the air of smug, arrogant superiority he usually flaunted. On previous encounters, it had been clear he would have preferred to have summoned the king to see *him*, but that he had condescended to do otherwise for the sake of appearances.

“We are advised that an army from Estlin has been seen on the upper reaches of the Trader’s Highway advancing into the western reaches of Oestrand,” Aldobras said. “I’ve come to offer the sanctuary of the Temple to your family, that you might confront the coming difficulty with mind at peace regarding their safety.”

With nothing but the word of the man by the fireplace to base his response on, Ganev would have considered it. The betrayal of humankind

by magic users like him thirty centuries ago wasn't the sort of thing that encouraged instant trust.

However, for all his self-acknowledged faults as a ruler, King Ganev of Oestrand had never counted being stupid among them. He had seen the changes at the Temple—the loyal if somewhat lax guardsmen replaced by thugs, the acolytes and Adepts imprisoned or worse, the appearance of an usual number of “novices” with the blond hair and brown eyes of Estlini. The Mage’s explanation of that had certainly rung true.

His problem still remained. Did he dare trust the Mage any more than he did Aldobras?

“I will certainly take your generous offer under advisement,” he said.

“Is delay wise?” Aldobras persisted. “Your lady wife is near her time, and who better to see to her health and that of your child than our Healers?”

“Based on what has been reported to me, the Estlinis will require at least another fortnight to reach White Haven, which is more than ample time. I will discuss it with my lady and advise you of our decision.”

For a moment, it seemed the Chief Elder might press his point, nor did Ganev miss the flash of anger in the man’s eyes before Aldobras tipped his head in what barely passed for respect, spun on his heel and strode through the door the inside guard yanked open.

RANDRIK CROSSED TO TAKE THE CHAIR IN FRONT OF THE KING’S DESK HE’D VACATED when Aldobras was announced.

“Because if you and your family are going to survive you have to trust *someone*—and I know you don’t trust the Temple,” he said.

He hadn’t read Ganev’s mind. He didn’t have to. He’d conferred with Magi who had known the king and his father and grandfathers for generations, and knew the way the man thought.

Now, he watched the King of Oestrand wrestle with his prejudices. Ganev’s belief that the Magi had long ago died out—and good riddance—he shared with the rest of humanity; it had been corrected within five minutes of Randrik’s arrival. His prejudice, however, had not.

To keep his presence unobserved by the Temple spies within the royal household, Randrik had passed the layers of palace security shape-shifted into the guise of a veteran guardsman nearing retirement age. Watching a stocky, gray-haired soldier turn tall, lean, dark-skinned and raven-haired had put an end to Ganev’s misinformation regarding the existence of the Magi in short order. Randrik’s dark-amber complexion in combination with black hair and blue-violet eyes could belong only to a Mage.

“Disappearing” in front of Ganev’s eyes when Aldobras arrived had to have eliminated any lingering doubts.

“Let me see if I have everything straight,” Ganev said, leaning back in his carved armchair with a nonchalance Randrik knew he didn’t feel. “One week ago, you and your lifemate confronted a god, banished him into someplace called the Everdark and escaped death at the hands of the high priest of Estlin.”

“Yes.”

“And you have no faith that I can establish an adequate defense to forestall the invasion.”

“Hasdrugon has been amassing his army for the last two years, and he has ten thousand trained soldiers and cavalry.” Ostrand, without a standing army, had only a few thousand trained troops to counter that force and no time to draft enough to put up more than token resistance. “More importantly, the priests of the Black Sanctorum have been breeding magic users for the last hundred years, some of which now live in the Temple, ready to attack you from behind if you should decide against all common sense to go to battle.” He leaned forward, hands on knees and gaze locked with the king’s. “You can’t win, and engaging in a noble gesture in the guise of defending your people just means those people will die for no good reason.”

What he didn’t say was that people would die anyway, no matter what Ganev or anyone else did, sacrificed to Azdrefel the Souleater in the bloody, agonizing ritual of the Black Sanctorum. The king would never agree to what he proposed if that came into the game, and he needed both monarch and royal family safe in the Sorcerer’s Tower. Otherwise, they had no hope of reclaiming Ostrand after Hasdrugon’s army presented it to its master as the spoils of war.

Randrik had assured Ganev the surrender was temporary. However, when the time came to challenge the conqueror, the people of Ostrand would need a symbol to rally around. Ganev’s daughter Asintea, the two-year-old heiress to the throne, just wouldn’t to serve.

The set of the king’s jaw said he intended to argue further, but he never had the chance. One of the guards, ignoring all the rules of protocol, threw the door open and strode inside, his expression grim. The reason for his behavior—behind him, a terrified page, blood running from a shallow cut on his scalp, clutched the hem of his tunic and looked ready to piss himself.

From a distance came the unmistakable sound of battle.

“Your Highness,” the soldier snapped as the boy stumbled in and dropped to his knees, “the Temple guards are attacking the palace.”

Ganev stood, anger darkening his face. “There were only a dozen of them and at least three times that many of you.”

“There are at least a hundred, Your Highness.”

“But how—”

“The tunnels under the city,” Randrik reminded him. “Aldobras recruited every thief and cutthroat in the Beggar’s Guild for his guard, and they know where all the entrances are to the major buildings.”

That instant, the three other Mages who had accompanied him Traveled into the room, seeming to appear out of thin air. The guard spun toward them, his halberd at the ready.

“They’re with me,” Randrik assured him then, when the man shot him a look that asked why that should matter, added, “And if you want your king and his family safely out of here you’ll go out there and keep the enemy away as long as you can.”

“Magic!” the guard spat, as if the word fouled his mouth, but he was a practical man. Every regular escape route was blocked, and his duty was to see the royal family was kept safe. He spun on his heel and stalked back into the hall, slamming the door behind him.

“I will agree to let you take my wife and daughter, but I’m staying,” Ganev said. “I have a responsibility to support my men.”

Randrik managed to suppress a sigh—barely. Still, it was what he’d expected.

“If you’ll take us to them...” he urged.

Ganev tilted his head toward a curtained doorway and led them through it and along the elevated corridor connecting the public section of the palace with the one that contained the royal living quarters. The look on their master’s face was enough to bring the guards at the end of the corridor to attention.

The young and very pregnant queen was in her sitting room stitching a dress for her daughter, which she dropped as her husband and his astonishing escort swept in. Ganev cradled her face in his hands.

“Beloved, have your women fetch those things I bade you pack, and send for Sintay. We are under attack.”

Randrik’s respect for the king went up a notch. So did his relief that he’d managed to come today *before* Aldobras arrived.

Though her face was ashen, Queen Belory gathered up the dress and stuffed it into a carryall as she called for her maids. One she sent running down the hall, the others she bade pull half a dozen trunks from a storage closet. By the time the last one was ready, footmen arrived with three more.

“Is this everything?” Randrik asked her.

Glancing from one to the other of the Magi, she nodded, then gasped and staggered back when all nine trunks vanished between one breath and the next. Her bright hazel eyes went wide.

The first maid Belory had dispatched returned now with the nanny and the toddler princess, both looking like they’d been napping. Randrik tipped his head, and Darak and Wanek moved toward them, Darak tak-

ing the child and Wannek embracing the nanny. Before the woman had recovered from astonishment enough to struggle, they, too, were gone.

Belory spun toward her husband.

“The Magi have offered you and Sintay the safety of their Tower,” Ganev said as Emmalia, at Randrik’s nod, came to stand behind the queen.

“But what about you?”

“I must stay here and do what is required of me.”

Her expression shouted what she thought of that idea, which was pretty much the same as Randrik’s opinion. Good. Rumor had it the king had more than the usual level of respect for his wife, so perhaps she would persuade him what was about to happen was for the best.

“Please, beloved,” Ganev said, going to her once more and taking her in his arms. “Don’t argue. Go with them...and pray for me.”

He let her go with a slight push toward Emmalia, who wrapped her arms around the queen and Traveled.

Ganev turned to the maids and the page, who had followed them from the other tower for want of anyplace better to be.

“I cannot promise we will be victorious. Get out of the palace any way you can, and may the gods go with you.”

They ran for whatever escape route they could find as the king lifted his ancestral sword from its place of honor above the hearth. It had been three thousand years since that sword had drawn blood, but when he pulled it from the sheath the edge threw back the light with a razor’s glint. The blue of magic shimmered in the steel, an irony lost on the king but not Randrik.

Ganev started for the door then had to stop when Randrik blocked his way.

“Move aside, Mage,” he commanded. “And take care of those I love.”

“Do it yourself,” Randrik said, and landed a solid punch on the man’s jaw that sent his eyes rolling back in his head and the sword clanging to the floor. Randrik caught him in one arm, snatched up the sword with the other, focused his mind on the Sorcerer’s Tower and Traveled from the palace.

CHAPTER 1

ISN'T IT STILL A LITTLE COLD TO BE SITTING OUTSIDE?"

Ashtophar ignored the question and kept his eyes focused on the far side of the garden. It didn't surprise her he preferred his own to her company. If it weren't for her, he would have had the universe at his fingertips. Had their positions been reversed, she'd have had nothing to say to him, either.

Although the spring equinox was two weeks gone, the season was still chilly, even for the mountains. The earth, Perian sensed, was still recovering from the poisonous onslaught of the energy of the Everdark that had bled through the gash Hasdrugon had torn in the wall of the world to free Azdrefel. Magi in Estlin, spying on the enemy, reported the damage was even slower to heal there, so near to the source.

Ashtophar had long since recovered from the physical wound that had been her first sign he was no longer what he had been. He, too, might be considered a victim of the Everdark, but that would be absolving her of her part. Her grandmother said he would have survived even if Perian hadn't used the last of her strength to heal him as he lay bleeding in the great hall of the Star Clan's residence. Despite that assurance, she could not believe he didn't harbor deeper, unhealed wounds. How could he not? He had once been considered a god. Now, he was a cripple.

She was a Healer. She needed to fix him.

"I enjoy the solitude," he answered finally, his tone so neutral it was nearly a monotone. Then he looked at her, his face as neutral as his voice. "I'm quite old enough to be out here without supervision."

Words of apology clustered in her mouth, but she didn't let them escape. She'd done that, and had been absolved of responsibility—by everyone but herself. If she hadn't demanded he bring Randrik back from the dead, Ashtophar wouldn't be as he was. If not her fault, then whose?

Her breasts were growing uncomfortably full, so she gave up and went back inside, taking the stairs up to the suite of rooms on the second floor she occupied with Randrik—when he chose to be there—and their son. They could have taken quarters in the clan residence or one of the smaller homes set aside for clan use, but she had wanted to be close to her grandmother. As Chief Elder of the Drevnya, Firebird lived in the Great House.

She wished, not for the first time, that she could persuade her grandmother to let her help with council work. Custom said she would have to do it one day, as the undisputed next Star Clan elder, and she hated being unprepared.

“Your task for now is your son and your lifemate,” Firebird told her the first and every other time she asked. “I have many hands to help me. They have only you.”

Thinking she would prove she could do both, Perian had tried following the Drevnya custom of taking Star Rider with her snuggled in a cloth sling. She quickly abandoned that plan when she couldn’t overcome her discomfort at nursing him in public. However, the transition from “chosen to save the world” to having her entire life focused on domesticity left her feeling as if she had forgotten to do something.

And painfully bored.

She felt the touch of her baby’s mind as he woke, sensed his hunger and discomfort, and all but jogged the last few paces to the door. The clanswoman who served as Rider’s nanny was just getting up from her sewing to fetch him when Perian entered.

“Thank you, Winter Moon, I’ll get him,” she said with a grateful smile as warm drops began to darken the front of her blouse.

On the surface, she didn’t lack for something to do, between making more clothes for Rider and adding more blouses to her own wardrobe so she’d have enough to wear between trips to the laundry. If most of the time she felt as if she were trapped within the walls of the mansion, it was her problem to deal with.

With Rider clean and dry and relieving the almost painful pressure with all the table manners of a wolf cub, she leaned her head against the back of her chair, closed her eyes and wondered what she was going to do with the rest of her life.

THEY WERE BOTH ASLEEP WHEN RANDRIK ENTERED THE ROOM, SNUGGLED into a soft upholstered chair in a slanting cataract of afternoon sun. He closed the door silently, using just a touch of magic as a muffler, then crept over so he could stand looking at them.

Rider, lost in baby dreams, gave a milk-smear smile, and Randrik’s breath caught as his eyes burned with unshed tears. He gently lifted his

son to plant a kiss on his gleaming red curls then tucked him in bed. Rider heaved a sigh and slept on.

He had sworn to Perian he would not allow his son to grow up fatherless, as he had. All his life he had both loved and hated his own father for putting duty before family and getting himself killed. Yet here he was to tell her he was about to do the same thing—put his life on the target range at the behest of his newly honed conscience and a crippled god.

There was hunger for revenge to be sated, too, but that he would have set that aside, at least temporarily. Once, he would have been willing to die trying for redress from Hasdrugon, which would have been an even greater violation of his promise. That was before he had looked into a pair of teal eyes filled with nothing but innocence and trust and seen there the one thing stronger than his hatred for the man who had raped and humiliated him in the service of a god.

Desire lashed through him so hard and fast he fought to suppress a groan of pain. He and Perian hadn't made love since their return from Estlin. Worse, he hadn't wanted to. He'd used the excuse she needed to heal and rest—from childbirth, from banishing Azdrefel the Souleater back to the Everdark, from using her last remaining strength to keep Ashtophar from bleeding to death. All of it true, used to cover a lie.

They knew now that unless Ashtophar was beheaded he would never die no matter how badly injured the physical body that held him prisoner. Pain was part of his punishment for violating the rules of noninterference laid on him by his kind when he was appointed this world's guardian. He knew Perian blamed herself. He also knew her well enough to doubt even telling her the truth would change her mind. It was one of her more frustrating characteristics that she insisted on assuming responsibility even when it wasn't hers to assume—and insisting on trying to repair things.

So, he preferred to use whatever excuses made sense to avoid the possibility that his memories of his captivity would prevent him from making love to his lifemate.

He returned to the sitting room and gathered her in his arms, then sat in the chair still warm from her body. Like their son, she sighed in her sleep then nestled more snugly against him.

He would put her to bed and leave before—
“Randrik?”

She tipped her head back to see his face, and another wave of need slammed through him. Almost of their own accord, his fingers trailed over her bared breast, and he watched heat kindle in her emerald eyes.

Her breath hitched as he cupped her and circled her nipple with his thumb. He should stop, tell her what he had to before this went any further. Light knew she wouldn't want him to touch her after he told his news, and he could avoid potential failure one more time.

But then she gave a soft whimper and arched to press against his hand, dropping her Shield to let her love and need spill over him, and he was lost.

Their joining lacked all dignity and finesse. The instant their mouths met nothing existed save the two of them and the hunger to merge in each other. She smelled of lavender and milk; he smelled of sandalwood and patchouli. Her skin was satin against his palms, his hair silk against her threading fingers. Desire was a bonfire, each touch of fingertip and lips and tongues fuel, and when she knelt over him and impaled herself—hot, slick velvet—he exploded so hard there was as much pain as pleasure as they fell into oblivion.

And shared everything that had happened to them, from the moment she was taken from the Temple of Light's dungeon to this moment without time in which they drifted, boundary-less, two souls made one by a lifelong bond and Drevnya magic.

She was crying when he finally returned to his body, the air chill against naked skin—at some point he'd used magic and made their clothes go away. He fetched a throw from the sofa by the hearth with a tug of magic and drew it around them.

"What's wrong, *chernaya*?" he asked, although he knew—and hated that she did. He had hoped to spare her *that* knowledge, at least.

"How could I have been so stupid?"

Which wasn't the answer he'd expected. He sat her upright and wiped her cheeks with the heel of his hand, confused by a reaction that made no sense.

"When I found out you were with her—"

Oh. "Altani."

"Yes, Altani. I was certain she was your lover, when all the while... And what they did—"

"Shh," he commanded, pulling her down so her cheek nestled in the hollow of his shoulder. "Your grandmother and my mother all but dragged me to the loremasters. It's just a bad memory."

This time she shoved herself up, chiseled cheekbones dusky, eyes snapping. He got hard again, knew she felt it, watched another kind of heat weave into her outrage...

Felt the unfocused wave of hunger and discomfort coming from the bedroom as Rider woke. Saw droplets of milk seep from her taut nipples. Caught one on his finger and licked it off, eyes locked with hers.

"Promise me you'll stay right here," she demanded, but he knew this time it had nothing to do with the renewed desire lighting her life energy bright rose. Bonded empaths did have certain communication advantages over other people. Or disadvantages, if you wanted to keep a secret for any length of time.

“We need to talk,” he agreed with an inward sigh.

She understood it was as much of a promise as she was going to get, although a quick grimace said she wasn't happy with it.

“Go clean up,” he told her, guiding her to her feet. “I'll get Rider.”

He chose to ignore the raised eyebrows. Despite everything, she still managed to be shocked when he did something she hadn't expected. Like change a diaper.

Oh, well. If stopping Hasdrugon didn't kill him, he would have a few thousand years to plumb her ability to be surprised.

CHAPTER 2

WE'RE COMING WITH YOU."

She said it softly, so as not to disturb the infant in her arms. She knew Randrik didn't make the error of taking that for uncertainty, and she suppressed a grin. He thought he knew her so well he could predict her every response, and it was fun puncturing his smug overconfidence.

"Leave Ashkaron?" he asked, as if he thought she might not have considered what she was proposing would entail.

"If we can't be a family here—and you just said it might be months at a time you'd have to stay in the Tower or wherever—then I'll go where we *can* be."

"I know what I said. But have you thought about what you could be letting yourself in for? Altiera is still at the Tower, with her crowd, and she's no fonder of either of us."

"I can handle Altiera and her pets. She's hardly an Azdrefel."

She regretted the comparison the instant she made it. She'd imagined for the last year what Randrik had suffered at the hands of Hasdrugon and his greedy god, but the reality seen in their Sharing had appalled her. That she would have suffered the same once Azdrefel had claimed their son's body made her want to vomit.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Bad choice of words."

"Do me a favor, *chernaya*. I hadn't intended you to know...that. But dancing around it for the next thirty centuries isn't going to make it go away. I was raped, brutalized, compelled to perform acts of perversion that made me want to die rather than have to think about them. You wouldn't let me die, so deal with it."

His voice was tight, almost negating the Drevnya endearment—*chernaya*—and he had gone to stare out the window that overlooked the central courtyard. She knew it was so she wouldn't see the tears on his

cheeks. It was useless, his trying to hide from her, though he didn't seem to realize it yet.

Once, he had been able to block her from his mind and body and emotions. Even his life energy had been hidden. Since they had combined their power to banish Azdrefel the Souleater back to his prison in the Everdark, that was no longer possible. The life bond that connected them had opened so she was always aware of him, like a passenger in her soul. It took only a slight touch more of concentration to know how he felt.

Someone tapped on the door, and Randrik wiped his face with the backs of his hands before he went to see who it was. He stepped aside without a word.

"My apologies if I seemed rude earlier," Ashtophar said to her in a tone without a pinch of regret.

He had, before his transformation, usually taken the form of a slight blond man, little more than a head taller than she was, or as the foolish, ugly nobleman "Tarash of Tenbock." Even so, he had always worn an aura of damped power if one were alert enough to see it.

Now he had only one power—the ability to see the future. However, he had explained as his spear wound was healing, he saw not one future but all of them, the multiplicity of possibilities. He no longer needed to refrain from offering his assistance based on that knowledge, but unless one thread truly stood out he was as limited by his fear of choosing the wrong one as he had been by the previous injunction to watch and not meddle.

The Elder Ones had assigned Ashtophar to guard the world of which the land of Karlathia was a part from the depredations of Azdrefel, that one of their kind who had shaped it. Ashtophar had been given permission only to watch, on pain of dire consequences, as Azdrefel had been considered safely imprisoned in the void of the Everdark.

The ancient stories said Ashtophar had risked those consequences to create two races capable of using magic—her Drevnya and Randrik's Magi—when Azdrefel escaped his prison. The Souleater was sent back, although barely. Then, for the next three thousand years and more Ashtophar had tread the narrow edge of his limitations to ensure the preservation of two tools only the most powerful of those two races could use, should the Souleater escape his confinement again.

Which he had.

But Ashtophar had stepped beyond his limits when Perian had demanded—*pleaded* was too soft a word for what she had done in that blood-spattered room of the Black Sanctorum—he save Randrik's life. She had watched him struggle before he acquiesced, but she hadn't cared. So, when, Ashtophar assured her his present condition was not her

fault, it was only when he annoyed her enough, as he had this afternoon, that she came close to believing him.

“Is there something you need?” she asked as the timely coincidence of his arrival registered.

He glanced from her, wrapped in a robe and clearly little else, to Randrik, who wore only trousers, and then he stared into infinity. She shifted in the chair, watching the expressions that flowed over her sleeping infant’s face. She knew what Ashtophar was doing—studying the myriad threads of possibility—and it irritated her. She knew he was determining what she and Randrik having made love would mean in the scheme of things, and it was embarrassing.

Ashtophar frowned slightly, but only for an instant. Then the sweet smile she had always loved, and saw far too infrequently these days, brightened his face.

“No, not really. I ran into your mother in the hall, Randrik, and she asked me to remind you you’re having dinner with her.”

“And you came all this way to deliver the message,” Randrik said with false congeniality. “How thoughtful of you.”

So, he was no happier with their visitor than she was.

If her relationship with Ashtophar was tainted by her guilt, Randrik’s was impossible for her to interpret. Even sensing his feelings didn’t help. That was the one thing he *was* able to block.

Randrik leaned against the now-closed door, arms crossed, expression neutral. Ashtophar turned to face him, and she couldn’t see whether the Guardian’s face belied the soft cheeriness of his reply.

“She’s invited me as well, so I’ll wait and talk to you then.”

“I’ll save you the trouble. The royal family is safely in the Tower, and His Royal Highness is looking for someone’s nose to flatten. You might want to have Darak take you over so you can meet him. I’ll give your excuses to Mother.”

Stunned by Randrik’s rudeness, Perian watched Ashtophar respond with a shrug then nod and turn to leave. Randrik remained in his way while they exchanged a long look then stepped aside.

She stood and hurried into the nursery to put Rider in his crib. Activity didn’t drain away any of her shocked outrage.

“How could you say that to him?” she demanded when she returned to the sitting room. “After all he’s done, all he’s suffered.”

She had long since ceased thinking of Ashtophar as the god long years of legend had made him. Still, the habit of reverence isn’t easily broken, even after you’ve seen your deity bleeding from a well-aimed arrow. She could never treat him as Randrik had just done, as if he were a servant who had failed miserably at his assigned task.

“You have no idea of all he’s done,” Randrik said. He had gathered the rest of his clothes and was fully dressed. “And his suffering is by his own choice. The only difference between now and before is there’s nothing that prevents him from taking an active part. Which, except for an occasional hint, he still refuses to do.”

He sauntered to a sideboard in the dining room and filled a tall glass with fireberry wine from the decanter on it. Tossing back a third of it, he returned to stare into the dusk-filled courtyard.

“And that gives you the right to be rude?”

He was silent for so long she almost convinced herself he was repenting. When he finally turned, the grim look on his face made her stomach lurch.

“I think it would be better if you and Rider stay here.”

She felt how it hurt him to say it, but that made no difference. Just as before, he was relegating her to the role of someone who wasn’t part of his life, a passive observer whose only function was to follow his orders when necessary.

“So you can drop in for a few hours’ amusement when you have them to spare?”

“If you’re going to question every move I make, yes.” He drank another third of his wine, cold eyes fixed on her, then set the glass down. “This is a war, Perian, and it won’t be won by committee. If Ashtophar thought you were the best choice to run it he would have said so.”

“I never said I wanted to run it.”

“You just questioned how I deal with him. You’ll do it any time you disagree with something I choose to do—we both know you will.”

Yes, they did know. There had been a time when the idea of challenging anyone’s authority was beyond her. She’d been cured. And though she trusted him with her soul, she knew she would question his decisions if she thought they were wrong or incomplete. The admission didn’t help, though. Someone should be there to challenge him, and she doubted anyone else would dare. He was the Archmage, the first in thirty centuries, the most powerful being in the world now that Ashtophar had been rendered human. She knew Randrik would never misuse that power, but it could corrupt even the best into believing they knew what needed to be done in every instance.

His expression softened. He came to her and bracketed her face with his hands, tipping it so she had to look at him.

“You and Rider are the only things that matter to me. Do you believe that?”

“I know.” How could she not, with his feelings throbbing deep in her chest with each beat of her heart? Still...

“Our kind were created for one purpose—to protect the other races of this world against forces they can’t handle.”

“But—”

He silenced her by pressing a finger against her lips.

“I’ve just stolen the King of Oestrand away from his people. Hasdrugon’s army is about to march onto the plains. We have no way to stop him—now.

“I have to gain the respect of people who hate us, who believe we betrayed them long ago. Some will be convinced our real purpose in helping them now is to rule in Hasdrugon’s place. I am in command, but for the next while, I’ll be holding it by a very thin thread. What I can’t have—*dare* not have—is someone who will debate my decisions in front of those who must see me as their unquestioned leader.”

He bent down, brushed his lips over hers, then again, then took them in a kiss that left her with trembling knees and spinning head.

“I can’t afford to have you around, chernaya.”

His voice was gentle, his hyacinth-blue eyes filled with regret, but she felt the implacable finality of his resolution deep within. It ached like an old wound, gripped her throat and squeezed out tears of frustration and loss that burned her eyes. She had fought with a god for this man’s life. They were supposed to be together, watching their son grow up, lying in each other’s arms making more sons and daughters. He wasn’t supposed to leave her and put their life together at risk again. Battling the forces of Azdrefel was just as much her job as his.

“I love you, chernaya,” he murmured in the velvet rumble that always made heat pool in her groin. “Know that, and trust in it.”

And then, before she could wrap her tongue around the words to tell him she loved him, too, to argue he had no right to take on all the responsibility himself, a tingle of magic wafted over her and he was gone.

CHAPTER 3

RANDRIK FOUND THE ROYAL FAMILY WITH ASHTOPHAR IN THE LARGE SOLARIUM by the Tower's north keep, and it didn't require magical talent to see the king was still not ready to accept the situation. Ganev paced on the white stone path, his wife, two-month-old son and daughter on a bench behind him. Ashtophar sat on the one opposite, the image of patience. The king looked ready to gnaw on one of the ornamental trees.

The Army of Azdrefel had descended on the farmlands of eastern Oestrand, and the lack of resistance other than from scattered pockets of hopelessly brave locals didn't prevent them from slaughtering innocents in the name of their god. The Tower had established communication lines, spreading word before the invasion that the king had ordered his people not to fight the enemy but to wait until Oestrand had enough of an army to deliver at least hope of victory. He hadn't, but that didn't matter as long as they believed he had. Still, some of Ganev's subjects shared his belief that heroics were a substitute for tactics.

At first glance, Ganev Milhatril didn't look like anyone's idea of royalty. Like most Oestrandi, he was short and stocky, with a broad face, square chin and round eyes that gave him an ingenuous look. It was only when you really observed him that you saw those pale-blue eyes were sharp with intelligence, and he carried himself in a way that made him seem taller than he was.

"You have no right to keep me here," he bellowed the moment Randrik stepped into view. "My country has been invaded. My people need me."

"Your people need you alive if you are to retrieve their country from our enemy's hands," Ashtophar explained, and by the strained patience in his tone not for the first time. "Please accept that you could not prevent Hasdrugon from succeeding, and attempting to stop him would have only resulted in needless deaths, including yours."

“My love, perhaps these people are right.” Queen Belory signaled to the nanny and murmured to her to take Princess Asintea where she wouldn’t be frightened by the argument. Her husband opened his mouth to protest; either he still feared for their safety—something of a stretch considering they’d been unmolested and very well seen to for the past three months—or he wanted them all together in case an opportunity to escape appeared. The look the queen shot him said he might rule the country but she ruled the castle, even this one.

The child gone, she went to his side and took his hand. The king’s cheekbones flared when, with a mental command, Randrik fetched the royal sword from where it had been hidden.

“You should listen to your lady,” he told Ganev, resting the sword on his shoulder and joining them. “Unless your goal in life is to die a noble but pointless death.”

He stopped in front of the king and offered him the blade. He was, to all appearances, unarmed. Their eyes held for a long moment, during which the only sounds were the soft rush of water from an unseen fountain, and the child’s laughter. Then Ganev gripped the sheath in one hand and claimed his weapon.

“I know you,” he said. “I thought as much when you first turned up but couldn’t place you. You stole a woman from the Temple.”

“I rescued a woman they planned to sacrifice to Azdrefel—and lost my aunt to the Beggar’s Guild scum they hired for guards.”

Ganev turned to Ashtophar.

“And this one won’t say *who* he is.”

Ashtophar made just the slightest twitch of warning, a bit of body language only someone who knew him as well as Randrik did would even notice. If the Guardian told them who he really was, the king would expect a demonstration of proof.

“Lord Tarash is my advisor,” Randrik said, which wasn’t a lie. Belatedly, he bowed to the queen, narrowing his attention as if they were the only two people present. It was a technique that rarely failed with women.

The importance of the situation gave his conscience some absolution for spying on her mind. She smiled—she found him handsome, and the narrow black scar bisecting his left cheek from eye socket to chin, she thought, made him seem both sinister and exciting. It was a good start.

What’s more, she had a touch of Talent, a small ability to sense the feelings of those she spoke to. She knew he meant what he said—and her lifemate had come to rely on her judgment.

Even better.

“Look,” he said, turning back to the king, “I know we started badly, and I apologize for the punch. I just thought you’d prefer it to my tampering with your mind.”

Ganev went pale, and fear drifted from him like a smell. His lady looked uncomfortable, too, but with the idea of its being done rather than the knowledge Randrik could do it. Randrik glanced at Ashtophar, who gave a single brief nod. So, he had seen this woman’s future long ago and had arranged then for one of the Magi who hadn’t immolated themselves in the Tower to train her when she was a child. That meant she understood the rules he abided by.

“There is a very complete library here in the Tower,” he told Ganev. “I suggest your best first move is to use it. My people will continue making sure everyone knows you and your family aren’t dead. That should keep them primed until we’re prepared.”

“Prepared for what?” Ganev demanded, the hand gripping his sword white-knuckled. “The Estlini are sinking roots faster than weeds after rain. The longer they’re here, the harder it will be to yank them out.”

“We’ll talk about that after you’ve read what really happened when we and the Drevnya are supposed to have abandoned your kind. For this to work, we have to trust one another.”

“Why should I believe anything a Mage *wrote* any more than I do what one says?”

“The history he refers to wasn’t written by a Mage,” Ashtophar informed him. “It was written by Varin the Chronicler and suppressed by the Temple of Light five centuries ago.”

“And how do you plan to prove that?”

“Which part?”

“Take your pick.”

No doubt about it, the King of Oestrand didn’t trust them and wasn’t ready to change his mind. He wasn’t, however, used to dealing with prescient former deities, either.

“Do you recognize this?” Ashtophar picked up a small leather-bound book from the seat beside him and held it out. Ganev stepped to take it, opened it a random and scanned two facing pages.

“It’s the diary of Varin—my father made me read it so I would see how easily even a wise man can stray into delusion.” He turned a few more pages then stopped and stared at one for three breath-lengths before looking at Ashtophar from under his dense, dark eyebrows. “This *is* my copy—I wrote this comment on what I thought of old Varin when I was thirteen. I buried it in the library archives the minute I had the chance because my father would have skinned the hide off my ass if he’d seen it.”

“So you did,” Ashtophar agreed politely, then continued, “The history I will provide is also written in Varin’s own hand. You will easily be able to compare it to this. Of course, you may argue we could have forged it, but I believe once you see the volume in question you’ll accept that writing it for the sole purpose of perpetrating a hoax would have been...extreme.”

For the first time, a glint of humor flickered in the king’s eyes.

“I take it I’m being assigned some heavy reading.”

“Very heavy,” Ashtophar replied with an answering twinkle. “And I fear Varin’s academic style is even more turgid than his personal one.”

Ganev winced then stared at his boot tips with a thoughtful frown.

“As for our knowing about the invasion,” Randrik said, “that’s been going on for the better part of a year. Servants of Azdrefel have been sneaking into every corner of the country, infiltrating the criminal societies and recruiting. Any foundation for your defense was already undermined.”

He didn’t remind Ganev that there had been clear signs of that infiltration in the Temple of Light. He suspected the king’s eagerness to launch into hopeless battle was as much an effort to make up for not doing something about that when it first happened as it was for defending his people.

As they waited for Ganev to make up his mind, the nanny appeared around a curve in the walk with the princess. The little girl bolted and ran straight to Randrik, who knelt and picked her up. She stared into his eyes, traced one tiny finger along his scar.

“Ow,” she said.

“Uh-huh,” he agreed. “But it’s better now.”

She bent her arm to reveal a fresh scrape on one elbow.

“Ow.”

“I bet that hurts.” He knew both her parents were watching, the queen with mixed curiosity and nervousness, the king with the piercing gaze of a man used to judging other men. Gently, Randrik pressed his lips to the injury. “Does that help?”

The princess bobbed her head and blessed him with a dimpled smile then wriggled to be put down. Back on her feet, she dashed to her mother and buried her face in the queen’s skirt before turning her head to shoot him a flirtatious glance.

“Do you have children...I never got your name.”

“Randrik alt Harbinnen, my lady.”

“Do you have children, Randrik?”

“My son will be five months soon. He lives in Ashkaron, the Drevnya city, with his mother.”

“Alt Harbinnen,” Ganev interjected. “That name sounded familiar when the Temple wanted you arrested. Was Terrik alt Harbinnen—”

“My father. Who died in the line of duty in *your* father’s service.”

There was a long pause as once again the king took Randrik’s measure. When the man at last made his decision the change in the atmosphere was palpable.

“I don’t condone your methods, Archmage,” he said, “but sparing me the necessity of reading Varin will go a long way toward making up for that sore jaw you gave me.”

From the corner of his eye, Randrik saw Ashtophar’s shoulders loosen with relief.

“I’d take a sore jaw over Varin any day,” he agreed with a grin. “But why don’t we see if we can’t find the princess something good to eat.”

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