

A large, glowing orange-red full moon dominates the upper half of the image. The moon's surface is detailed with craters and darker patches. Below the moon, the dark silhouettes of evergreen trees and a mountain range are visible against a dark sky. A path or stream winds through the lower part of the scene, reflecting the light from the moon. The overall atmosphere is mysterious and ethereal.

HUNTERS
OF A
FADED GOD

JC Shelby

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

HUNTERS OF A FADED GOD

By JC Shelby

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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HUNTERS OF A FADED GOD

By JC Shelby

Photo Description

Two fully dressed young men lie together on a bed as sunlight streams in through a thin, translucent window shade. One has blond hair and wears a white short-sleeve shirt; he is on his back, head turned away to the left to face his companion. The smaller dark-haired young man, wearing a red-stripped shirt, is on his right side, eyes closed, his left arm flung over the waist of the blond man. Both seem at peace.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

This is how we were last time I saw him. Well, the truly last time I saw him was five minutes later when he was being dragged out of my flat through the broken-in door by armed men. Another one stood by making sure I would not do anything stupid—like try to stop Them.

Now I go about my life, keeping my head down. To this day I don't know what happened. All I know is that at the time he wasn't confused or surprised—terrified, yes, but not confused. What had he hidden so well from me? And why should I care? We hadn't dated for even four months before he was gone and with the added threat-veiled-as-advice from Them it should have been awfully easy to forget all about him, right?

The reason can be sci-fi, mundane or paranormal/urban fantasy, but not vampires/shifters/werewolves. Some kind of road trip would be a bonus but not a must-have. And of course, HEA please.

Sincerely,

Barbara

Story Info

Genre: alternate universe, urban fantasy

Tags: mages, magic users, polytheistic society, mythical creatures, non-explicit, hurt/comfort, reluctant heroes, lunar calendar, established couple, abduction

Content Warnings: drug use (not by main characters), death of secondary characters

Word Count: 52,833

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Midlands Territorial Calendar – Standard Year:
Month and Moon Names

After the winter solstice:

- Wolf (January) Wolf Moon
- Storm (February) Storm Moon
- Crow (March) Crow Moon

After the spring equinox:

- Seed (April) Seed Moon, also Pink Moon
- Hare (May) Hare Moon
- Flower (June) Lovers Moon, also Rose Moon

After the summer solstice:

- Thunder (July) Thunder Moon
- Grain (August) Grain Moon
- Harvest (September) Harvest Moon

After the autumnal equinox:

- Hunt (October) Hunters Moon
- Beaver (November) Beaver Moon
- Snow (December) Snow Moon

Note:

—Each month is a full lunar cycle. The moon usually shares the name of the month, although some months the moon may have other nicknames as well (most commonly Lovers Moon and Hunters Moon). Leap years will contain a thirteenth month, a Blue Moon.

HUNTERS OF A FADED GOD

By JC Shelby

Prologue

Moonset of the full Grain Moon

As hundreds of people gathered together to celebrate the cycles of the moon and the sun, to witness together the transition from night to day, to honor their chosen gods, three men hunted.

When the last star disappeared from the lightening sky, musicians began to play the Moon Descending movement. One hunter made his way slowly through the suddenly quiet crowd, relying on the tracking charm in his hand to lead him to his chosen prey. He appreciated neither the sight of the full moon edging behind the hills to the west, nor the reflection of the moon upon the pristine water of the lake.

The moon slid out of sight as the music swelled to a crescendo, then stopped. No one spoke. No one played with phones or cameras. The croak of a frog first broke the silence, and from the surrounding trees, a bird began its morning song. First one violin, then two, began to play a song of sorrow, of loss, of loneliness, before flutes and pipes began a hopeful countermelody. The first strong rays of the sun were peeking over the eastern horizon when the hunter spotted the quarry that had led him and his companions on a long chase.

A young, dark-haired man stood with his back against the chest of a taller blond man, who leaned against a dock railing. The hunter paused. He had expected the runaway to be alone. Easy prey.

Vocalists and more instruments joined in the music as the Sunrise Chorus swelled over the crowd. The blond man pointed out across the lake to where the silhouette of a heron posed in the light of the rising sun.

As the hunter neared the pair, the shorter one turned, his face visible. The hunter congratulated himself. Definitely the youth he sought. Finally. He would be well rewarded. He watched as the two young men embraced, with the familiar ease of lovers. No! His boss would not be pleased to learn of a lover. The offering was supposed to be pure. On the other hand, perhaps he wouldn't need to mention this detail.

The hunter signaled to his companions and prepared to follow the couple away from the gathering. He would let them separate themselves from the herd, and then he would find a better place to capture his prize.

And if, somewhere, the gods and goddesses of the world were watching and waiting and weighing, the hunters did not care.

Chapter One

Rio, First Prayer

~In the Temple of Nerzu, manifested god of springs, rivers, fountains, wells,
and fresh water~

Nerzu, I don't have a lot of extra money at the moment. You'll understand why soon. But take these azurite stones as decoration and these water hyacinth to help cleanse the lesser fountain. I've infused the stones with what power I can spare. I have followed you as my patron since my seventh year. You know I don't often pray to you for aid, much as I honor you. But now I need help. Please hear the start of my tale and judge my sincerity.

After the Moonset-Sunrise celebration, Phoenix and I returned to my apartment, full of light and music, giddy but exhausted. We kicked off our footwear and collapsed, still dressed, upon my bed to sleep. I am not sure how much time passed, but at some point the shifting patterns of sunlight and shadow slowly teased me awake. I yawned and blinked sleepily, watching the translucent window shade sway in the summer breeze and listening to the birds chattering outside the window. My gaze shifted down to my lover and I smiled. I wanted to get out of my clothes and take a shower, but not until after I convinced Phoenix to join me. Then I thought perhaps I should just let him sleep. Phoenix had seemed stressed and tired recently. Rest might be more useful to him than sex.

You don't mind if I mention a male lover, do you? Stories of your past have you paired with both female and male water elementals. And perhaps even mortals of both genders. Someday I would love to see a water elemental again, but I think they are frightened of our cities, and who can blame them? But I digress.

That morning, I stretched and rolled over onto my back. I could be unselfish, I decided as I started to rise. Phoenix mumbled something without opening his eyes, flinging an arm across me, holding me close.

"Are you awake?" I whispered.

"No."

I laughed, turned on my side, reached out my hand, and began to slide it up under Phoenix's shirt, lightly enough to tickle.

“Bet I can wake you up.”

“Not gonna happen. Go back to sleep.” Even as he spoke, Phoenix had already begun to pull me closer. Our hands lazily caressed, our lips touched. A perfect morning moment, like a shallow brook trickling over time-polished, sun-warmed stones.

Crash! From the next room, I heard the crack of splintering wood. I rolled over even as Phoenix pushed himself up on his knees. I admit I froze and lay gaping at the sight of armed men pushing into the room. One of them pointed a weapon directly at my chest, while another man reached over me and grabbed Phoenix by his arm. Phoenix was yanked off the bed and thrust into the hold of a third man.

I watched, unable to move or think, as Phoenix struggled, his slender frame dwarfed by the muscled thugs.

“Keep still, you little punk, or your pal dies.”

Phoenix immediately stopped moving. His eyes seemed greener than usual against his paling skin. I tried to read his expression. Fear, certainly. Maybe even terror. And apology. Shock, but no surprise. Whatever was happening, Phoenix knew who these men were.

“Just let me get my shoes.”

Without so much as a glance at the corner where his boots lay half-hidden under a chair, Phoenix pointed at a new pair of sandals that I had bought myself last week and hadn’t even had a chance to wear. One of the intruders grabbed the sandals, thrusting them at Phoenix. The man holding Phoenix shoved him to the floor, keeping a grip on his shoulder and a weapon to his back. Phoenix shot me a “keep quiet” warning glance. So I did. Not that I could think of anything to say.

As soon as Phoenix was finished, he was pulled to his feet and shoved out of the room by two of the men. I finally sat up. The third man, the one holding the drawn weapon, spoke to me for the first time.

“Forget this happened, and if you know what’s good for you, forget you ever met Nickson.” And he pulled the trigger.

Pain! Intruders! Poison! Danger!

I collapsed back against the bed as the last man left. With my right hand, I reached up to touch the dart sticking out of my chest. I barely refrained from

yanking it out. Instead I spread my hand near the area where the dart was and *focused* my energy, my magic, down into the blood moving away from the entry wound. There. I could feel the toxins from the dart entering my bloodstream. *Intruder! Poisons!* Or maybe not toxins. A magic substance. A very bad magic substance. Fortunately, blood was enough like water, and in that moment I was enough in tune with my own body, that I hoped I could isolate the particles with water magic. I forced the contaminated blood to move against its desired flow, shoving it back upstream toward the hole, letting it pool and swell under my skin as healthy blood moved underneath it. *Have to let the healthy blood flow. Can't stop it completely or I die. Can't let this stuff into me. Something bad.*

I didn't seem to have the strength to get the stuff out. *Need to remove dart. Let blood out the hole.* Preferably without cutting my hand and getting even more infected. I almost lost my concentration when Tobi and Liam burst into the room.

“Oh, shit. Rio. What happened? Who were those men? Never mind that now.” Tobi dropped to her knees and held a hand near the dart. “Grade Three amnesia spell with hypnotic and sedative components.”

Now, afterward, when I have had time to think, I am extremely impressed. I mean, she identified that spell in less than five seconds. Well, less than ten. Do you know Tobi Fierro, Nerzu? I have no idea whether gods pay attention to other gods' followers. Her patron deities are the God of Forensics and at least one of the three Goddesses of Knowledge. Some people mistake her for a fire mage, with her auburn hair and amber eyes. But she does not have elemental or crafts magic the way the majority of people do, unless she has just a little of all types of magic, nor can she practice any beyond basic replenishment and storage. Instead she can recognize any type of spell currently in place and most magic recently used in an area, even if no longer active. How long after casting she can identify a spell depends on how strong it was. She works primarily as a sniffer, a Crime Scene Spell Examiner. And she hates being called a sniffer, because she says her ability seems to be tied in more to Sight and other mage senses than anything else.

Where was I? Oh yeah, on my back, my energy levels dropping, my control faltering, trying to keep an extremely dangerous pollutant out of my bloodstream.

Liam pulled a pair of protective gloves—*where had those come from?*—over his dark hands and leaned over me. Concern and concentration vied for

dominance on his face. Healing magic slid into me, surrounded my own. “You have it contained?”

“Yeah,” I gasped, trying to believe that I did. “Need stones. Drawer.”

Tobi yanked open the drawer from the bedside cabinet and grabbed my strand of focus stones, shoving them into my left hand. My magic settled and strengthened as it flowed into my treasured aquamarine, the little sapphires, and the irregular but strong clear topaz chunks, and then flowed back into my body. I found the last little bits of the vile stuff and gathered it all together.

“The dart’s not barbed,” Liam told me. “I need to pull it out. Tell me when.”

“Now.” *Get it out! Get it out! Before my blood starts to recognize the poison.*

In a swift move, Liam pushed one hand against my shoulder to hold me down and pulled the dart smoothly out with the other. Immediately I felt small dots of blood stain my shirt, imagined the red, bright against the white fabric. I tried to push the contaminated blood out through the hole, but it did not want to leave. It seemed to be congealing, the blood and the poison clinging together. Liam’s magic worked with mine to try to loosen the mass. With a soft curse, Liam pulled a scary-looking needle from somewhere, and I felt a stronger pulse of concentrated healing magic even as he pierced me with the tip in almost the same spot where the dart had entered. I sighed with relief to find I could now shove all the bad blood out of my body. Soon I could no longer *feel* any of it inside me.

Tobi donned a second pair of protective gloves and picked up a pair of scissors—I wondered if they had come from the same place as the mysterious needle—and cut a vertical slice up my shirt, bypassing the blood-stained area as much as possible. She pulled the remnants apart and peered closely at the wound. “Looks as if it’s bleeding clean of magic. What a nasty spell. Not the strongest amnesia spell I’ve seen, but nothing to laugh at it, either. That could have seriously messed with your mind.”

“Or killed you with blood clots.” Liam’s addition was not very reassuring. “Although the clotting might have been a by-product of the blood being stopped from flowing naturally.”

“Yay.” I felt drained both from the panic and the magic use. “They, those men, they told me to forget they were here. And maybe to forget Phoenix, altogether. Only they called Phoenix by a different name.”

Tobi and Liam looked at each other and then at me.

“Maybe it would be better if you pretend you have,” Tobi suggested. “That the spell worked. At least for now. You don’t know who they are and why they wanted Phoenix, or whomever he is. You don’t want them coming after you to try something more permanent. So pretend it worked. When it’s safe you can ‘remember’ later, if you need to.”

Wait, Ms. Honesty and Justice is advising me to lie? To the police she works with? I tried to wrap my mind around that, but it refused to cooperate. Finally, I simply agreed. “Yeah. Safe is good.”

Liam stripped off the gloves, turning them inside out and tucking one inside the other, and used his shirt sleeve to wipe sweat from his bald head. He helped me sit up and assisted me to the bathroom. “The police may be here any minute, so let’s make this quick if we’re going to hide your recovery.” Liam tossed my shirt in the spell-shielded waste container, along with the cloth he had used to clean the area around the wound, and stashed the container under the sink. He put a small bandage on my chest. I felt the slight tingle of the protective spell as the bandage adhered to my skin.

I grabbed a shirt from the top of my laundry pile, pulling it on unbuttoned. Liam and I entered the living room just as Tobi appeared in the doorway with two uniformed officers. She now had her badge fastened to her shirt.

I sank down on the sofa. I didn’t even have to pretend to be shocked as I stared at the door, now dangling precariously from its one remaining hinge. “Why did they do that?”

She performed introductions. “Riordan Lantos, Liam Braun, meet Detective Flores and Officer Klein. I’ve explained to them that you were shot with an amnesia spell, Rio. And that such spells take effect within a couple of minutes of the magic entering your bloodstream.” Tobi gestured with the dart she held, already sealed in an evidence bag.

“Other residents heard the door breaking and saw several people leaving the complex. Possibly four men. Do you know who they are or why they were here, Mr. Lantos?”

My eyes had closed during the questioning, mostly to avoid looking at the door, but now I opened them. “No.” Almost the complete truth. I didn’t know the three strangers, had no idea why they had been here, and now, much to my dismay, wasn’t sure I knew who Phoenix was.

“One of them might have been his new boyfriend,” Liam offered, smoothly implying that new was somehow more recent than four months. “Rio did say

yesterday they had been planning to go to Lake Pye for the ceremony. Unfortunately, I don't think I ever learned his date's true name."

I closed my eyes again. I just wanted to rest for a while and not have to think of lies and half-truths. The conversation drifted over me.

"...think his nickname might have been a bird name..." volunteered Tobi.

"What, like Robin or Hawk?" asked Officer Klein

"We can try a search of registered mage names, but it will take a while." Detective Flores frowned. "Dozens of people use bird and animal names, even when they aren't their birth names. Birds are especially popular among air mages and musicians. And you know most people don't bother to register mage names unless they stop using their birth names."

Liam contributed with a smooth drawl, "Raven would have been a better name for him. He reminded me of a raven."

I pictured Phoenix's feathery black hair and tried to smile. Remembering the bird I had seen that morning in the lake at sunrise, I mumbled, "Heron?" I had meant it as a suggestion, but the police seemed to take it as an identification and jotted it down.

"How long will it take him to regain his recent memory? And how far back in time does the spell go?" Because that question seemed to be directed at someone else, I let myself drift, barely listening to Liam's explanation about the uncertainty of amnesia spell and how the effects were individualized, and how the hypnotic addition presented an unknown and potentially random factor. And then, whether truthfully or because I continued to doze, Liam mentioned that these spells could cause their recipients to feel fatigued. Sometimes it is good to have a healer as a best friend.

"So you are basically saying he could recover tomorrow, next week, or never?" Detective Flores asked for clarification. I opened my eyes and watched as Officer Klein scribbled something on his pad.

Liam concurred.

"Maybe we can trace the missing person through his phone. Do you know his code?" Flores asked.

"Um..." I thought. "Maybe?" I knew his code included the Jorjina coastal prefix, and not the local prefix used in northwestern Jorjina. I shared that tidbit, and for a while my mind seemed devoid of additional useful information. *Prefix. Two colors. Four digits. I can do this.* "Uh... gold blue... maybe five six one three... no, wait, I think that part of the number is for a guy at work. I

don't know—it should be in my phone.” I gave up and gestured toward the table by the door. “It's over there.”

Tobi went over to look. “I've seen him drop his phone here when he walks in the door.” She paused. “I don't see it.” She pulled open the little drawer. “Your house keys and bike keys and wallet are inside, Rio, but no phone.”

“I always leave the phone there. On top, not in the drawer.”

The police exchanged glances, before writing down my code instead. “Maybe it was taken. We'll try calling it later, once we get a tracking spell in place.” I wondered if the spell would only work when the phone was on, because I remembered turning it off before the ceremony at the lake. Not that I could tell them that, if I was supposed to have forgotten the last several hours. Lying is way too complicated.

“I'll keep an ear out in case I misplaced it.” I could at least honestly make that promise.

After they asked for a description of the missing person, I listened as Liam and Tobi gave conflicting but truthful descriptions of Phoenix.

“I saw him come to visit Rio several times, and he usually wore fire mage colors. I think usually red. Sometimes orange.”

“Rio may have told me his friend was an air mage, only not a very strong one. I never heard him mention a job.” *What? Oh. “May have.” Clever. Because I hadn't ever told him, or ever thought, that Rio was an air mage.*

“No, I don't know where he lives.”

“How do we know Rio? I live next door. Liam lives downstairs.” Tobi provided their unit numbers. She didn't mention that the three of us had been best friends for the better part of four years, ever since we ended up tenants together in the same four-unit building.

Officer Klein looked at me, concern on his face, and turned to Liam. “He doesn't look well. Should we have him taken to the hospital? Or contact his family?”

Liam touched my forehead. “I am qualified to take care of him. I'll make sure he gets appropriate medical care, physical and magical.” He listed his credentials.

I fought to keep my eyes open. “I think my family's traveling. Taking my younger sister on a boat trip to visit a Siren colony in the Tilana Archipelago.” Like my father, Indigo could play half a dozen instruments, but her only trace

of our mother's water talent was a strong affinity for the ocean. She needed to be close to the sea to be happy. I have no innate musical skills. As a child I learned to read music, and to play a recorder with moderate competence, but I had been grateful rather than jealous when Indigo came along to follow in Dad's footsteps. The detective was still looking at me. Did he need more details? "Uh. My parents live in Port Sunrise. Emmet and Neave Lantos."

Finally the police left, after advising me to phone or stop by the local station if I remembered anything useful. I nodded.

Liam brought me a glass of water. After a few minutes, I stirred. "I need a shower. Need water on my skin."

"Hot tub would be better." Liam and Tobi assisted me down the outside steps of our two-story building, across the common yard to our complex's small hot-spring area. We could see police still questioning other residents who might have seen something, but they let us walk by without comment. Although the roof of the spring's adjacent bathhouse blocked the sun, the opaque skylights let in light, and the wide windows and doors were all open to the summer breezes. I managed to strip off my clothes, uncaring of my friends' presence, and slid into one of the smaller tubs fed by the spring waters.

I love the hot tubs. Small fragments of weaker minerals and lesser gemstone fragments are carefully worked into the tiles, mostly in the universal clears and blacks. They are not enough to store or replenish energy, but they do generate a comfortable hum against my bare skin. All sorts of magic has flowed through those stones. I can't ever identify all of them clearly, but they tease my senses the way spices in food tease my tongue, some sweet, some spicy, some tart.

Liam sorted through the jars of powders and liquids stored in the waterproof cabinet nearby, chose one, and then tossed a scoop of something into the water. I am always too afraid to add something, for fear I wouldn't be able to relax if the water feels impure. But I needn't have worried. Immediately, I sensed the change in the water, a positive change that complemented the natural minerals in the water and harmonized beautifully with my magic.

"You two are the best friends ever. Thanks for saving me."

And now I need to keep them safe, because they insist on accompanying me in this mad venture. So please, Nerzu, even though they are not your followers, help me to ensure they return home in one piece. And if I die, perhaps send some comfort to my family. This is all I pray for. I will do whatever you ask in return.

Chapter Two

Phoenix Captured

Phoenix sat quietly in a chair in the corner of an inexpensive motel room, alternating between surreptitiously watching his captors and staring at the floor. He had perfected the art of appearing unthreatening and insignificant before he was ten. And now he had something to enhance it. He adjusted his position in order to slide his little finger into his pocket, slowly wiggling until he touched the plain gray marble. *Nothing to see here. Just a harmless boy with a pathetically weak air talent and no initiative. Forget that I ran away. Just remember you think I'm a subservient little coward.* He might not have a projective empathy talent of his own, but he had acquired five powerful and illegal Suggestion Stones. Four of them were safely buried in different locations, wrapped in wax, silk, and clay. He had no qualms about using the fifth one now. *No need to tie me up, because you have cowed me into obedience.*

Actually that last thought wasn't far from the truth. What had kept him acquiescent was a fear that if he caused any trouble, his uncle's men might go after Rio again, and probably Rio's friends and other bystanders as well. His initial terror had subsided, but he sometimes let fear show on his face when they looked at him. He hid his grief and rising anger. Before he escaped, he wanted to know how they had located him, if possible. And if he had to kill them, if he could even bring himself to, well, that activity would be best done somewhere without potential witnesses.

Instead of immediately hitting the road and beginning the journey north to his uncle's mountain compound, the men had taken him to this inn on the far side of the city. Closer to the Interterritorial Highway, yes, but they had not actually left. The belongings scattered across the room suggested the men had been here for a while. Phoenix reassured himself that was a good sign. Somehow they had tracked him down, but it hadn't been easy for them.

"Boss will be pleased to hear about you," Malak had commented, waving his phone. But he had not actually called anyone. Nor had the other two. Instead, Malak had muttered something about checking in later, and the men had settled around a table already adorned with empty bottles, food containers, and a deck of cards. Otto had gone out for more food, and when he returned, the three of them ate. No one offered Phoenix anything. He would not have

trusted it if they had, but the smell of their food reminded him how long it had been since he had last eaten.

Phoenix wished he and Rio had eaten after the ceremony, instead of falling asleep. He wished they'd had time for one last... *no, don't think of Rio. Don't think of Rio.* Phoenix tried not to recall the fear in his lover's blue eyes, tried not to imagine the betrayal Rio might be feeling, assuming he even remembered. He tried not to think of Bryce with the dart gun, his cruel warning, the faint but distinctive sound of the dart gun firing. He tried not to think of Otto laughing about the hypno-amnesia spell on the darts. Of course he failed, and the scene replayed itself over and over in his mind. Phoenix prayed Rio was otherwise unharmed. He had managed a quick glance back, before he had been hustled out of sight, and had seen Liam running up to Rio's apartment. Could an amnesia spell truly be healed?

How much would Rio forget? Would he remember Phoenix at all? Remember when they first collided with each other on Black Cherry Lane? Remember their first kiss by the fountain in Pearlman's Square? Maybe if Phoenix lived to complete his self-imposed task, he could return, and he and Rio could start over again, without Phoenix's deceit between them. If Rio didn't think Phoenix had abandoned him. But of course Rio wouldn't think that. Even if Rio forgot him, plenty of other people had seen him leave against his will. Rio would probably think he was dead. Unfortunately, being dead was not the worst thing he feared.

As the men ate, they rambled on about hunting. Otto boasted about how they had tracked Phoenix to Jorjina Territory using a locket imbued with Phoenix's blood. If the claim were true, Phoenix was not surprised either they or their accursed boss were dabbling in blood magic. He would need to get his hands on the locket before he escaped, otherwise they could find him again. Bryce, a previously taciturn man, explained in detail about their improved "hunting" skills, which he claimed were a gift of the god. He did not say which god, and Phoenix didn't ask. Malak mentioned they wandered around Ettix Springs for days trying to track him down, before finally spotting him in a crowd near a lake. *If they followed me to Rio's, they don't know where I live. Good.*

Phoenix studied the men, confused by their behavior, especially their uncharacteristic willingness to babble secrets in front of him. He had known them for years. Along with several others, they had rotated in and out of the house and grounds as "bodyguards" for Phoenix and his mother. Bryce had true craftsman's talent, the ability to heat and cool metal. Phoenix had always

thought Bryce could make more money working as a smith or technician than he did serving an egocentric madman, even if he had to be within ten feet of the metal to be able to focus his talent properly. Otto had turned his cooking talent to crafting potions and drugs, and probably had sampled too many of his own concoctions over the years.

Poor Malak had a strong and unwanted air magic gift, the ability to see images and hear sounds carried on the wind. The gift had come to him young and overwhelmed him, and his parents had bought a magic suppressor. Malak never developed the discipline or patience necessary to learn to block the images and sounds himself, or to sort through them to find what might be of use. Instead, with the help of a suppression bracelet, he kept his untrained talent blocked most of the time. Phoenix had been very young when he first overheard someone explain that Malak occasionally would sit in an underground room with a closed door, take off the suppressor, and channel his excess energy into stones or into the house protection spells. Phoenix had later used that knowledge when he learned how to siphon off his own developing mage energy and store it in plain sight where no one else would think to look.

But even though all three men had made questionable choices in their lives, Phoenix had never doubted their intelligence until today. Seriously, what sort of idiots kidnapped someone in the middle of the morning from a residential housing community? Especially when the majority of the renters were city employees, off work celebrating a holiday? Had they bothered to do any recon at all? Didn't they care about witnesses? If they had any brains left, they would have waited until Phoenix was alone before grabbing him. They should have made sure they knew where he lived and what he had been doing. He was grateful for their incompetence. As long as his uncle didn't find out how much his nephew truly knew, Phoenix might have a chance to stop him, to stop all of them.

A quiet rap on the door drew Phoenix's attention. While Malak strode to open the door, Phoenix took the opportunity to cross one leg at the knee and fiddle with his sandal straps. They might fit Rio, but they were overly large for him. He needed to be able to run if the chance came, and if he needed to walk a long way, he preferred to do so without going barefoot or getting blisters. Leaving his boots behind had been a split-second decision based more on a driving need to keep his secrets from his uncle and his henchmen than on any rational thought. He hoped he wouldn't regret it. Although the men had taken his mother's necklace of citrine and pale sunstone, they hadn't bothered to search him further. In addition to overlooking the Suggestion Stone, they had

missed his real secondary focus stones: the amber on the inside of his watch, the innocuous-looking chunks of weathered moss agate and petrified wood in his cargo pocket, and the rainbow obsidian beads cleverly stitched into his leather belt.

Phoenix wanted his mother's necklace back. He had only a few mementos of her. He rarely wore it, preferring to keep it safely hidden, but had felt compelled to wear it to the Sunrise ceremony. The quality of the necklace did not fit with his current impoverished lifestyle, nor with his masquerade as a fire mage. Although some fire mages used yellows gems, most preferred oranges and reds and blacks, and sunstone was rarely used by anyone other than air or earth mages. He had contemplated buying a piece of red sardonyx for his masquerade, but had decided not to throw away the money. Instead he bought a few cheap flame-colored shirts.

"Look what I found on the way out." Otto pulled a phone out of his pocket. "Your phone. Now Boss can track down everyone who helped you."

How did they get his phone? He had left it behind with his boots, on purpose. When Otto stopped waving the object like a prize, Phoenix got a closer look. *Oh, shit.* They had *Rio's* phone. With Phoenix's number and those of Rio's friends and family. What had he done? Had succumbing to his need for companionship, for a lover, for a *friend*, now led to him endangering them all? He could have managed another six months alone, should have turned away from Rio's first overtures after they met. Instead, with only two months to go, he might have lost everything. But he had been selfish, and he had wanted, just for a while, to experience a normal life, to relax and laugh with another person, to feel safe, to be desired.

Perhaps Phoenix was just as bad as the rest of the men in his power-hungry, egotistical, entitled, arrogant, amoral family. Looking back to four months ago, Phoenix wondered if he had initiated the affair from attraction or from an opportunity to finally be with a person after a celibate young adulthood spent in fear for, and of, potential partners. Had he just used Rio to experiment with? Phoenix had been surrounded by violence and deceit all his life. A gentle, earnest, scholarly water mage had seemed safe. His blue eyes, corn-silk-blond hair, and easy grin hadn't hurt either. Only later, when he began to know Rio better, had he let his guard down enough for his emotions to get involved. Or maybe that was a lie he told himself; maybe it was only later that he allowed himself to *admit* his emotions were already involved.

Malak returned and dropped a small packet on the table. He opened it to reveal several vials of powders and liquids. If those were drugs, Phoenix only

hoped they planned to inhale or ingest them, and not smoke them. He definitely didn't want to experience any of the secondhand fumes.

"I need to use the bathroom," Phoenix said, making it an announcement rather than a question.

Bryce pulled out the dart gun and pointed it at Phoenix. "Make it quick and don't try anything. We only need you alive, not competent. And if you piss us off, we know where your buddy is."

"Got it."

As Phoenix walked past the table, trying not to limp, he glanced down to where Otto was inspecting one of the powders. He caught the faintest trace of plant residue, enhanced by plant magic, and a sparkling shimmer of colors from additives. *Stardust*. An innocent name for a dangerous and addictive drug. For most people it acted as a mild relaxant, but it could cause hallucinations in others. And it could interfere with judgment, cognitive ability, and the ability to focus mage energy.

He wondered if Bryce, Otto, and Malak were even aware of what had happened to them in the months since Phoenix had managed to flee from his uncle. They had changed, and not for the better. Phoenix suspected some of their new "skills" were merely a delusional by-product of their drug abuse. However, the alterations might also be genuine changes brought about by a god or by magic no human should be messing with. And the drugs could be their way of trying to cope with the side effects.

He had never liked any of them, but watching what they had become filled him with an unwanted pity. He shook it off. They might be slowly losing their minds and any sense of judgment, but they were still very dangerous. Perhaps even more so now than before. Unknown was unpredictable. He only hoped their lack of self-preservation might play in his favor.

He walked into the bathroom and shut the door.

Chapter Three

Rio, Second Prayer

~In the Temple of Dasonin, manifested god of travelers and new beginnings,
the guardian of crossroads~

Dasonin, it has been some years since I last gave thanks to you, at one of your roadside shrines. I know many people must ask for your favor daily, and you are a busy god, with followers from all paths and professions. I bring you these seeds, rare to this area, and this basket of wild local berries, freshly harvested. In return, I beg that you bless these moonstones, one for each of us, as protection on our travels. And if you can, please watch over us on our journey, just until we reach our destination.

After eating a bowl of soup and some toast, I felt almost ready to tackle the many questions battling for dominance in my mind. *Who were those men? What did they want with Phoenix? Would they have killed me? Or anyone else who got in their way? Will they come back? Where was Phoenix now? Had they hurt him? Who is he, really? Why did he lie to me? How do I find him?*

My apartment door was being replaced, so I was sitting downstairs on Liam's couch, cradling an unwanted mug of tea. With my energy levels mostly restored and my mind clear, I now worried about Phoenix. Unfortunately a plan of action wasn't immediately apparent. My expertise is in ensuring this city has a pure drinking water supply, not in tracking down bad guys and rescuing kidnapped boyfriends.

Tobi, once assured of my health, had gone off to see if she could, in her words, either "find a trace of the bastards" or "be persistent enough that someone tells me the status of the investigation."

Liam fiddled with his mPad, occasionally sharing tidbits of medical information with me. "If the clotting didn't kill you, I think you only would have forgotten between ten and twenty hours."

How reassuring.

"There is a good chance you never would have remembered those hours at all." He read some more. "Short-term amnesia spells don't have the ability to weed out one aspect of a long-term memory so you probably wouldn't have forgotten about Phoenix completely." Another pause. "However the hypnotic

component, combined with his command, might have made you reluctant to think about Phoenix or focus on him for very long.”

“I’m not sure I want to think about him now. And not because of the spell.” Even as I spoke the words, I knew they weren’t true. I was scared by what had happened to me, terrified that if I looked for Phoenix something worse could happen, furious with Phoenix for hiding something that endangered all of us. But I couldn’t—I hoped—just forget Phoenix. “Gods, I’m sorry. That sounds selfish and cowardly.”

“No, it doesn’t. It sounds like someone who has sustained a huge shock, not just physically, but magically and emotionally.” Thus spoke the healer. Liam put down his tablet and focused his attention on me. “First, let’s see if there is anything we can do to safely locate Phoenix. Once we find him, or the police find him, then you can decide whether you want to keep seeing him. You said those men called him by a different name, right?”

I nodded.

“Well, if I were on the run and using an alias, I might not be honest with anyone either. We don’t know who he is or what he is hiding from, but those men who nabbed him weren’t law enforcement.”

“So... wait until I talk to him again before I get angry?”

“Something like that. And remember that he is younger than us.”

If he had been truthful about his age, then Phoenix was only twenty, four years younger than me, and six years younger than Liam and Tobi.

Tobi gave a cursory knock on the door before she entered without waiting for a reply. “No trace. They did a good disappearing act once they got in their vehicle. Witness descriptions are about as accurate as can be expected.”

“Meaning everyone saw something different?” I had heard the complaint from more than one of her police friends.

“More or less. Most people agree the kidnappers, if that is what they are, wore brown. One said, ‘The kid in the red shirt, the one who visits Rio, was in the middle of the three bigger men. One held him by the arm. I took a few steps toward them, and the kid looked straight at me and shook his head, so I stopped.’ Two men identified the vehicle they left in as an older model NeoStorm, although a third thought it might have been a WindBeam.”

“Doesn’t help much. Even though most people around here ride bicycles or motorbikes, there are plenty of NeoStorms and similar cars in Ettix Springs and the neighboring communities.”

“Do you know where Phoenix lives, Rio?” Tobi toyed with her badge. “Maybe we can find some clues there? In a way that won’t get me fired, of course.”

“He has a room in one of the short lanes off the East Market Street, just south of the community gardens. Peach Lane.” I had only been there a few times, briefly, when Phoenix had returned there to pick up something or drop something off. “I’ve never met his roommate, so I am not sure whether we can persuade him to let us in.”

“If the roommate’s not there, the rooms will be locked,” Liam pointed out. Memory fragments that had been teasing me suddenly came together. Phoenix sitting in the chair, pulling off his boots, dropping his keys, wallet, and phone into one for safekeeping. Phoenix, just a few hours later, taking my sandals.

“His keys are upstairs in my bedroom.” I stood. “Guess I should go see how the door repairs are coming along and change clothes. And put up some ward stones before we go. Wish I had done that last night.”

Even if I had felt well enough to bicycle to the market, I could not do so without making the police suspicious. I was still supposed to be recovering from the morning’s trauma. Instead, we took our motorbikes, and at Tobi’s suggestion, we parked them several blocks from our destination, outside the south gate of Market Plaza. After we locked up our helmets, Liam tied a rainbow bandana over his bald scalp. We passed under the Archway of Ettix, where the Ever-Changing Mural stretches for a hundred feet on either side. Usually I love to watch the different painters at work, and admire the changes, but we didn’t linger today, although I did notice a small team busily replacing last week’s desert vista with a sunrise bayou scene. Farther along, cats and wood nymphs danced in the moonlit woods. As always, at least two segments were dedicated to various deeds attributed to the God of Fortuity. The local citizens take great pride in our city’s patron deity. I murmured a quick prayer to Ettix, hoping he might aid Phoenix, should the chance present itself. I had the feeling Phoenix might need whatever luck he could get, however coincidental it might seem.

We wandered leisurely toward East Market Street, looking at stalls, buying some produce, entering a healer’s shop so Liam could chat with the merchant. Occasionally one or the other would pat or squeeze my arm or shoulder, as if consoling me. I normally loved the vibrancy of the Market District. As you must know, Ettix Springs is famous, or infamous, for the vivid colors of its

buildings, but at least some neighborhoods aspire to a harmonious, yet vibrant, color scheme. The Market is a free-for-all of self-expression, a place where bright colors comingle with bold pastels and accents of more muted tones. Weatherproof mobiles and wind chimes hang from windows and stalls. In the main plaza, musicians and street performers and artists often entertain the crowds, especially on rest days. Phoenix and I had often wandered there, holding hands. That afternoon all the colors and noise grated. I wanted to scream at everyone to be less cheerful when Phoenix was missing.

Eventually, when we had seen no trace of followers, I led the way down one of the little side streets that led mostly to storage buildings for the street and market-stall vendors, but also to inexpensive lodgings in unused buildings and upper floors. The buildings on this street were similarly colored, with variegated peach-skin tones contrasting nicely with stem-green trim. We leaned against a wall for a while, chatting, nibbling on fruit, pretending to relax in the shade. After Tobi gave the go-ahead, I walked to the far end, where a narrow two-story building almost abutted the south wall of the community gardens.

Using one of Phoenix's keys, I unlocked the lower door, hoping the black keystone tied to the key chain would let us through any wards. Inside, a narrow staircase led to another door upstairs. The lower level was stacked with dusty crates. Tobi gave them a cursory glance, and dismissed them. "Standard level anti-theft spells on the crates, but the secondary level of house wards will kick in if someone tries to carry one of the crates out of the house. Decent thieves may spot the second level, but not the quick opportunists. There is also a mediocre alarm spell not keyed to Phoenix's stone. Range of no more than a mile."

I shrugged. "His landlord owns this. Doesn't come very often, I gathered. I think it is for seasonal decorations."

We went upstairs and knocked on the door. No one answered.

"I only see one set of wards keyed to that stone," Tobi said.

I used the second key and opened the door. As soon as we entered, Liam gave an admiring whistle. Light streamed into the room from two skylights overhead. Vines thicker than my thumb climbed up the walls from several pots, reaching toward the skylights and the windows. Plants covered most of the numerous tables and benches in the main room, in a greater number than I remembered. An array of exotic flowers meant for sale attracted Tobi, while Liam went to study what he said was an assortment of high-value medicinal

plants. Other surfaces sported herbs for planting in gardens and planters and a few young vegetable plants. More plants crowded together on the windowsill.

On a workbench, sachets of dried flowers, bottles of herbs in oils, and small packets of seeds were all neatly assembled.

“I think Phoenix has been holding back on more than just his name,” Tobi said as she looked around the room. “Traces of earth magic, specifically plant magic, are everywhere in this room, particularly in some of the plants.” She picked up a pot. “Individually, it would be hard to detect, but when they are all together like this, the signature is quite distinctive. I think it all comes from one person.” She hesitated. “I thought for a moment I sensed air magic or something similar, but it was very faint, and it’s not detectable now.”

“Phoenix said the man who rents him the room is an older plant mage.” I gestured to one of the two closed bedroom doors. “And that he doesn’t want to disturb him. That’s why we never stay here overnight.”

“Hmm.” Tobi wandered over to the bedroom doors, knocked on each, and opened the first door when no one answered.

She peered inside and stepped over the threshold. Liam and I walked up behind her.

Tobi said, “There are traces of magic, but it is faded, and feels different than the magic in the outer room.” She walked around. “This room gives the appearance of being used, but if you look closely, you can see dust on items that ought to have been moved recently, like that mug or the book by the bed.” She gestured toward the nightstand.

Back in the main room, she pointed out a few objects I had not even paid attention to. On the table with the flowers, a crystal of bicolored green-and-rose tourmaline, still partially embedded in stone, was being used as a paperweight to hold open an accounting log. A cursory glance at the log showed nothing more than plant sales and supply purchases. Did the plants in this room generate enough money for Phoenix to support himself, even living frugally?

Tobi picked up a small clay pot filled with decorative but magically useless tumbled green glass shards and carefully emptied it out onto the table. She held up a perfectly cut clear green gemstone.

“Is that an emerald?” I asked, stunned.

She shook her head. “A lesser stone, not as hard as emerald. But perfectly acceptable as a focus. And the size is impressive. This one has the feel of being

passed through the hands of many plant mages. I don't think it has been used much recently."

After she carefully buried the stone beneath the glass again, she walked to a row of upside-down pots pushed against a wall. She picked one up, revealing a yellow-green stone, on which a tree and flowers had been carved, using a bas-relief technique, with the sun on one side and a stylized rainfall on the other. The carving was just light enough to be easily held in cupped hands, but large enough to store energy or aid in enhancing a spell over a larger area or to anchor a long-lasting spell.

"Our active plant mage uses this one regularly." She smiled. "Healthy magic, living magic."

"That's nephrite, a type of jade." Liam held out his hand and took the stone. "Some healers use it, too, and potion makers."

I felt his magic ripple lightly across the room. An incipient headache I did not even realize I had suddenly vanished. Tobi held up a hand to touch her temple and then smiled. "Wow!"

"This stone is more than a pretty carving, it has some very good magical pathways. The detail work complements them. Whomever carved this knew exactly what he or she was doing." Liam turned it over, looking for the maker's sigil. "I never had much use for jade before, but I might need to get a piece or two."

"Shouldn't we keep looking around?" I reminded them. "Knowing Phoenix might be a plant mage is interesting, and probably explains why he never came across as a successful fire mage. But why did he masquerade as one? I thought he ran errands for his plant mage roommate, who apparently doesn't exist. But does any of that help us find him?"

The other bedroom, even smaller than the first, barely had enough space for a single bed, a beat-up desk beneath a tiny window, an uncomfortable-looking chair with a mended leg, and a dresser with mismatched drawers. Several shirts I had seen Phoenix wear seemed to be engaged in a tussle to escape the confines of a partially open drawer. A large box by the door held an assortment of inexpensive sunhats, both fabric and straw, a pile of bandanas of different colors, and a smaller container with several pairs of sunglasses. I didn't even need Tobi to figure out the box contained plenty of potential disguises.

"How odd." Tobi tilted her head. "There are no plants in this room and almost no traces of magic in here either." She walked back into the main room,

moving slowly through it. We watched as she took a heavy plant off a chair, moved the chair, lifted up a corner of a ratty scrap of rug, and lifted up a section of the floorboards. She retrieved a metal box.

She took it over to Phoenix's desk. "No magic locks, only a regular lock."

We looked around for the key, since it wasn't with the door keys. Unfortunately, between the bedrooms and the main room, too many hiding places existed. "Sorry, Phoenix," she muttered, and broke the lock with a tool from her kit.

Dasonin, if Phoenix hadn't left his key behind, if we hadn't gone to his apartment, if Tobi hadn't found the box... would we be at this same place today? Has the Goddess of Fate been toying with us? Sometimes more than one road leads to the same destination. And sometimes the same road can lead people in different directions. We may be standing at this crossroads in our lives, but we already know the path we must take. Don't we?

Chapter Four

Phoenix Uncaged

Phoenix found a very strong sleeping potion in one of the toiletry kits by the sink. Even if he hadn't recognized it from the distinctive feel of the plant extract, the warning symbols on the label were clear. A hospital-grade pharmaceutical, not the common market variety, or one of Otto's unpredictable concoctions. Phoenix wasn't sure if the potion was meant to eventually subdue him for the journey or was used by one of the men, probably Malak, to sleep through the night. He made note of other potentially useful items, such as bandages for his feet, but left them alone for the moment.

He went back into the main room and, after a quick questioning glance at the men, picked up the coffee pot. He poured the dregs into an empty mug and went into the bathroom to rinse and refill the pot. He would have liked to have added the potion to the water, but it had been colored to prevent accidents. Bryce eyed Phoenix as he returned to the room and started to make a fresh pot, but he did not reach for his dart gun. With his right hand, Phoenix carefully scooped the coffee from a small tin, while pressing his left arm against his beads. Hopefully the men wouldn't notice the small traces of magic it took to nullify the stimulating properties of the caffeine. He made the coffee strong, to mask any other taste.

While the coffee brewed, Phoenix tossed some of the trash in the garbage. He slid his hand into his pocket and caressed the Suggestion Stone, hoping it still had some power in it. The stardust the men had taken earlier should make them ever more susceptible. *Look at the kid. Just being useful. Merely your employer's ignorant, talentless nephew. Not a threat, too stupid to run away. Let him serve you.* Phoenix walked slowly to the table. He could detect the effects of the drug starting to work on the three men in their relaxed postures and their lack of alarm as he got closer. He quietly picked up the three coffee mugs and walked toward the bathroom.

He nearly jumped when he heard Otto move toward him, but as he stepped to one side, Otto just stumbled past him into the bathroom. Phoenix offered up a silent prayer to whatever god or goddess might be watching that none of the toiletry kits looked disturbed, or that Otto would be too zoned out to notice if they did. He waited patiently by the door, listening as Otto relieved himself.

After Otto finished, Phoenix waited to see if either of the other two would follow suit. When they remained at the table, Phoenix went into the bathroom, making sure his body remained between the sink and the table, blocking the men's view. He rinsed out the mugs and dried their outsides, surreptitiously dribbling some of the sleeping potion in each cup as he did so.

Phoenix took the doctored mugs back out and placed them on the counter. He poured himself coffee in the safe mug and slid it away from the others. After cautiously filling each of theirs with a hand that only trembled slightly, he carried all three mugs over to the table and put them down, relieved when Bryce shooed him away and handed out the mugs himself.

Malak waved a hand toward the chair in the corner.

Phoenix obediently fetched his own mug and sat down in the chair, tentatively taking a few sips. *Yum. Coffee. Kind of strong, but not too bad. You know you want some.* With luck, they would be too far gone to worry about damaging their high by mixing a relaxant with a stimulant.

Phoenix curled up in the chair, facing away from the table, and closed his eyes. He wanted to stretch his power outside the window, reach for the comfort of the nearest tree, but instead he forced himself to listen to the increasingly disoriented chatter of the men. One of them, possibly Otto, mentioned a nap. Phoenix heard him stumbling for several feet, possibly over to one of the beds.

"How much of the dust did you take, man?" asked Malak.

"Think it's a stronger dose than usual," Bryce replied. "Let's have some more coffee. That'll wake us up. The spineless punk can make another pot."

Otto began to snore.

"Yeah. Then let's tie him up, and we can rest."

"Nickson! Get up and make more coffee."

Phoenix didn't answer.

He heard a groan and a curse, then a thud.

He counted his heartbeats and concentrated on breathing evenly, keeping his posture relaxed, in case he was being watched. Despite trying to take regular breaths, his heart rate sped up. One hundred. Don't let him get caught now. Two hundred. Don't let them tie him up. Three hundred. He pretended to stir, yawning silently. He rolled over in the chair and slowly blinked his eyes open.

All three men were passed out, Otto on a bed, Bryce on the floor, Malak on the table. Malak's nose bled a little, either from the drugs or from hitting the table.

After a few more minutes, Phoenix got up. He had already formulated his plan. He took the dart gun from the table. He removed Malak's magic-suppressing bracelet. Then he took a few deep breaths and shot each man, one at a time, in a location that might go unnoticed, or be mistaken for a bug bite. He coolly loaded each new dart, even as his mind ranted. Let them forget they had ever seen him at the lake. Reload, shoot. Let them forget they had ever seen Rio. Reload, shoot. Let them forget they had ever grabbed him. *Forget! Forget! Forget!*

He washed out the coffee pot and started a new, unaltered batch. While it brewed, he quickly bandaged his feet and stole a pair of dark socks to put on between his skin and his sandals. He hoped the socks would help the sandals fit better or at least keep the straps from rubbing his feet too badly. After carefully noting the positions of the coffee cups on the table, he took them and washed them out thoroughly, trying to remove all traces of the potion. He also washed the one he had used, and returned it to its original spot next to the pot.

He emptied out a small duffel bag belonging to one of the men and tossed in Rio's phone. He carefully pulled the used darts from the men, wrapped them in several socks and jammed them into someone's spare shoe. He also took the matching shoe and the dart gun. He thoroughly searched each of the men. He put his mother's necklace back around his neck, tucking it under his shirt out of sight. On Otto, he found the tracking charm the men had used to locate him; Phoenix shoved the charm into his pocket. He took almost all their obvious cash, tossing their empty wallets on the table. Let it look like a burglary. He also scored four other weapons, including two hunting knives and two non-magical handguns with regular bullets. He was grateful they hadn't shot Rio with one of those, but why give them the opportunity?

He found the keys for the NeoStorm. As he worked, he considered his options, but finally decided not to chance stealing their car, no matter how tempting. For all he knew, the theft might lead them to finding him again.

He put Malak's suppressor back on, hoping the amnesia spell had had time to take effect. He had contemplated keeping the bracelet, but he didn't want to risk Malak suddenly figuring out how to use his talent.

After the coffee maker finished its job with a wheezing gurgle, Phoenix partially refilled their coffee mugs and placed them back on the table.

He hesitated over the phone. He had no idea what spells were on it, and it could be too easy to track. He compromised by picking it up in a napkin and using the end of a spoon to see if he could read the messages. Pass code or prints required. Too risky to try to hold Malak's hand long enough to use his fingers to do it. He placed the phone on the floor and kicked it under a chair, where a thief might have missed it.

Next he took the half-empty vial of stardust, uncapped it, and spilled a little on the table. He left the rest of the drugs wrapped up on the table, partially buried underneath the wrappers from the men's meal. He needed to leave the men something to distract themselves with and keep them too high or too low or too tired or too disturbed to look for him.

He pulled on a clean shirt, a couple of sizes too large, over his own. His red shirt mostly vanished beneath a color a charitable person might call oatmeal and an honest person might call dried mud. Scanning the room once more, he tried to think of any sign of his presence left behind, or any possession of theirs he might be able to use. He only had this one opportunity. Nothing came to mind except the suddenly overwhelming need to leave. He adjusted the cross strap of the duffel bag and slung the bag across his back.

He stood for a moment by the door before he cracked it open, listening for any sound from outside. He heard nothing close by, so he stepped outside, into the narrow hallway between rooms, and closed the door behind him. Slouching, head down, he walked slowly away, out of the side entrance of the building, past the familiar car. Away from the parking lot, away from the motel, away from the highway. Just a man going for a walk.

He followed the street onto another that fed into one of the city's main drags and started along it, surprised to find everything so normal outside. The late summer mid-afternoon sun beat down on his hatless head. Birds chirped, insects buzzed. Bicycles, motorbikes, and the occasional car passed him on the street.

He needed to get back to the market district, needed to dig up the extra set of room keys he had buried in one of the community garden plots he tended, needed to find out how Rio was, maybe needed to move to a different location even if he stayed in Ettix Springs. Although he was tempted to use Rio's phone to call one of his lover's friends, he decided not to risk it. He had no way of knowing what they were doing or who they were with, and he didn't want to disturb them if they were busy helping Rio.

When Phoenix came to a small park, he immediately entered it. He ignored the benches, the other people, the playing children, and went to lean against a red oak nestled between some late-blooming azaleas. Plants could be better than a dozen focus stones. These weren't the plants that stored his energy for him, but they seemed willing to share some of theirs. In return, he killed the early traces of wilt fungus he found on a few of the tree's leaves. He silently praised the azaleas' flowers, admiring their colors. Then he sat down, placed his head on his drawn-up knees as if he were resting, and let his tears flow.

Chapter Five

Rio, Third Prayer

~In the Temple of Verdenia, also called the Green Goddess, manifested goddess of plant mages and gardeners~

Venerable Verdenia, you don't know me, but you must know Phoenix. Even if he has been a less-than-perfect follower because of his need for secrecy, I know he honors you as best he can. He lives for the day he can practice openly as a plant mage. This path he has chosen is so dangerous. For all of us, but especially for him. Please help him in whatever way you can. I have no physical offering for you, but I can provide water magic or labor for one of your gardens. A favor for a favor.

Tobi slid the little lock from the box and stepped back. She and Liam both looked at me. I guess this final invasion of Phoenix's secrets fell to me. I stepped closer to his desk and opened the box. On top was a small tablet, an inexpensive model several years out of date. The solar battery had been separated and stored in a rough silk bag. Underneath I found two bound writing journals and a small pile of papers.

I opened the top journal. The first page was blank. I turned to the next page. Together we read:

*Where the shadow of the Earth
Stands between the Sun and the Moon
Pink Moon and Blood Moon, two years running
To lift the Veil between the Worlds
Gather the Hunters
Offer forth the gems of the deep,
The fruit of the harvest,
The metals forged into symbols of strength,
And the body of the pure host.
Call then unto you the name of the Summoned.*

I turned the page. The next one read:

*– Possible source: Prophecy of Phineas Whitefeather Pikes,
Unconfirmed ForeSeer,*

- *Possible source: Grayhill's Book of Summoning Spells, banned*
- *Question as to exact translation of some of the terms*
- *Find original version and alternate translations*
- *Need all interpretations*
- *Prophecy, spell, or poem?*
- *Ambiguities: Hunters, symbols of strength, body, pure host.*

I turned back to the poem or prophecy.

“Does this make any sense?” I tried to parse it down. “*Where the shadow of the Earth stands between the Sun and the Moon.* Maybe a lunar eclipse? The next part mentions Blood Moon.” Although shouldn’t the Earth be between the sun and the moon, not its shadow? Or did it matter, if they are aligned?

“Wouldn’t that be *when* the shadow of the Earth and not *where*?” Liam asked.

“Unless *where* is a location you can see the lunar eclipse.”

“When or what is the Pink Moon? Is that the same as Rose Moon?” Tobi said, but then shook her head. “Wait, that makes no sense. The full lunar eclipses, when they occur, are after the equinoxes, in the months of the Seed Moon and the Hunters Moon, aren’t they?”

“In this context, pink may possibly refer to the moon color during the eclipse, but Pink Moon is also an alternate name for Seed Moon. Pink spring flowers, pink sunrises, pink snow, depending on location.” I turned a few pages. All the notes dealt with trying to interpret the poem, lists of places Phoenix had been while researching and which books he had read. I didn’t see any reference to a pink moon. Something else about the moons seemed familiar, though. “*Pink Moon and Blood Moon, two years running.* The tetrad! That’s what’s happening now. Four total lunar eclipses in two years, all visible in some areas, including this part of the continent! It has been several decades since that last happened.”

Both Liam and Tobi stared at me in surprise.

“What? Didn’t you have to take Astrology and Astronomy? I thought they were both required for mage licenses,” I asked. Of course, I had forgotten about lunar eclipse tetrads, even if I did learn about them in class, until I read an article last year about the impending events in *Midlands Mage Monthly*.

“Maybe for some elemental mages. But not everyone. Can you imagine most craftsmages and musicians taking them? Get real. And it’s not required for a med mage license, either. Maybe a condensed astrology course for some of those going into mind-therapy fields, but not the rest of us.”

Perhaps that was why full moon and new moon ceremonies were not as important to them as to me. “Well, as least I know you both went to last spring’s Lunar Eclipse ceremonies with me. Take my word for it. If this thing is a spell, it somehow involves the four lunar eclipses, and the last of the four eclipses is two full moons away from last night.” Although the phenomenon had been mentioned by the media and discussed on television, the magical, mystical, and mythical connections had been downplayed.

“But what’s the purpose?” Tobi ran a finger down the page. “*To lift the Veil between the Worlds*. Which worlds? And which Veil is meant in this context?”

Of course you know, Honored Goddess, how Veils separate the planes and realms of the worlds, separate the living from the dead, humans from the divine, mortal from the elemental, even though some beings could wander freely through Veils from one realm to the next. I was taught there are multiple realms for the dead, for the deities, and at least one realm for each element, but you must know the truth of that far better than I.

“I would be more worried about the use of *Summoned*,” Liam interjected. He had been shuffling through the loose papers, and held up drawings of several scary-looking creatures. “Aren’t gods and goddesses usually prayed to? Or *invoked* or *implored*?” He looked at me. “Isn’t the purpose of *summoning* to enslave elementals? Or, in the case of very powerful elementals, demons?”

I recoiled just looking at the sketch of a six-horned fire elemental. Another series of small sketches showed a giant creature closely resembling a spherical pile of rocks with four arms. I think it must have woken up on the wrong side of the gravel pile one morning, because it was taking out its wrath on a hapless town, smashing houses and rolling after people and livestock. Some scholars speculated that what we called demons were enslaved elemental creatures bending to the will of corrupt masters, or formerly enslaved elementals seeking revenge.

Another set of less scary sketches showing a variety of gods, and a few goddesses, all armed with weapons and guarded by predatory animals. Underneath most of the drawings, a neat hand had jotted a name, land of origin, and current status of each deity. Most were Hunt Gods from a variety of cultures, with a few Warrior Gods added to the mix.

I paged through the journal further, looking at all the notes taken there. “Is this going to help us find Phoenix? If it is, I think we need to read his research, or learn more about eclipses ourselves. *Elemental Enquirer* had an episode on lunar eclipses. Maybe we should watch it, too. I know the show is mostly unproven fear mongering and conspiracy theories, but there is often a basis in truth.”

“A well-hidden one,” Liam replied. “We might as well watch *Party of Fire* or *Iron Manifestations* to learn all we need to know about demons.”

Abruptly, Tobi turned toward the main room, stunner in hand, perhaps in response to something magical, even before I heard footsteps on the stairs. No time to run. Hastily, I crammed everything back in the box. Liam moved to block the bedroom doorway as I buried the box under the hat pile. I wanted to keep the box more than I wanted the police to have it, if that was who was on the stairs. I hoped it wasn’t one of the thugs.

We all froze. Although we had locked the door again, we had not reset the wards. A key turned in the lock and the door was pushed open. No one entered.

“Who’s in there? Announce yourself!” The voice trembled with the first question, but firmed in time for the subsequent demand. Oh, thank the gods!

I shoved past Tobi and Liam. “Phoenix?” I dodged a vine dangling from the ceiling, stopping when it snagged the back of my shirt.

“*Rio?*” I didn’t see him enter, but suddenly he was in the room, in my arms. “Gods, Rio, I am so sorry! Did they hurt you? Can you even remember? How much did you forget? Wait, how would you know?” Tears soaked my shoulder through my shirt as the vine dropped away. “I was so scared they had killed you. I would never have forgiven myself, ever.”

“I’m okay. I didn’t forget anything. Who were those men? How did you get away?”

Phoenix pushed back a little, opened his mouth to answer, but then I saw relief turn to fear. “Why didn’t you forget? Didn’t the spell work?”

“Wait, you wanted it to work?” Liam was suddenly there, shoving us apart, bristling, and glaring at Phoenix.

Phoenix turned to Liam. “Not on Rio! On them! I shot them all with the spelled darts so they would forget finding us at Lake Pye and forget about Rio. But if the spell didn’t work, then they’ll still remember and he won’t be safe. And they’ll know I am here in Ettix Springs and keep trying to track me down.”

He reached up to rub tears from his face, but only succeeded in smearing dirt across his cheeks.

Liam's expression softened. "Why don't you go wash up?" He nudged Phoenix toward the sink in the tiny kitchen area. Liam shook his foot, reaching down to brush off a vine now wending up his leg.

As Phoenix washed his hands and face, I watched as thick vines, which now encroached across most of the room, slowly retreated to their perches along the walls.

Tobi touched one. It coiled reflexively around her wrist before releasing her. "Wow, I saw a trace of magic in these earlier but had no idea they could do that. Are they strong enough to hold a person?"

Phoenix nodded. "Several persons." He produced a slightly feral smile. "And they are not my only defenses." Despite his bold words, he appeared fragile, as if most of his strength and vitality had been used up during his escape.

"Good." She patted his shoulder as he moved planters off a bench and a couple of chairs and started to clear a space at the largest of the tables.

He froze when he noticed the still-open hole in the floor where the box had been hidden.. "I assume Tobi sniffed out my secret?" We all nodded, and he continued, "Fetch the box, too. Then we can talk. After I eat something." He looked resigned rather than angry at our prying.

By the time we'd consumed a snack of cheese-and-hummus sandwiches and fruit, Phoenix had regained some of his normal color.

He stared at the table and took a deep breath. Taking a piece of green-and-white stone from his pocket, he held it, rolling it over in his hand, although I got the impression he was not looking at it. After a minute, he placed in on the table between us. The air shimmered briefly, subtly, a rippling flicker quickly gone.

Tobi looked all around the room, amber eyes examining something I couldn't see. "Wow. Impressive."

Phoenix shrugged. "My only piece of air magic. Probably the only reason I am still alive."

"Not just air magic, though, is it?" She looked at Liam and me. "Phoenix has cast a spell to trap sound waves inside its boundaries. Or absorb them. No sound we make will carry past the edge of the spell. It also has a subtle anti-

scrying component. Not blocking but blurring?” After Phoenix nodded in response, she continued, “But the coolest part, something I have never seen before, is that he has also tied it to the plants. Every plant in this room is somehow amplifying and expanding the range of the spell. And the presence of the plants seems to be changing the magical signature enough that it would have been hard for me to identify if I hadn’t seen it cast. How did you learn to do that?”

“Necessity.” Phoenix reached into the box, took out the tablet, inserted the battery, and turned the device on. “I need to ask all of you to promise never to speak of any of the names I mention, at least not outside of a shielding spell. Not just for my safety, but for yours. I might have outwitted them today, but they’re dangerous. And if they find me again... I don’t even want to think about what they might do. Especially if they guess or remember about today.” He looked at Tobi. “I don’t think I can trust the police. Most of them, sure, but someone could be bought. Or be watching. Especially after those three wake up. So you can’t ask questions about them.”

After we had promised, Phoenix looked relieved. “Now if something happens to me, you at least will know why. Especially you, Rio. I was so afraid you would forget me.” He hesitated, as if wanting to say more. “There’s so much to tell, and I don’t even know where to begin.”

I put my hand on his arm. “At the beginning. Or wherever you want to. But you could begin with your real name.”

“No one has used my real name since I was a child. Except my mother once or twice.” He scrolled through some files on the tablet, before showing us a family portrait of an impeccably dressed man who looked vaguely familiar, a woman in a stylish racing outfit, holding a helmet decorated with a single lightning bolt, and two children: an arrogant-looking teenage boy and a girl several years younger. The picture was dated twenty-six years ago.

“My maternal grandfather was Sirius Bolt.”

“Sirius Bolt? ‘Faster-than-Lightning’ Bolt? The Stormchaser?” I admit I felt in awe for a moment. The man was a legend amongst elemental mages.

Liam frowned, as if trying to place the term. Tobi looked stunned. I probably did, too. Sirius Bolt had been the former patriarch of the Bolt clan, one of the most prominent of the Stormchaser families.

“Storm *chasers*, Liam.” Unconsciously I dropped my voice. “The storm mages are probably the most powerful and elite subset of air mages. They can

directly harness the power of lightning.” In one good thunderstorm, a small team of storm mages could fill hundreds of large batteries: those used to power cars and major appliances. During the stormy season, groupies followed them around, watching them work. In this part of the world, the best area was the Lightning Belt. The storm mages and their entourages moved mostly back and forth along Thunder Road on the Okaola Peninsula, but sometimes along the eastern and southern coastlines as well. The mages did their dangerous jobs during the storms, and in between times, they and their followers partied hard.

Phoenix rolled his eyes. “They are people, Rio, not demi-gods, no matter how much they may act like them. Not worth all the media frenzy and fans. All they did was convince a bunch of people that lightning-powered batteries are somehow better than those powered by solar energy or windmills or water turbines. They didn’t get rich from the battery sales, they got rich from convincing people that lightning-powered car racing was a great sport worth investing in and betting on. Their children without the ability to harness lightning were often forced into a life in the racing industry or treated as second-class talents.”

He tapped the woman in the photo. “My grandmother was very well known in the Lightning Ladies Circuit, back when the drivers were still segregated by gender into different racing groups. Sabrina Nimbus, daughter of Sable Nimbus.”

Putting down the tablet, Phoenix reached over for the nearest plant. I watched, fascinated, as he stroked it like a pet. It quivered and swelled beneath his touch, leaves rustling. After a final touch, he set it aside. “They met, they married, and they raised a couple of children to follow them. Unfortunately both children were flawed. Or maybe spoiled. Raised in an opulent, hedonistic lifestyle, where only lip service was given to the storm gods, or any gods. Maybe the price of being treated like a god is that you lose respect for the real ones. At least that’s what my mother said. She never genuinely prayed until it was already too late.”

I couldn’t bear the lost and lonely look on his face. I closed the distance between us on the bench and hugged him tightly.

Phoenix leaned against me. “Did you ever see the movie *Tragedy on Thunder Road*? I heard it had horrible acting and bears no resemblance to reality. I haven’t been able to bring myself to watch, mainly because it portrays *him* as a hero who tried to save people.”

“I saw it. Which him?” asked Tobi.

I had seen the movie, too. I knew his answer even before Phoenix tapped the man in the photo and spoke.

“My uncle. Sylvester Bolt. My mother was Sylvia Bolt.”

Verdenia, you know the service I promised you? Maybe it would be best if you collected it soon. In case we don't make it back.

Chapter Six

Phoenix Revealed

Phoenix knew they were shocked. How could they not be? Only six premier storm mage families lived on this continent, and he had the bloodlines of at least three of them. Of course, the reason there were only six is that independent rivals were not tolerated and were quickly brought under the mantle of one of the six, through money or marriage.

“My uncle was an extremely gifted storm mage. Very strong, very controlled. A Stormchaser superstar. Maybe would have become even better than my grandfather in time. He received lots of acclaim. He had power and fame and he loved it. Loved the power in his body, the admiration of his fans, the money, and the attention of women. In contrast, my mother seemed to only have an average air talent, the ability to redistribute heat in a small area.”

Liam looked intrigued. “Localized, that talent could be useful for treating burn victims or frostbite victims, or for treating bruises or using with massage. Or to heat up or cool down a tent or something similar.”

That’s Liam, being ever practical, thought Phoenix.

“Yeah, but, she didn’t—or wasn’t allowed to—see that as an option. And she had no aptitude for racing. Instead, she let herself be bullied into helping plan and hostess social events for both the storm mages and the racers. She got to watch all the people enjoying supposedly exciting lives without having one herself, while being encouraged to snag a strong air mage husband and produce children, hopefully one with ‘more useful’ talents.”

“Because forcing one’s child to marry for your benefit always works out so well.” Tobi spoke with the cynicism of a woman who had left her own family behind for similar reasons.

“My mother—Sylvia—was young and lonely. She had flirtations with a number of the young air mages, and even a few flings. One of her friends, although not one of her lovers, was my uncle’s main rival among their generation of storm mages, Nikolai Cloudsmith. Sometimes called Nick but more often Niko. One of the main reasons she kept company with him was because it annoyed her brother. And because, she told me, he was a decent man, less stuck-up than the others. He also confided in her his own secret—he

wanted her as a friend for cover, because his own interest was firmly affixed with one of the smith mages who worked on his family's race cars. A male."

Phoenix looked at Rio, meeting his gaze briefly. At least they didn't have to hide their relationship for that reason.

"During a lull between storms, my mother, uncle and grandparents attended a party hosted by the head of the Cormorant Bay fire mages. My mother stepped outside to admire the gardens and instead met the gardener, Dominic Hollis. They first saw each other as they wandered among blossoming pink magnolia trees and red fire bushes, under the light of the Flower Moon. The Lovers Moon. He called her Phoebe, after one of the faded Moon Goddesses. She called him Nic. Somehow they managed to keep their affair secret all summer."

Rio reached over and squeezed his hand. "Let me guess. He was a plant mage."

"Yeah." Phoenix found strength from Rio's clasp. Perhaps he would be forgiven after all. Perhaps there was still a chance for *them*. "Anyway, to make a long story short, her family found out she was pregnant. When she said that 'Nic' was the father of her child, she found herself publically engaged to Nikolai Cloudsmith within two days. Her family didn't want to listen to her protests or explanations. Especially when she decided not to reveal her lover's identity after all."

"Why did he agree? Cloudsmith."

"He was her friend. He was willing to go behind both their families' backs and help her marry Dominic Hollis on the sly. Then Dominic was killed in an apparent robbery-gone-wrong a few days before their planned elopement. Mom fell apart for a while, and Nikolai supported her. He told her he was willing to go through with the marriage because I might be his only chance for a child, and he would raise me as his own. We lived well away from both their families, in a small house near the ocean. She said we were happy. I certainly don't remember being unhappy or knowing fear, but I was young when they died. Closer to my fourth birthday than my fifth."

Phoenix paused to take a drink and to collect his thoughts. "Mom avoided the world of the Stormchasers, even though Dad—Nikolai—still did his job during the storm season. During the other months, when he lived with us, he encouraged her new hobbies, spent some time with search and rescue, and experimented with trying to use his talent for fire suppression. If either of them had lovers, they didn't invite them into the house."

Phoenix scrolled through to the best picture he had of the man the world knew as his father. “I don’t dare keep a picture of Dominic yet, but here’s Nikolai’s picture. We only have a superficial resemblance, but it was enough to still the gossips for a while. No one outright demanded that a blood mage or truth-speaker verify my paternity.”

He pulled up an old news article from the start of the doomed season. “My uncle hated Dad, not just because they worked for rival families, but for other reasons I never understood. Maybe because he took Mom away, I don’t know. They sniped at each other so much that the senior mages usually kept them well apart. During the summer months, the storms were large and frequent enough that everyone usually had plenty of work. However, sixteen years ago, Thunder Moon seemed appropriately named. Storm after storm, relentless, for weeks. Mages were exhausted, but they refused to stop even when they became careless. Did the movie explain why they risked everything for a few thousand more batteries?”

Rio and Tobi exchanged a quick look. Rio finally spoke. “According to the movie, lots of wealth was wagered on which family would produce the most power over the course of the season. That’s why no one would stop.”

Phoenix nodded, feeling the familiar disgust and loathing. “Was it worth it? Did the movie also tell you they may have taken too much and altered the natural state of the storms? They tampered with the elements a little too much. They all had a role in what resulted. The drive for batteries, money, prestige, and I guess supremacy in that contest, caused even some retired and semi-retired storm mages, like my grandfather Sirius, to come help. Instead of remaining at home, far from the Lightning Belt, Mom, for whatever reason, decided we needed to visit. So she packed me up, and we headed to the town nearest the Stormchasers’ current location.”

Rio passed him a mug of fresh water, and Phoenix swallowed several gulps. This next part would be tricky. He wasn’t ready to share his belief about exactly what happened. Not yet. Not today.

“My uncle and Dad were working the same area of the storm, instead of being separated. Maybe they were showing off. Maybe their powers clashed. Maybe they fought over lightning, no one knows for certain. Maybe my uncle tried to kill Dad and he fought back, which is also possible. Something went wrong, very wrong. One or both of them, or maybe another storm mage, lost control of the power. Instead of going into the batteries, their lightning and mage energy went through everyone at the battery staging area, overwhelming

any protections they might have had. As you know, seven people died instantly, including Dad and my grandmother.” Any childhood memories he had of his grandmother were long gone, but Phoenix sometimes wondered if everything would have turned out differently had she survived.

“My grandfather had a heart attack trying to save her, but lived as a partial invalid for a few more years. Mom, miles away, somehow felt what was happening and lost control of the car, crashing it. All the emergency responders went to aid the storm mage team and no one found us for hours. She used all her mage energy keeping me warm and dry as rain came into the car through the torn roof. By the time we were found, her physical damage was extensive. Even with an excellent team of doctors and healers, she lost part of her right leg and her left hand was permanently crippled. She didn’t deserve that.” And she had been so sheltered, she didn’t know how to cope.

He paused. “My uncle’s mage powers were also burnt out. He was furious and blamed Mom for everything from getting pregnant to marrying Dad. My earliest memory of him is being brought to visit Mom in the hospital and seeing him yelling at her. He looked at me and said, ‘So that is Nick’s son.’ He never, not once, called me by my given name. I was always ‘Nick’s son’ to him, although as I got older I sometimes wondered which Nick he referred to, and if he knew the truth. Everyone in his household thought my name was Nickson. Even Mom started calling me Nicky. No one in the house ever spoke my name again.”

“How did you end up living with him? I thought your family had your own house.”

“My grandfather. He decided the whole family should convalesce on one of the family’s vacation properties, a large estate in the Blue Crest Mountains of Caralyna. We all went. Eventually the nurses and healers left. We never did.”

Phoenix explained about his uncle’s growing madness and rage when his mage powers did not return, his tirades about losing everything. His mother had been depressed by her own nightmares and losses and afraid of her brother, and for several years resorted to alcohol and drugs. The Cloudsmith family must have known the truth and had no interest in a child not of their bloodline, because they never inquired after him.

He had attended the local school as Nickson Bolt, not as Ash Cloudsmith.

“Ash? That’s your true name?” Rio asked.

“It was. Once. Many years ago. That’s one of the reasons I chose the name Phoenix.” *A phoenix risen from the ashes.* “I also wanted to be reborn into a new person, but still have the best parts of the old. The first syllable of the name has part of Dominic Hollis’s pet name for my mom, Phoebe, and the ‘nix’ pays tribute to both Nicks, Dominic and Nikolai. Implying I might be a fire mage with that name was just a bonus to help me hide.”

The other three all expressed amazement about how much meaning he had managed to pack into one alias.

“I had a lot of time to plan. Also, I hate to admit it, but I fear I inherited my grandfather’s brain.” He glanced at Rio. “I know you idolized the guy...”

“I’m over it. Momentary lapse. Sorry. Hate him now.”

“...but he was both brilliant and ruthless. I can’t prove it, of course, but I think he may have had Dominic Hollis killed. I scared myself today. I was their prisoner, and I sat in the room and plotted how to escape them. Part of me was afraid, for myself and for you, Rio, but another part of me was cold and calculating and analytical. I was prepared to kill them if I had to. And I do not like that part of me at all.”

He drew one foot up on the bench so he could rest his forehead against his knee. And then Phoenix found himself telling them everything he had done to the three men, although he refrained from mentioning his remaining hidden Suggestion Stones.

He didn’t want to face Rio, see what expression his gentle lover wore. Would Rio be shocked? Repulsed? Would he understand? Instead he looked at the healer. “What do you think the combined effects of all those drugs will be?”

Liam ran a hand back and forth across his head, as if searching for a stray hair. “Stardust, an unknown quantity of a Grade Two sleeping potion, and the Grade Three amnesia spell with its own sedative. I honestly don’t know. They are going to sleep for a long time. I can’t tell you what state they will be in when they wake up. The amnesia spell will have had plenty of time to work. Most standard sleeping potions actually have very little magic apart from that occurring naturally in the plants. Nor can I tell you what trace compounds will remain in their blood if a sample is taken. That suppression bracelet should have no effect, since they are meant to block external, not internal, influence. I wonder if your Suggestion Stone worked at all on that one.”

“Could any of them... not wake up?” Had he left one or more of them to die?

“Possibly. Do you care?”

Liam’s blunt, harsh question deserved the truth. “If they had succeeded in returning me to my uncle, they would have been signing my death warrant, or worse. And not just mine. There are no guarantees they or someone else wouldn’t have come back to take care of Rio. Or maybe all three of you and some of your neighbors as well. But will I care if my actions kill them? Yes. Will I regret their deaths? Yes.” Phoenix paused, then added, “Would I do it again in the same situation? In a heartbeat.”

No one spoke for several long moments. Rio reached out a hand to stroke Phoenix’s back and slid closer on the bench, encouraging Phoenix to lean against him.

“Better them than you,” Rio whispered, and kissed his temple.

Phoenix told them the last truth about the men. “I think they were already dying. Before today. That accursed spell. Or the drugs. Something’s damaged them.” He waved one hand toward the journals.

“What are you trying to do with that spell, anyhow?” Tobi demanded. “It seems dangerous. You shouldn’t be messing around with stuff you don’t understand.

Phoenix surprised himself by laughing. “It *seems* dangerous? You have no idea. I have been researching it for more than a year now, just trying to understand it. And I don’t want to cast it myself. I want to *stop* them. Stop *him*. Only it may already be too late.”

Chapter Seven

Rio, Fourth Prayer

~In the Temple of the Guardians of the Night, addressing Nydaris,
manifested goddess of dreams~

Noble Nydaris, Goddess of Dreams, I beseech you. My life is twisted and scary enough during the day without adding nightmares to my sleep. Unless these dreams serve a purpose I do not yet understand, please help me sleep undisturbed through the night. Even just for one or two nights.

When we got back to our complex, we stowed our motorbikes in their designated spots in the garage. Already I missed Phoenix and feared for him, but I knew for his safety, and ours, we had to leave him before the police starting looking for us. As we walked along the path to our building, Donna Fierro approached us, resplendent in purple and aqua and gold, her seven beaded braids swinging. In addition to managing the complex, she is a minor oracle-priestess, sworn to the service of Yara, Goddess of Oracles and Seers. Donna alone decides who will be allowed to live in the complex, and which unit they will occupy. Even when she herself may not understand why, there always seems to be a purpose to her assignments.

“May the Gods of Twilight bless your evenings, friends.” She smiled at me. “Your door is fixed. I ordered new parts last week.” Frequently she sends repair people to fix things shortly before they are about to catastrophically break without warning. As tenants we are grateful, but it is also freaky and disconcerting. “Of course I couldn’t have it fixed before these men broke it. A correct time exists for each action.”

“I understand.” Maybe. Or not. If she knew Phoenix was going to be kidnapped, couldn’t she have mentioned it in time to stop them? Or did she only know that the door would need fixing? Or did she order the parts without knowing when she would need them and for which door? Never mind, I don’t think I want to know.

She didn’t seem to see us as she continued speaking. Some of her beads began to glow faintly. “What has begun cannot be stopped, the threads are in the weave. Time circles back. The Veils weaken. Earth born of Air, Water born of Music, Sight born of Fire, Healer born of Truth. Seek the Hunters, free the

Hunters, be the Hunters. Your best hope to stop the scion of Lightning from his path of destruction is to awaken one of the Faded.”

She stopped speaking and blinked, focusing on us once again. The glow vanished. She handed me new keys. “Here you go. Have a good night!” Then she sauntered away, hair beads rattling.

We stared after her in silence. Liam wrote her cryptic warning down on a piece of paper, and Tobi and I both agreed he had the words correct.

Tobi was the first to say what we were probably all thinking. “I have seen a lot on my job, but that was... very disturbing.”

“Creepy,” I agreed. “Like most of the rest of this seriously messed-up day.” I started processing Donna’s words. “So my father’s a music mage, and Liam’s mother’s a truth-sayer. Your parents are fire mages, right, Tobi?”

“Yeah. Yara, or whichever Deity used Donna as a Voice, definitely knows us.”

Both my friends walked me to my door and watched as I tried my new keys. I insisted I could handle being alone. But in my apartment, by myself for the first time all day, I felt lost, out of place. So much had changed in less than twelve hours. More about my apartment felt different than just a reinforced door and new high-grade ward stones. I set the wards, and shivered. Someone had cast thorough cleansing spells in the apartment, to remove the negative energies and boost my protections. Unfortunately, no such spell had been cast on me. I stood in the middle of my living room as I was bombarded by memories and emotions of the day.

I had never worried about security before, beyond locking my door. I had no weapons and only minimal non-magical self-defense training. Ways existed to use water magic offensively, but I had never been trained in them. Perhaps now was the time to learn, if I could practice without hurting someone.

I listened to soft music as I changed the blood-spotted sheets on the bed, except for the case on the pillow Phoenix had used. It still smelled like him. I washed quickly, stripped out of my clothes, and slipped into bed. I got up again to open the window for fresh air, got back into bed, got up, closed the window, and then finally opened it a few inches. I pulled a box of glowstones from underneath my bed and activated several, bathing the room in a tranquil, faint blue-green light. I placed them around the bedroom and put one in the washroom.

Back in bed, I took the other pillow and hugged it close, breathing deeply. What was I going to do? I had thought perhaps I loved Phoenix, despite our short time together, but did I even know him? I had a hard time reconciling my shy, inexperienced, orphaned boyfriend with the mission-driven, potentially lethal person I had seen today. Was this big secret the cause of the barrier I had sometimes sensed between us but had wanted to ignore? Could I trust him? Should I? I knew he had more secrets, and he had not yet told us everything about his past.

Earlier, Tobi and Liam had left Phoenix's apartment first, waiting at the base of the stairs and leaving us alone for a few precious minutes. Most of those had been spent hugging. He had repeated his apologies, I had murmured reassurances, and we had kissed almost desperately, as if afraid it would be the last time. We had arranged to meet in two days. Maybe then he would answer more of my questions. I knew, for now, as long as the police were looking for him as a potential victim, and he was trying to avoid his uncle, he could not come to my apartment.

I fell into a restless sleep. And dreamed.

Phoenix and I sit on a blanket in Wildestrand Park, sharing an afternoon picnic, listening to the band play on the outdoor stage. Nearby, people work on little crafts projects or enjoy quiet games. A gentle late-spring breeze twists its way through the crowd, too weak to worry those with cards or needlework. We feed each other pieces of cheese and fruit, share a bottle of cider. I lean to give Phoenix a quick, public kiss. A shadow falls over us. I look up to see the once-blue sky suddenly heavy with clouds. The wind picks up. Shouts of alarm drown out the band. I see and hear rain all around, but I don't smell it. Nor do I feel any water with my magic. The audience has scattered, leaving containers and blankets and projects behind. The wind whips viciously through, a funnel picking up everything. A band of animals now plays on the stage, something ominous that I feel but can't understand. I look at Phoenix, who is turning green. I reach out to him, but I can't move my feet and he is being pulled away. A dark cloud descends and floats above our heads. I can see the lightning zapping back and forth with it. Then the lightning starts to coalesce, growing bigger, and the cloud starts to glow. Flames flicker all over Phoenix as he reaches out to me with leafy arms. Faceless cloud men appear, tiny lightning bolts arcing and flitting around their white bodies. One waves a large lightning bolt like a spear, while two others reach out to grab Phoenix. As they drag him away, I try to scream, don't touch him, he can't handle lightning magic, but the words won't come before the cloud envelops me and I am inside. Water drops

come to me, clinging to my clothes and skin, drenching me. Something else is here in the cloud watching me. Something angry.

I sat up, soaked in sweat, heart pounding, gasping for breath.

Two evenings later, I strolled along the paths of the community gardens. I had never paid much attention to them before. Now I took the time to examine the rectangular raised vegetable plots, the fruit and nut trees in the corners, and several rows of berry bushes that doubled as dividers to separate the garden into different regions. A fountain in the middle of the garden attracted several species of birds, as well as two students working on reciting either poetry or lines of a play. Four sturdy gazebos provided places to sit and respite from the sun and rain.

I eventually made my way to the southwest gazebo, sat on the hardwood bench, and took a small book out of my pack. I admit I was more interested in the contents of the berry bushes and the nearest vegetable plot than the words on the page. Maybe someday Phoenix could teach me to garden if... never mind, let's not think too far ahead to a future that may never happen.

I heard footsteps, but did not look up. Someone sat on the bench at a right angle to mine.

"You look awful." Phoenix sounded shocked.

I risked a quick glance at him, before turning a page in my book.

"So do you. Did you get in a fight with your vines?" He looked as drawn and weary as I felt. He also sported bruises on his cheekbone and had a bandage on his forehead, both clearly visible around his sunglasses. He wore a gray shirt from an event that had occurred two years ago. I am guessing the shirt came from a secondhand store, but it did make him look like a local. He held the moss agate in his hand.

"Fell out of bed. Banged my head when I sat up."

"Nightmares?" I wanted to reach over and hug him, run my hand along the unbruised part of his face. Instead, I gripped the book tighter.

"Some. You?"

"Yeah. Weird ones. We usually start out in one of the places we went on a date, then the storm comes, sometimes you get dragged off by lightning men, and I end up in a cloud with a pissed-off entity." Last night Tobi and Liam had also been in my dream, but I couldn't remember what they had been doing.

Phoenix looked sick. “A cloud entity?”

I nodded. “What do you dream?”

“We—four of us, I think—are standing in a forest. The moon is rising. Something is wrong with the trees and the plants. You are talking to a water spirit, who also might be somehow deformed, and you seem sad. You start to play on a wooden pipe, and I want you to hurry, because the trees keep telling me, ‘The Hunters are coming. Run.’”

Had Phoenix ever seen me play my recorder? Did he even know that I still had it? I didn’t think so.

Then I told him what Donna had told us.

“Gods, I’m sorry. I certainly never intended to drag anyone else into this. How accurate are her prophecies?”

“No idea, but she is sworn to Yara.” I let him think about that, then prodded, “Do you know something about the cloud creature? Or a faded god?”

“The cloud creatures, yes. A faded god, maybe, but not one we want to wake.” He hesitated. “I don’t think we want to speak about them here, even with my spell. We need to meet somewhere we can safely talk. All four of us, if there is a chance Liam and Tobi might be trapped in this gods-cursed mess.”

I thought for a moment. “The library in the Temple of All Gods. It has private study nooks and is safe from scrying and evil intent. And if we have questions about the gods, especially faded gods, maybe some of the resources there can help us.”

He nodded. “I’ve been there several times.” As sunset approached, the light in the gazebo lessened. I closed my book. The garden was deserted now, except for us and the birds and the insects. Phoenix abandoned his own bench, and came to sit on the ground near mine, leaning his head against my knee.

“Maybe it will be easier to talk here, outside in the garden.” He gestured toward the nearby plots. “In addition to all the plants you saw in my room, I care for seven of these plots. Six for other people and one loaned to me for my own use. Unofficial apprentice training.”

He moved closer to me. “I didn’t end up in Ettix Springs by chance. Or maybe, given its fortuitous nature, I did in a roundabout way. Only the gods know. Maybe I owe thanks to Ettix. After my mother died and I managed to get away from Caralyna, I sought out my blood-father’s kin in Okaola. They knew

who I was, had approached me in secret when I came of age, but I hadn't been willing to leave my mother. Her health was already failing by then. And I was angry with them for not coming for me when I was a child."

"Why didn't they?" For a moment I was angry on his behalf.

"They had valid reasons, which I understood once I finally met them." He did not elaborate upon those reasons, though I had my suspicions, instead continuing with, "I did get to see a picture of my true father. I have his coloring as well as his talent. I met my paternal grandparents and my aunt. Alexander and Olivia Hollis and Rosanna Hollis Greenberg. I didn't get to meet any other relatives yet, although I have a lot of cousins. The Hollis family arranged for me to work for the mage who oversees the operations of the community gardens and owns the rooms I am using. They also managed to get me identification under my current name and a phone with a Port Sunrise prefix."

"How much reach do they have? Do they have some pull with the local authorities or the media or both? I mean the whole story was downplayed in the news. No pictures of our complex or building appeared. Nothing about me, even though a lot of people must know. And yesterday, I called the police, as a victim and a concerned boyfriend, to inquire if they knew anything, and was told that you had been found 'safe' in Marshmore Point, and I had nothing to worry about."

Phoenix sighed, and then pleaded softly, "Please don't be mad. I didn't lie. My mentor here has some sway with the media, although he would not have worked directly. And I've got an older cousin I've never met in Marshmore Point, although I have talked to him on the phone a couple of times. Thorn works for the MTI."

He has a cousin who works for the Midlands Territorial Intelligence? Interesting.

Before I could even ask the obvious question, Phoenix continued, "And don't ask why he isn't investigating my uncle. I've been told he would love to get someone inside, but the Bolt clan is too powerful, even if Sylvester is no longer one of the leaders. Thorn has helped me when he can. Supplies and information. But it is mostly on the side, because he can't do too much openly."

Marshmore Point is several hours away, along the southeastern Jorjina coast, even farther from Caralyna's northern Blue Crest Mountains than Ettix Springs. I couldn't blame Phoenix for his cousin not having any ability to promise help with something happening in a somewhat isolated spot in another territory.

“I understand. Don’t worry. Anyhow, the police told me my friend was not expected back anytime soon. I have no idea if they are still working on the case or not, but I am inclined to doubt it.”

“Probably not if they were led to believe that the men were last seen on the coastal highway and that the MTI is involved.” Phoenix relaxed, leaning more snugly against my leg. “The sun will set soon. You can’t feel it, but most of the plants are slowing down for the night.”

“Can you still hold your spell?” If he couldn’t, we could continue this conversation later.

He nodded, his head rubbing against my knee. “One of the first techniques I ever learned was how to store and hide all my green mage energy in plants. A little bit in as many plants as possible. Most of the plants around the compound held some. Even some around my school. I had to make sure that people assessing my talent would have pegged me as a weak air mage. Besides, the plants are usually willing to give my energy back to me.”

“Usually?”

“If they are fighting off a disease or a pest, they need it more than I do.”

Something the size of a small bird flew into the gazebo, causing me to jolt in alarm and sit up straighter. It was about the size of a hummingbird, maybe even larger, but didn’t fly with the sound or speed of one.

“Just a sphinx moth searching for nectar. Nothing nefarious.”

The moth fluttered out as I gave in to the urge to bury my hand in Phoenix’s hair, and gently stroke his head.

“When my grandfather died, three years after the... incident, Mom finally sobered up. One of the guests at the funeral took her aside and told her to stop feeling sorry for herself and look after me instead, that I would need her help in the near future. Something in his voice got through to her.”

“Did she ever tell you who?”

“No. Just that he was a seer of some sort. And she found a couple of healers who helped her dry out and get clean. She later told me her renewed fear for me gave her strength and purpose, but unfortunately not enough to stand up to her brother, take me, and leave. When I started exhibiting the signs of green magic, she told me I had to hide it. She promised to try to find a way to help me practice and develop it, but it would have to be in secret. My magic was to be our secret, she told me.”

I thought about that, how hard it must have been for a child to have to keep a secret of that magnitude.

“She never regained her original air talent, but somehow, she learned or created a new one for herself. In order to keep us ‘safe’ from some pretend threat, my uncle brought in ‘bodyguards.’ Supposedly for our protection, but in truth to keep us from running away.”

Phoenix explained about his mother learning of one of the bodyguards’ rogue talents and how he blocked them. She spent some time chatting with him, pretending to be friendly, learning what she could. “Malak might not have liked his talent, because he had no control over it, but Mom envied it. She also wondered if she had something similar, because she had overheard many things, especially since losing the other talent. Or maybe she had always had it but had simply never recognized it for what it was. She could have just thought she had good hearing.”

“People often allow training and habit and expectation to interfere with their ability to develop and nurture their talents. And not just magical talents.”

“True enough. I learned my best tricks through experimentation and desperation. Maybe she experienced something similar. She began to be able to not just hear distant sounds, but to actively enhance sound waves and to manipulate the air to bring sound to her.”

I wondered what other skills I could develop, if I tried. I had never learned how to keep poison from moving in my bloodstream, yet I had managed to do it. I could certainly relate to fear and desperation affecting talent.

“Could she also block the sound?” I asked.

“A little, by dampening the waves, but she couldn’t enhance and block at the same time. Mom taught me how to block the outgoing sound, which is the only skill I could ever do with air magic. It was another thing I was never, ever to tell my uncle about. We worked as a team. She would bring the sounds, and I would trap them where only the two of us could hear them. We spied on the household together for twelve years. We learned who we couldn’t trust, which was most of the household.”

The last traces of my anger at his keeping secrets from me faded away. He had spent years in an environment where trusting the wrong person could have resulted in something bad happening to him or his mother. As he got older, he had probably learned or begun to suspect what he had hinted at the other night—that either his grandfather or uncle had had Dominic Hollis killed.

Obviously his uncle wanted him back for some reason, probably not a good one. How could I blame him for trying to keep himself safe?

I listened as Phoenix told me more about growing up and the strategies he and his mother had employed. His mother had played up her injuries to remain an invalid in her brother's eyes. Not all her injuries were faked of course, and perhaps the burden of the real injuries, as much as anything else, kept her bound in virtual chains. She pretended to idle her days away, reading and watching television, but actually learning many useful facts and skills she later taught Phoenix. At some point, she had become almost as ruthless and practical as her brother and father, since she taught him things I think no parent should ever have to teach a child just to survive.

When Phoenix got older, he read books about plant magic at school, as long as no one caught him with them. He would find one in the library and carry it with a stack of other assorted books and have several open on a table at once, taking turns reading from each of them. He never checked out anything plant related, either to bring home or to show on his record. Several teachers over the years apparently had suspicions about his circumstances and no love for his uncle. Those teachers allowed him to attend self-defense and marksmanship classes without registering. Wilderness survival became a required short course for all students. He was allowed to devote almost an entire semester to botany under the guise of Elective Exercises in Intermediate Ecology. And when students were "randomly" assigned chores around the school, he found himself assisting the groundskeeper/head gardener for an hour once a week, just long enough to get some basic grounding in his magic.

"The worst part was the bodyguards. One or two escorted me to and from school daily and often lurked outside in the lot. Fortunately they were not allowed to come inside the school or onto the school grounds."

"Did you have any friends?"

"Not really. Acquaintances and in-school study partners. I didn't dare make friends once I realized the friendships might be used against me. My uncle was not above either harming them in order to hurt me, or bribing them to spy on me." He tilted his head back against the bench to look up at me and tried to meet my eyes in the growing darkness. "You were my first true friend, Rio."

Tears stung my eyes. What could I say in answer to that? I slid off the bench, sliding an arm around him, pulling him close. "I am still your friend, Phoenix. Always. And I hope more than just your friend." I might be scared of

what he seemed capable of, horrified by aspects of his upbringing, and wary of wanting him back in my bed—please don't blame me for that last part, but it's true—but I never wanted him to feel alone again. Choking back my fear and doubts, I added, "And I will help you any way I can."

I trusted the combination of his magic, the darkness, and the gazebo to keep us safe from scrying spells and prying eyes. And if they didn't? Well, in that moment I was willing to take the risk. We wriggled around, somewhat awkwardly with the seat of the bench at our backs, until we faced each other. Then we kissed, for mutual comfort and reassurance rather than passion, an unexpectedly gentle and tender kiss, more tentative than even our first kiss more than a season ago. I felt warmth in my heart rather than heat in my blood. After a few minutes, I pulled him with me onto the bench. He curled up next to me, head against my chest, one hand clutching my shirt.

"Remember when we first met?" I murmured, stroking his back.

"Black Cherry Lane. You were wandering around staring at puddles and blocking the walkway."

"I was not staring at puddles, I was trying to trace the origin of a contaminant."

"Yeah, but you can't deny you were blocking the path. It's your own fault I ran into you."

His voice sounded lighter, and I relaxed.

"At least you weren't carrying anything breakable. I helped you pick up everything. And I even bought you a drink to replace the one you spilled. And brushed the dirt off your clothes."

"That dirt had nothing to do with our accident."

I smiled, remembering the feel of him standing still for my unnecessary aid. "I know. And your point is?"

He didn't answer. We sat in silence, our breaths growing steady and synchronized, listening to the sounds of the night.

On the other hand, Nydaris, if one of us has to have nightmares, let it be me. I think Phoenix has already had enough nightmares in his life, and most of them have been while he was awake.

Chapter Eight

Phoenix Mourns

The Temple of All Gods reminded Phoenix of the night his mother died. Not visually. What tugged at his memories and his emotions was the faint, underlying scent of the incense. On his previous visits to the library, he had hurried through the main chamber, eager to escape the smell. Today he took the opportunity to look around. Sixteen alcoves, where people could go to petition any god or goddess, branched off the main room. Along the ceiling, a narrow ledge displayed small carved stone and wood figurines representing each of the world's 461 currently manifested deities. Against the far wall, on either side of the library doors, shallow glass-doored display cases held sketches and more figurines, many of them reproductions of antiques, showing some of the faded gods. Larger paintings showed artists' renderings of the Assembly of Gods. In the center of the room, the large skylights and a series of carefully spaced prisms combined to create abstract patterns of color on the pale floor. Around the room, a few people knelt on cushions or sat on low hassocks, some with offerings placed before them.

Phoenix wanted to spend some time looking at the carvings and pictures of the faded gods, but first he needed to do something he had put off for too long. He took a cushion from a cubby near the floor and walked past the Flame to kneel by the Tree. And remembered.

~Evening of the full Seed Moon, previous year~

As Nick prepared his mother's medicinal tea, habit caused him to reach out to *feel* each of the plant components in the infuser. Cannabis was the strongest of course, but all five were there in the customized proportions the healers had sworn by. And without a trace of magic. A mixed blessing and a mystery. This combination kept the worst effects of her illness at bay, for which he thanked both the healers and the gods, but it had also activated a previously dormant aspect of Sight. Nick initially puzzled over that, because the liquid preparation usually inhibited the psychoactive components of the cannabis. But since her "visions" were true events, as far as they knew, and not hallucinations, perhaps the reason didn't matter.

“Are they gone?” Mom didn’t look up from her needlepoint, clutching the frame with her bent hand.

“A few minutes ago. The two new guys are downstairs talking and eating, instead of guarding the doors.”

He reached out to one of the plants that his mother had insisted on since she fell ill, claiming they cheered her up. In truth, they were there for him. He extracted some of his hidden magic and sent it to the rest of the plants throughout the room as he activated the shield spell.

“Maybe you should take this chance to leave.” She gave him a glance. “Before they get back. It may be the best one you get.”

She looked down at her needle and thread, avoiding his reproachful glare.

“We’ve discussed this. I’m not leaving you alone here.” *Especially not when you only have a few months left to live.*

Nick prepared a different tea for himself, with mint leaves, dandelion root, and raspberry leaves. As it steeped, he poured a cup from the other pot. He took it over to his mother, searching her face, studying the marks etched by months of pain. “Are you sure you want to do this now?”

She nodded, exhibiting the inner strength that seemed to grow as her disease progressed.

He took her needlework, helped to straighten the pillows behind her, and handed her the cup of tea. She breathed in the vapors before she drank a few mouthfuls. After fetching his own tea, he picked up a good journal shelved among the several identical journals in which she pretended to write bad poetry as cover for recording what she overheard. He flipped past the poems until he found a blank page and put a pen inside as a placeholder. As he sipped his tea, he tried to hide how much he hated what was about to happen. His mother was willing to do this, wanted to do this, so Nick masked his own feelings.

A combination of the medicine and the alterations in her brain allowed his mother to somehow slip into her brother’s mind and see what he saw and hear what he heard. Because it only worked between sister and brother, Nick suspected it was something passed unknowing and unused, or at least unmentioned, down her maternal line. He cringed at the mere idea of his mother being stuck inside Sylvester’s brain, but she had explained, somewhat apologetically, that she could not actually read or hear his thoughts. She could only share his vision and had no control over what he looked at. “I am merely a

passenger to his eyes and to his ears.” Personally, Nick thought that limitation was a blessing.

Nick and his mother had known for a while that Sylvester had been promising some of his key guards that, over the course of the four lunar eclipse ceremonies, one of the Hunting Gods would grant them special talents and gifts to make them mighty Hunters. However, without her newest skill, they would never have discovered the exact wording of the spell that had fueled his uncle’s obsession, nor would they have identified the location where the ceremonies were to take place or learned of Sylvester’s other illegal enterprises. His mother had seen and described some of the preparations over the past few months. They were still uncertain about his uncle’s ultimate goal. Neither of them thought Sylvester cared enough about his men to care whether or not they gained special hunting skills. He was using them for something, obviously, but what? The problem with a madman was trying to understand his logic and his motivations.

As the medicine began to take effect, Nick saw some of the pain ease from her body. Her breathing became easier, the muscles in her face relaxed. Her eyes seemed to lose focus, and she closed them.

“They are approaching the mine.” Farther up in the mountains, closer to the summit, lay the entrance to a gem mine, supposedly abandoned a century ago, on land meant to be preserved in its natural state. The road ended at a large clearing, formed by an expanse of fairly level rock, which had been a staging area for the mine in its prime. A short hike up the new trail would bring the men to the ridgeline, where they would have a clear view across the wide valley to the next set of mountains to the west. “He gets out of the car and checks the moon, it is full and still to the east. There are three vehicles. The men carry battery-powered lanterns. He walks behind Malak. Others follow.”

Without opening her eyes, she finished her tea and held the cup out. Nick took it and placed it on the table.

After a few minutes, just when he began to wonder if she had fallen asleep, his mother continued, “They are clear of the trees. The men have built a wooden platform, like a stage. Level enough that they can all stand on it. There are eight men. Sylvester wears a plain gray jacket but has his Stormchaser bracelet hidden under his sleeve. The other seven open their jackets. Each wears a shirt with an animal on it. He didn’t look long enough for me to make out anything except a wolf. He asks for more light. Ah, there is an eight-pointed star painted there, with a raised octagonal altar and a square bowl in the center.

The men move four lanterns to the ground behind the primary points and hang four on poles behind the lesser points.”

Nick jotted that down in the book.

“*He* stands at the south. The other seven men stand at the other points. He looks over them. I also see an eagle, an owl, a bear, and... a fox or a coyote, I think. He didn’t focus on it, and it is in the most shadow.” She tried, over the course of the next couple of hours, as the eclipse progressed, to pair men’s names with the animals in case it mattered. Malak, with his unwanted visions, was Eagle. Oddly fitting and somehow warped at the same time. Otto, Bryce, Carlo, and Shawn were Owl, Bear, Cougar and Shark, respectively. Easy enough to remember, perhaps deliberate name choices, but... a shark? On the other hand, Nick thought he remembered hearing Shawn had been a mediocre coastal water mage until trouble with gambling debts led him to flee inland. Perhaps he wanted a reminder of the ocean. Or maybe Sylvester was toying with him. Ralph, a carpenter mage who had only been on Sylvester’s staff a few months, was Wolf. And Garret, the sneaky orange-haired fire mage, was Fox.

His mother asked for more tea. Nick poured some and helped her with the cup as she drank.

“Now he fills the bowl with gems, both polished and uncut. He steps back, picks up a staff. The other seven men sit down, take out small drums, and begin to beat softly, not loud enough to carry down the mountain. The man on his left puts down his drum and approaches the altar. He picks up a knife, cuts a finger, and lets a few drop of his blood fall into the bowl. He returns to his seat and wraps his finger, then picks up his drum. Now the man on his left stands.”

Nick shuddered. Most blood magic was taboo. Voluntarily using one’s own blood could be powerful in spells, especially when used to indicate sacrifice and willingness to suffer or atone. Blood spells which could also be used to bless people were generally accepted, those used to trace people were tolerated when used by law enforcement, but those used to curse or bind people were considered forbidden magic in all the civilized nations. Spilling another person’s against their will for use in a spell was banned everywhere, and treated akin to murder and rape by the Territorial Courts. Thus far, from his mother’s description, these men seemed to be willing participants, but perhaps they had already been spellbound.

“Now they speak. They chant a name. Zah-ree-see? Zar-a-zee? Now he says, ‘On this the first of the four eclipses, we offer you the gems of the deep. Help these men to become true Hunters.’ The men chant the name as Sylvester

approaches the center. He has his own knife. I recognize it as a ceremonial knife belonging to our great-grandfather, but possibly it is even generations older. As his blood falls, he says the name, then whispers, ‘Give me back my powers.’ As he steps back into the south position, the drumming stops and the other men stand. He looks up and to the west, as the lunar eclipse peaks. The men he can see are doing the same. The lanterns all go out and it is dark. Something bright flares, and he hears crackling and some of the men cursing in shock. He turns and see flames in the bowl, blue and white and orange and silver flames.”

Time passed, both high on the mountain and in the guarded house farther down. Finally as more of the moon crept out from behind the earth’s shadow once more, the lanterns came back on by themselves. Sylvester went to inspect the bowl. It was empty.

Nick listened as his mother’s whispers of what she/Sylvester saw/heard became more sporadic and sleepy. He removed some of the pillows from behind her, helped her ease down into the bed, made sure her prosthetic leg was close by. Half asleep, soothed by the drugs, she almost looked close to her true age of not-yet-forty, rather than the extra twenty years the disease bestowed upon her appearance.

He was about to let his own spell lapse when she bolted up, eyes widening in panic, her gaze locking with his. “He’s going to use you somehow in the last ceremony. You are either going to be his offering to whatever he summons, or be its host. Please, Nicky, leave now.”

“It’s already too late tonight.” Nick did not even feel a flicker of surprise at the news his uncle planned to sacrifice him. He had always known the man had a reason for keeping him around. “I have an idea, though. Let’s make those two downstairs take us to the hospital. We might not be able to run away, but we can at least get out of this house for a while.” *And never come back. At least not if I can help it.*

~Evening of the new Thunder Moon, previous year~

Mom was rambling again. As the tendrils crept into her brain, her thoughts scattered between past and present. Sometimes Nick was glad no one else could really understand what she said. Especially anyone who might report to his uncle.

“Why would anyone kill Nic? His family might be named after a prickly plant, but he was such a gentle man. He never hurt anyone. Gods, please don’t let him be dead because of me. Nic, I love you.”

Two days after the first lunar eclipse ceremony, he had moved with his mother into Eglene’s Hospice. His uncle had tried to argue, but the healers had all been on Nick’s side, agreeing that his uncle’s mountain retreat was too far away in an emergency. His mother had a small set of rooms: a sitting room with two bedroom nooks, one for the patient, one for the primary caretaker.

“My family is a mess, Niko. You don’t need to give up your future for me.”

Nick worked half-shifts in the main cafeteria downstairs, serving meals for residents and their guests. Just enough time away to give his mother some privacy while she slept and to earn him a little coin on the side.

“Ash? Ash? Stop crying, baby. Shh, it’ll be okay. I’m trying to reach you. My foot is stuck. Ow! I’ll free it in a minute. I’ll keep you warm. Shh, try to sleep. I hope you didn’t see that fight. I’ll protect you. Yes, I know you’re not a baby, anymore. Just stay put, help will be here soon.”

Nick reached out from where he sat beside her bed to take her hand in his. “Your child is fine. I’m fine. You did protect us.” He paused. “What didn’t you want him to see?”

For a few seconds, her hand clutched his with surprising strength. “I don’t want to remember. I tried so hard to forget. Don’t make me remember.” She paused, gasping. “Fighting in the sky! How could I see it from so far away? Was that creature an elemental? He was so angry! He tried to kill all the storm mages. Niko and Charley Flash tried to protect the people.” Her voice was raspy, growing thready. “Sylvester wants to enslave the elemental. I hear him. His shield slips, and he lets the elemental in. Anger! Rage! The elemental strikes out at everyone stealing the lightning and disrupting the storms. But that includes this body. Stop the humans. Kill them, and take this one’s magic as he would have done to us. Niko senses me in the storms somehow and thrusts me away.”

A lone tear escaped her eye. “I’d forgotten. I don’t want to remember that. Please let me forget again. I failed everyone. Nic, Niko, Ash.”

“No! You didn’t! Mom, I am here with you, alive. I love you. I know you did what you could for me. Don’t cry, save your strength, be at peace.” Nick had no idea how much of what she had just said might be true, and how much might be the product of delusions and dreams.

“But I let him turn you into Nicky and didn’t stop him.”

“You did what you could. You became strong for me.”

She stared up at the ceiling, unseeing. For a while, the room was quiet. Nick was about to open a book when she spoke again. “Are your things packed, Nicky? Ash?”

“Yeah.” The important items, the notebooks, most of his newly earned money, her gifts, and some clothing, were stored in a safe location far away from this building, always ready.

“I think it’s almost time for us to go. Light the Hope Incense. And the Serenity. Be free. Find a nice young man.”

As Nick lit the two scents she requested, tears began to slide down his cheeks. Better to cry now. He held her hand. “Remember when I was three, and you and Dad took me to see the pink spoonbills?” He remembered very little of that, but he had seen pictures and heard the tale. He told the story now, not sure if he was embellishing from memory or imagination, trying to inject humor and love. By the time he had finished, she was gone. He stumbled through a couple of prayers. Then he summoned the night healer and suggested they wait until morning to call his uncle.

Less than an hour later, after taking a few final items from their rooms, he tossed all his bedding into the communal laundry room and walked out the back door of the hospice, reclaiming his mage energy from the nearby plants as he crossed the courtyard. A quarter mile later, he dumped the clothing he didn’t want to keep into the nearby hospital donation box and activated its internal cleansing spell. That should make them useless for tracking him, if anyone even thought to look.

Within the next half hour, he reached the home of Mr. Ivey, the school groundskeeper. The wall of thorny hedges didn’t bother him. A soft caress of his magic and they parted to let him pass. Mage wards guarded the three storage sheds, but the middle one recognized Nick and lowered to let him in. The climbing ivy released a key into his waiting hand, and he unlocked the door. Inside he found an unremarkable motorbike, with two fully charged solar batteries. Nearby he found lightweight camping gear, and some non-perishable food that could handle traveling at midsummer. He shoved the food in the waiting packs, on top of his other belongings, and attached everything securely to the bike.

Nick arranged some pebbles on the little worktable, forming the symbol of thanks.

Then he strapped on the helmet. Twenty years after he was conceived and just shy of fifteen years after his safe childhood was uprooted by tragedy, Nick finally found a way to strike back at Sylvester Bolt. He disappeared.

By the time Phoenix had collected a small pile of library books and had taken them to a well-lit reading alcove, the others began to arrive, one at a time. Phoenix was sitting at the semicircular table, opening the books he had previously read, marking passages and pictures with small strips, when Tobi slipped into the booth to his left. She greeted him and, after a brief exchange of mundane small talk, picked up a book at random and began to read, immediately engrossed, or at least pretending to be.

Rio arrived next, wearing black shorts and a lightweight blue sweatshirt from a seafood restaurant in Port Sunrise. He stopped to chat with the novice at the desk and managed to score one of the tablets that interfaced with the catalogs of all the Ettix Springs libraries. Most people had to use them at the counter under the watchful eye of Temple staff.

“How much did you donate to Nabris?” Tobi asked as Rio approached.

“Are you implying my small gift of thanks to the God of Libraries and to the upkeep of the Temple in general was a bribe?” Rio slid in to the right of Phoenix, and under the cover of the table, gave his leg a comforting squeeze. “Liam’s running a little late, said his last patient took extra tending.”

As they waited for Liam, Rio ran a few random searches, even collected three books from the shelves. Phoenix looked over to see him flipping through *Song and Soul: Saga of the Siren*.

Rio shrugged. “I want to be able to understand Indigo when she and my parents get back from their trip.”

They all read in silence for a while until Liam arrived, squeezing into the final space on Rio’s right.

Phoenix began, “I know I didn’t answer all your questions the other day, so I will try to explain now. First of all, I don’t know the exact origin of this writing. It might be a spell, a prayer, or a prophecy. I have seen it repeated, sometimes with slightly different wordings, in a number of sources. At least three sources suggest it is a prayer or offering to one of the Hunt Gods, as two

of the four lunar eclipses would occur during Hunters Moon and the poem mentions Hunters.”

“Logical.”

“Another source suggests it is a summoning spell used by demon hunters. In which case its use would be banned in almost every country, especially those where hunting or binding elementals is considered a crime against the gods.”

“Or maybe it began as a prayer to the Hunt Gods and was later subverted,” Rio suggested. “How old is the prayer?”

“As near as I can tell, at least seven hundred years old. Possibly older.”

“Well, the demon hunters appeared about three centuries ago, first in Daesali and Pajano, although they spread out from there. Most of them were shown the error of their ways within two decades. They used whatever writing and verse they could to justify their behavior.”

“‘Shown the error of their ways’?” Liam repeated. “You are speaking of the White Purge, when dozens of people were killed all at once, with no warning, no opportunity to change.”

Rio frowned. “The gods judged their hearts and punished them, Liam. Those hunters killed innocent elementals for no reason other than sport. Often yanked them away from their homes in other planes and then hunted them down in ours. I have no sympathy for anyone who hurts elementals, much less kills them. And before you mention the elementals hurting people—both at the time of the demon hunters and in other tales from the past—I will tell you that they did not know violence until we brought it to them. They had a right to defend themselves as best they could.”

Before the two men could start arguing opposite sides of a centuries-old debate, Phoenix interrupted. “Speaking of elementals, I think there may be at least one involved here.”

Everyone quieted and turned to him.

“Including my uncle, eight men were involved in the first ceremony. I don’t know what happened in the next two. In the one I know about, the seven others are the would-be Hunters, and I believe they were seeking the favor of Zareeze, a former Esurski Hunt God.”

He opened one of the books in front of him and pointed to a picture. “The problem with Zareeze is that he took his followers’ prayers too literally and sometimes gave them what they asked for. You know the expressions eagle

eyed, ears like a bat, lionhearted, things like that?” He turned the page to show disturbing picture of humans with animal parts: eyes or ears or claws or scales.

Liam pulled the book closer to inspect the drawing, while Tobi made a disgusted sound. “Be careful what you wish for, I guess.”

“According to what I have found, the Esurski stopped praying to Zareeze, and changed his name and purpose to Azare, God of Archery. So Zareeze no longer exists as a manifested God in the Assembly, but Azare still does. Does he still hold some vestige of Zareeze within him? Will he still respond to prayers under that name?”

No one had an answer, not even Rio, whom Phoenix guessed had probably paid more attention in theology classes than anyone else at the table.

“Let’s write that down as a question to research.” Rio jotted it in a notebook. He looked at Phoenix. “So where does the elemental come in?”

Phoenix tried to think how to best to explain his wild idea. “Rio, you mentioned having dreams with lightning and a creature in the cloud. Shortly before my mom died, she told me something. She had never mentioned it before, so for a while I thought maybe she had been dreaming or hallucinating. But maybe not. She said, or implied, that the Stormchasers had pissed off an air elemental. From her description, I believe it was a lightning elemental or a cloud elemental of some sort. Instead of trying to protect people, my uncle may have tried to capture the elemental.”

“*What?*” Rio scowled. “I thought your family was supposed to be smart.”

“My grandfather. Never said anything about my uncle. Just that he was powerful. In any case, if my mother was correct about what she remembered experiencing, and in telling it to me, my uncle might briefly have bonded with the elemental. Imagine an elemental—angry, its home invaded by the powers of several mages—is suddenly sharing an awareness or body with a megalomaniacal lightning mage who has a callous indifference toward other people. They fight for control of their shared power, their lightning, their beings, even while striking out at the enemy they can reach—everyone else around them. No one else can see clearly what is happening. The other mages who survived saw my uncle battling the storm and the power, and thought he tried to save them, so history remembers him as a hero. But he’s not. And in the end, the elemental and my uncle separated, but the elemental somehow managed to keep my uncle’s power or cripple him from using it again. My uncle believes he can somehow use this ceremony to get his power back.”

“I’m missing something in your story,” Liam said. “What is the connection between the Hunt God and the elemental?”

Phoenix reached for his journal, turned to a marked page. “This is a copy of an entry from a book at the university library. The final volume of *Encyclopedia of Elementals and Entities: A to Z*.” He placed it on the table where they could all see it. “The Zarasi are creatures of air, but they don’t live close to the ground like the Sylphs. When they are in this plane, they live higher up, traveling in the winds that circle the earth, resting on the clouds, riding in the storms, playing with lightning. They may need lightning for procreation.”

Liam looked at the notes Rio was writing. “So Zareeze is the Hunt God. Bolt tricks people into worshipping him at these rituals, with the promise of becoming great hunters. You believe something is actually having an adverse effect on the men, but you can’t be certain it is this god. But Bolt actually wants to summon one of the Zarasi elementals, not the god.”

Phoenix nodded, and Liam continued, “How does Bolt know which elemental to summon? He could end up with any of the Zarasi, not the specific elemental from sixteen years ago. And even if he gets it, how can he control it? I thought elementals had to be bound by name.”

“That’s a common way, but not the only way.” Phoenix was not going to mention the other common method. “Besides, if that one does somehow have a part of my uncle, there may be a link between man and elemental, one that could strengthen over the period of the four lunar eclipses if he can reinforce that link with the spell. Especially with the combined strength of the Hunters being channeled into it. That one would be drawn first to the summoning spell, by virtue of their shared power.”

Rio shuddered, dropping his pen. He swallowed twice. Then he whispered, “You think he wants to use your blood to bind the elemental, don’t you? Since you share the same bloodline.” He looked sick as he sketched a threefold warding symbol on the top of his page and signs against evil on the bottom.

“Or something along those lines. I am expendable to him. And I suspect all the Hunters are as well.”

After a few minutes of silence, Tobi changed the subject. “So Donna said we needed to awaken one of the Faded. And I hope she didn’t mean that too-literal former Hunt God. Anyone have any ideas?”

Rio rubbed two knuckles back and forth across his upper lip, thinking. The sexy scholar-in-thought pose had always intrigued Phoenix, and in times past had had him replacing Rio's hand with his own mouth. "You just researched all the Hunt Gods, right?" he finally asked.

"For the most part."

Rio picked up the library tablet. "Let's start with eclipse deities and protection deities, then cross-reference with hunting deities if we need to."

"Or maybe try for deities of desperate fools," Liam muttered. Tobi kicked him under the table.

Chapter Nine

Rio, Fifth Prayer

~In the Temple of All Gods, addressing Caibrus, faded Athyrian god,
protector of small hunters~

Honored Caibrus, I don't know if you can hear me. Where do most gods and goddesses go when their followers have all disappeared? Do you rest somewhere beyond the Veils or come forth into this world as deities with different names? We have long been taught gods and goddesses are only as strong as their supporters. I am not a hunter, not even a small one, unless you consider water pollutants to be prey. So I may not make you a good follower. But if you sleep, I hope this prayer may help nudge you toward wakefulness in time to consider our plea.

The Harvest Moon rose full last night. A month has passed since Phoenix was taken and returned, and only a month remains until the lunar eclipse. So much still to do, so little time.

I go about my daily routine, keeping my head down and my eyes open for any sign of *them*. Well, I keep my eyes open as much as I can. Until now, until I had a reason to be afraid, I never realized how much time I spend standing around with my eyes closed, or focused on the ground as if I can physically see through the layers of pavement and soil and rock to the water below. I never felt unprotected before, but some days I am surprised I get through the days with my sanity intact. I always worry about seeing the hunters looking for Phoenix. Not hunters you approve of, I hope. Otherwise we are praying to the wrong god.

Two weird things happened yesterday. Last year, Tobi gave me a Stone of True Sight, which is supposed to allow some people to detect and see through illusion spells and ignore-me spells. It only works for me when I hold it and concentrate hard. I played with it a few times and never saw much, other than the location of protection wards and a few expensive motorbikes and cars, so I never thought much of it. Although I admit, I did once use it to find a few corroding barrels of almost toxic homebrew. In that case, however, I knew the bad liquid was coming from somewhere. Normally, I can't use it and do my work at the same time, because of the required split in concentration, so it isn't usually a useful or practical item for me. But, yesterday, as I was biking a

routine patrol through Cherrywood Hills, one of the outlying residential areas, I felt something grow hot and vibrate in my pocket. I stopped and dug around to find the offending object, then pulled the stone out, puzzled. It had never acted like that before.

When I held it and concentrated as Tobi had taught me, I almost dropped it in shock. The entire wall to my left suddenly blazed with lights. I stared in amazement. I must have been past here twice a month for the last year or two, but I had never felt even a twinge of curiosity about the place. Now, still holding the stone, I parked, hopped off my bike, and walked along the wall. Eventually I came to a pair of wrought iron gates. A plaque had once been embedded in the stone of the wall but was now missing. Through the gates, I could see a smallish temple surrounded by a garden. Seriously, spell or not, how could I have missed seeing a temple and a garden property larger than some parks? But wasn't that the purpose of such spells? Your eyes might see, but your brain doesn't register.

I reached out to touch the gate. "I wonder what secrets you hide." The lock clicked, and the gate swung open just enough to let me squeeze through. Yes, I know, entering the mysteriously appearing garden probably was not the brightest move on my part, but all I felt was a sense of invitation. No compulsion, no danger. Tentatively I let go of the stone. Nothing disappeared. Apparently the hide-me magic only worked on those outside the walls. I crossed a short path across a decoratively paved but untended courtyard, full of weeds, with a small dry fountain to either side of the main walkway.

The temple door opened for me, and I walked inside. There was no power, but I could see a large central room with high skylights and a long reception desk. Wall mosaics suggested this had been a temple of healing. I did not sense any of the water from the local hot springs, which is often part of healing temples, and I wondered if the lack of it explained the abandonment of this site. Nothing remained in any of the small rooms along the sides, except rods across some of the doorways, which could have been used to hang curtains. Perhaps healers had met with patients in those, or patients or their families had petitioned the gods.

I continued through the temple and out the back entrance, wandering through an enormous yard of curving paths. Untended vegetation ran wild. Even I, with none of Phoenix's plant magic, could sense the neglect. I saw a few empty ponds, pebbles where a small artificial brook had once run, and two drinking fountains. I did not have to try them to know no water had run through

their pipes in many years. Graffiti marred the inside of the garden walls, which might be the reason the spell had been put in place.

At the far end of the main garden were two arched entrances. One led to an enclosure with a seven- or eight-layered circular labyrinth built from colored paving stones, some of which had been broken and displaced over time, possibly from freezing and thawing over a series of winters. The pattern showed a complex design spanning across halves and quarters. Part of me ached to walk it. I love labyrinths, love the way they focus the mind and energy. Another part of me wanted to repair it. But I knew, somehow, this was not the time, and I did not walk through the archway. I had to keep myself from whispering “soon” to the lonely space.

The other archway led to a more familiar-looking garden, with regular raised beds and pots I guessed had once been filled with herbs and medicinal plants and maybe vegetables. A small tile-roofed building looked like it had contained a tiny washroom and a small bedroom for one of the resident priests, while the rest of the space had been dedicated to a windowless storeroom, and very large workroom or stillroom, probably where medicines had been prepared. Narrow windows and vents near the ceiling would allow for ventilation without adding much light.

One more gate, already open, led to the final building. I entered cautiously. The lower floor was divided into a central gathering room, with a kitchen on one side, and a huge bathing room on the other. I stared in awe at the tile work of the giant tub, the detailed patterns of green, blue, and aqua tiles. I entered the room, leaning to take a closer look, reaching out to feel for the presence of gems. I looked at the spouts high in the wall, above the little ledges and channels, trying to imagine the way the water would flow down the wall, pool in the depressions of the ledges, and finally flow in a gentle series of waterfalls into the tub. That could have a nice, massaging effect to anyone sitting underneath. Inset benches provided plenty of space for eight to ten people to sit, depending on whether they wanted to be in, or out, of the waterfall zone. The upper level of the building contained half a dozen rooms, each with a skylight. Remarkably none of the skylights seemed to have leaked. Two of the skylights had stained-glass panels fitted beneath them. No furniture remained in any of the rooms. Had these rooms once housed patients or priests? Or been used for some other purpose?

As I left the building, I knew in my heart, felt with everything in me, that Phoenix would positively love this property, especially the two gardens. Can

you imagine what a plant mage and a water mage could do with a space like that? I was going to turn, to go back the way I had come, but a compulsion I had not felt before propelled me to an exit not far from the bathhouse. Another iron gate, this one just a single door, swung open as I approached. I walked through, and then the door closed and locked firmly behind me. I found myself on a familiar street, one that ran parallel to where I had left my bike. A brief touch of the no-longer-hot stone assured me that the hiding spell was firmly in place on this side of the property also. Sighing, I began the walk back to my bike, trying to figure out how much time I had spent in the lost healing garden and how behind in my work I was. Not that work mattered to me at the moment. I lost some more time when I stopped to jot everything down. I didn't want the spell to make me forget later on. If we survived, I knew I definitely had to bring Phoenix to this garden.

Phoenix. Gods, I miss him more than I can say, but we agreed it would be better if he and I are not seen together. Sometimes, Tobi or Liam manage a word with him, but not me. I haven't seen him since that day in the Temple of All Gods. As I eat meals alone, I miss having him to talk with. And as the nights grow colder, I miss having him beside me in bed. And miss the sex, but never mind that. I probably shouldn't whine about a few weeks alone, when you might have been celibate for over one thousand years.

And I don't want to lead *them* to him, if they think I know where he might be. And by *them*, I mean Sylvester Bolt and his unknown number of minions. We don't know how many there might be, and who might have replaced the original three.

Liam and Tobi had news of the Hunters. Two mornings after the abduction, one man brought another into the city hospital with a suspected drug overdose. The man was in a coma. He and a companion had taken turns checking in for a few days, before a different pair of men appeared, with orders to transfer the patient to Murrcombe, in Caralyna. Liam hadn't dared ask for the patient's name or check whether the patient actually made it to Murrcombe. Tobi, who used the pretext of an unrelated investigation to check the registry of the motel where Phoenix had been held, could confirm that the three men were no longer there.

In his second journal, Phoenix has a detailed list of all the people who worked for his uncle, including pictures, physical and magical skills, weapons proficiency, and so forth. But he also says new people could have been hired since he escaped the compound last summer. Apparently, even sixteen years

after his last “heroics,” Bolt is quite capable of attracting star-struck groupies to work for him. And men with lax morals willing to do anything for money. Phoenix refused to show me the pictures. He says I’m a terrible actor, might give something away if I recognize one of them, and that I am better off not trusting anybody. He did show them to Tobi, apparently having more faith in her acting abilities than in mine.

Phoenix and Tobi might have been right not to show me the pictures. I think one of *them* approached me at our neighborhood’s Harvest celebration yesterday. That’s the second weird thing that happened. I didn’t particularly feel like celebrating, but at the same time, I was grateful for the familiar rituals, and yes, also the food. Once there, I mingled appropriately, politely. A fellow tenant and water mage, Ara, approached me to chat about work. Her date introduced himself as Garret Fox. And with his orange hair and narrow face, he certainly looks foxlike. I think he is a few years older than I am, although he pretended to be younger, dressing like a mage just out of the university. He claims to be a fire mage, and unlike Phoenix, I think he actually may be one. After a few minutes of listening to Ara and me discuss the city’s efforts to protect the upper aquifer from pollutants and whether the hot spring system could support another expansion of the subterranean pipeline, Fox casually, but not subtly enough, worked the conversation around to the topic that truly interested him.

“I hear you had some excitement a few weeks ago. Armed men in your apartment or something?”

Why couldn’t people in my complex keep their mouths shut? On the other hand, it probably did make for interesting speculation. I made a noncommittal noise, then managed, “Yeah. I try not to think about it, though. Don’t really remember much.”

“I thought this was a safe neighborhood. That must’ve been scary!” His wide-eyed, innocent, and earnest look seemed sincere. “What happened?”

I looked at him, injecting impatience into my voice. “Someone hit me with an amnesia spell. Don’t know who. Try asking someone who might remember more.”

He apologized. “Sorry, sorry. Of course. Do you know what happened to your friend? And who took him? We wouldn’t want anyone else to get hurt.” He put his arm around Ara, who looked embarrassed by his questions. I would have felt sorrier for her if I had thought Fox to be a serious romantic interest and not an opportunist who had coozied up to her for a way to approach me.

I shrugged. “The police told me he was found safe in another city and wouldn’t be returning.”

“That’s weird. How’d he get there, do you know?”

“I have no idea.” *Because he didn’t actually go there.* “Probably not of his own volition, but who knows?”

“Did he contact you after he got away? What did he tell you about it?”

Time to end this. “Look, to this day I don’t know why he was taken.” *Because, like Phoenix said, it was a stupid thing for those men to do. Far better to watch him, learn his routine, and grab him just a few days before the eclipse.* “I don’t think I really knew him all that well.” *Not like I know him now.* “Even if I wanted to get a hold of him, I couldn’t, because my phone was a casualty of the break-in, and I don’t know his code to put in my new one.” *Completely true, since he changed his, too.* “I’m trying to move on and put the whole incident behind me.” *You have no idea how true that is.*

Fox opened his mouth, probably to ask another question, when Liam came up beside me and bumped my shoulder. “Hey, Rio, Ara. Harvest Blessings and all that. I went into your gran’s store yesterday, Ara. She’s as lively as ever.” And Liam proceeded to dominate the conversation by talking to Ara about her grandmother. When a group of craftsmages I knew passed by, deep in discussion about how to build the next great Something-or-Other, I slipped away with them, even though I only understood one word in five.

Just in time, too. I hope I didn’t give anything away. Fortunately I don’t think Ara knew Phoenix by name. At least no one heard her speak it last night. When Liam and Tobi stopped by my apartment this morning, after they interrogated me, both assured me I had done well. When Fox tried to ask Liam a question, Liam had apparently shut him down with a quick, “Healer-patient privilege. I didn’t get a good look at the men. Why are you interested, anyhow? Were you here then?”

I mingled as best I could, chatting with acquaintances but shutting down flirtations. However, when the eating wound down and the background music changed to dancing music with a heavier beat, I made my escape. Being social was one thing. Watching dozens of happy couples was another.

Instead, I returned to my apartment and practiced my recorder, as I have every night since Phoenix told me his dream. Not many people realize you don’t have to be a music mage to use music to enhance and focus your spells. Some years ago I had found a book of intermediate spells, in a range and key

suitable for the recorder, in a used-book bin at the local music shop. I admit I hadn't done more than glance at it, but in the last month I'd taken the time to look through it and regretted not having done so sooner. I played a protection spell daily to strengthen my wards and then worked on the others I had chosen to memorize: cleansing and purification, binding and unbinding, and inner strength. I mixed glasses of water with a variety of additives and tried separating them back out using music as a focus, with and without the additional help of my gemstones. I have concluded music will never replace good gems for me, but it might work as a supplement or booster in some situations.

Do you know about Tobi and Liam? Probably not if you are still sleeping or whatever. Tobi and Liam and I have been friends for years. We still are, especially now... but what recently happened between them is strange to think about. They've each had lovers from time to time, but no one special. But in order to protect me, and for us to converse more readily without arousing suspicion from any watchers, they decided two weeks ago to pretend to be a couple, so that Liam would have an even better reason to be up on our floor more frequently. Only their mock public kiss ended up not being fake at all, at least not for more than a few seconds. Do you know the moment between when a firework gets shot up and—after a pause, while everyone waits—it suddenly bursts into color and sound? Their first kiss was like that. Watching their second kiss was, well, almost voyeuristic. After they went to Tobi's that first night, I think they probably wouldn't have noticed if I had been attacked by a band of trumpeters or dragged from my apartment by stair-climbing elephants.

No matter how sudden it seems, I am happy for them, truly. Who knows how much longer any of us has? I am envious of what they have, but not jealous they have each other. I don't feel excluded or anything, at least not much, but it reminds me how alone I am. But at least I still see them. I can't imagine how much more alone Phoenix must feel right now. If this last month may be all the time we have, why are we spending it apart?

Tobi and Liam are having weird dreams, too, not just Phoenix and me. Tobi dreams of lightning and fire and burning trees. Liam dreams of trying to heal non-humans and not knowing how. I told him what I learned—in order to heal injured elementals, you sometimes first have to heal the environment in which they live. He said that might help him interpret the dream differently the next time he had it.

I am going to Port Sunrise tomorrow, to visit my family for a couple of days. This whole scheme seems more insane every day. But... Phoenix is right.

There may be some families law enforcement can't, or won't, go after. Even Tobi agrees. But if we are going to do battle with an insane mage, a pack of armed enforcers with possibly enhanced senses, and perhaps one or more elementals, I need to remember what I am fighting for. And possibly say good-bye to my family, even if they don't know it yet.

I have also researched how to use my water magic as a weapon and a shield. I wish I hadn't. I know I am magically strong enough to do some of those things, but I also know that I never, ever, want to. I have never used my magic to harm another person before. I don't know if I can. I'm not a warrior, nor have I ever aspired to be. And now I feel like a coward.

Caibrus, I hope you are not disappointed in me. We chose you carefully, you know. A god of hunters and the protector of your people. And your companions were different than the wolves and giant cats and hawks seen with many of your fellow Hunt Gods. An Athyrian hunting cat, a Sootfoot terrier, a dwarf owl, and a kestrel. Little hunters, silent hunters, often unseen hunters. Although your people were assimilated by their neighbors many centuries ago, the descendants of your cats still thrive. When we learned you were born during an eclipse, it seemed like Fate, or maybe Fortuity, had smiled upon us.

Interlude

The former storm mage sat in his mountain stronghold. His fury at his inept employees ebbed as he perused the contents of the report. True, his runaway nephew was his closest living relative, and he had only kept the boy all these years for his potential usefulness. But the ungrateful brat had somehow evaded his “hunters.” Hunters! The man laughed to himself. Those idiots were so gullible. Of course, he couldn’t blame them completely for their weakness. The drugs he slipped them before and after the ceremonies had helped. Otto had even brewed one of them, before becoming its unwitting recipient.

Perhaps, once his powers were restored, he should rid himself of all of them. But not as long as they remained useful. He had a new use for some of his hunters, a new “prey” to send them after. This boy would be even better than his nephew. But not yet. Not until it would be too late to mount a successful search. By offering up a pureblood air mage as a sacrifice to the thief, he would finally get his powers back. Then he would kill his nephew and everyone who had slighted him and doubted him the last sixteen years. After years of being relegated to the sidelines, he would finally reclaim his rightful place as leader of the Bolt family.

Farther down the mountain, in the town nestled midway, a man tossed restlessly in his hospital bed, twitching as a breeze blew across the room from the slight opening of the window. “Make it stop,” he muttered to himself. “Please,” he implored, a little louder. Then *she* came. Although he had always wished for solitude inside his mind, the instructions he now received in his dreams and *her* aid when he was awake now seemed a blessing, for they taught him to block the rest on his own, taught him to use his talent. And if he occasionally longed for his suppression bracelet, he knew he would never put it on again. He needed to overcome all his addictions and crutches if he was to be of any use.

Somewhere across the Veil, the gods and goddesses watched. And, where they could, answered prayers and needs in their own ways.

Lyaqi, the local Storm God, wanted the balance restored. His storm elementals were becoming unruly. But despite his impatience, he knew that

others had a claim upon the storm mage. Air was not the only Element affected, nor were his elementals the only sufferers and victims. While Lyaqi often blustered and threatened, he knew better than to unleash a storm too early.

Pachialla, Patroness of the Pachialla Mountains, had as much claim against the corrupt storm mage as any of the other deities. He resided in her lands and threatened and harmed those under her protection. None of the other deities wished to align themselves against a goddess with the resilience of a forest and the enduring patience of a mountain.

Nydaris, Goddess of Dreams, had done her part. She had aided the misguided, mind-damaged air mage, the servant of the rogue storm mage. She had also slipped what hints she could into the dreams of the four mortals seeking to stop him. They must remember, share, and interpret. Perhaps she could gift them one more dream to help guide them. She loved nothing more than inspiring mortals with wisps of future possibilities.

Ettix decided it was *fortuitous* when the young water mage had wandered by the forgotten garden, charm in his pocket. Ettix could work with fortuity. The young man had needed hope, however subtle. He needed a better dream of the future, a foundation Nydaris could work with. Even in the midst of his own troubles, the mage had looked at what was empty and abandoned, and he had seen possibilities. Perhaps he and the green mage would be chosen to restore the garden, perhaps not, but for now, the idea, the lure, would help keep him motivated and dreaming, and those could help bring him home. Ettix wanted all four of his citizens back.

Now Nerzu watched as his devout young follower reunited with his family, hugging his parents and his sister. Love and fear and desperation warred within the young man. As a God of Water, Nerzu had always found it fitting that this man, who believed in the gods with a constant heart, would have an affinity for purifying water. But until recently, the mortal had never faced deep fear or loss or adversity. Risk and work and sacrifice must precede reward and gain and growth.

Verdenia's mortal perhaps faced the greatest risk. He had come into his full power, but remained only partially trained. And by accepting the duty to repair the harm wrought by his maternal bloodline, he might choose to join his blood to the summoning spell and thus become the very thing he sought to avoid: an offering for an unhappy and unappeased storm elemental.

Adario might not be Patron over a region or an element, but he had a significant following across the world. He spoke for all the men attracted to

other men, as his twin sister spoke for the women attracted to other women, and they both spoke for those born into the wrong-gendered bodies. In some regions of the world, his people were oppressed and scorned, and he worked tirelessly to ease their burden and help them gain acceptance. He had been surprised when the young female with the Spell-Sight asked him to please arrange for her two friends to have some time together before the lunar eclipse. Unusual. Most women who prayed to him asked him to release their sons from his grip, as if he somehow controlled the men. He had granted her request. A subtle nudge was all it took to have the green mage boarding a train to meet his lover for a coastal rendezvous.

And the gods and goddesses waited.

Even farther away, beyond a different Veil, in a realm of chaos and harmony, of light and energy, a speck of self-awareness began to coalesce. Yes, he had once been a god, but his followers were centuries gone. He rested here, waiting to be needed once more. He felt a tentative prayer calling to him through the Veil, although he could not yet understand the words. He felt, somewhere nearer, the presence of other gods and goddesses, many of whom might not even have been born when he last roamed the Earth. Slowly, carefully, he began to gather more energy. Perhaps it was time to rise.

Chapter Ten

Phoenix Returns

Phoenix, having spent many months dreading his return to Caralyna, had not anticipated any part of the road trip to be fun. But he had not expected to spend hours in a car with other people determined to distract him and themselves from thinking about the future. As he had never been on a road trip as a child older than four, his companions insisted he play traditional road trip games. Now, sitting in the back seat with Rio while Liam took the first turn at driving, he found himself engaged in such pointless pursuits as predicting the color distribution of the next ten cars coming in the opposite direction, counting livestock, trying to find an object for each letter of the alphabet, and answering riddles from a book Tobi had brought. After a hundred miles of this, his friends decided he had compensated enough for his lost childhood. They began to share stories of their best and worst road trips.

After some argument over the best route to take, the four decided to take the direct road from Ettix Springs east to the Interterritorial Highway, then drive north from Jorjina to northern Caralyna. They could skirt the east side of the Blue Crest Mountains in the Pachialla range. They had debated heading west, driving up Long Valley between the Blue Crest range and the Gruenberg Plateau range. However, the roads were not quite as well maintained on the Altunusin side of the mountains as on the Caralyna side, and they meandered more to accommodate the lakes and stream and farmland of the floodplain. Plus the western route would not only add almost a hundred extra miles to their journey, but include more traversing of the foothills and a longer climb up and over one of the highest passes of the range. On the eastern route, they would spend much of the trip on the wide lesser plateau, among small rolling hills.

With any luck, his uncle would not be thinking to look for him. And certainly he would not expect to find Phoenix as part of a group. And should he be looking, between Tobi and Phoenix's cousin Thorn, they had assembled quite an arsenal of weapons and artifacts. Each of them had one of the Suggestions Stones. Phoenix had a borrowed Scrambler, which should block any spells based on his blood or bloodline. Tobi and Phoenix both had stunners and bullet guns. Rio and Liam refused to carry weapons, but each carried a number of items in their mage kits they claimed would help with offensive or defensive magics. Rio did agree to take charge of some non-lethal freeze

charms while Liam had been given some extremely powerful potions in small containers suitable for a field kit.

They initially had planned on renting a car, but seven days ago, a man had approached Liam as he was leaving work, exchanged a few words, and handed Liam the keys and temporary papers for a used SunSlider. The forest-green car might not be the most luxurious model on the market, but in addition to holding the four of them, it could handle rugged terrain and also perform some minimal recharge of its batteries when parked in the sun. In addition, this one had been subtly spelled with some serious protection. Tobi noticed an anti-scrying spell, a forget-me spell, a fire-repellant spell, a distance-listening-enhancement spell, and an air-purifying spell. Everyone agreed it was probably a former, or possibly even current, undercover law enforcement vehicle. It was also equipped with a currently inactive tracking device.

Rio reached over and touched Phoenix's hand. "Thanks for coming to Port Sunrise the other day," he said softly, possibly too quietly for the two in the front of the car to hear. "I know I told you already, but it was the best surprise. Ever."

Phoenix remembered clearly Rio's astonishment, which had quickly turned into delight, when they had spotted each other at the Port Sunrise train station. Rio had quickly changed his ticket for the last train of the day, and they had checked into one of the nearby inns for a few hours.

"I needed to see you again, too," Phoenix replied. Those stolen hours seemed now to be both a distant dream, and the most real part of the past two long months. A frantic, hot encounter, followed by two much more leisurely romps. Intense, though. Not as playful as before he was kidnapped. More emotion and more honesty, perhaps tempered with the knowledge and fear that this might be the last time, caused every touch to feel more precious. Later they had showered together, washing each other, pampering each other, and then wandered hand in hand along the beach until it was time to return to the station. On the train, they boarded separate passenger cars just to be cautious, but Phoenix remembered spending most of the two-hour trip smiling.

"Why aren't there trains along this route? They're faster." Phoenix didn't recall ever seeing a train firsthand before his escape last year.

"Topography and power," Tobi answered. "The tracks need to be as straight as possible, with only gradual changes in slope. They only connect to transcontinental lines south of the mountains and to the north through a series

of tunnels. It took years for the earth and mining mages to agree on the safest and least damaging tunnel locations and get the cooperation of the local mountain creatures. A particularly troublesome and smart clan of mountain gnomes caused havoc, because they were the ones most affected by the proposed route.”

“What happened?”

“The gnomes get a per-car toll, and a cooperative formed of the local non-humans owns a fifteen percent stake in that leg of the railway. The gnomes used their money to relocate, and the collective uses it to protect their land against human expansion,” Tobi replied.

Rio laughed. “Don’t forget, some of the most enterprising gnomes took jobs on the railway and use it to scout out new territory and visit relatives in a protected manner.”

“So how do the trains float?”

“Something to do with repulsion, I think. I don’t understand it completely, you’d have to get a tech mage to explain it to you. But there is energy moving or circulating in the tracks, and when the train is on them, it has an opposing energy field underneath it, and they repel each other, pushing the train up. So there is no friction like that between car or bike tires and a road.” Rio shrugged. “Not something I studied much.”

“The energy also limits how long a segment of track can be and controls the design.” Liam continued the explanation. “They are more power-efficient than cars, even if they are geographically limited. But cars and bikes are more versatile over curvy roads and in hilly terrain. Don’t forget, pack animals and riding animals are still common in many areas outside of the towns.”

As they approached the bridge over the Hasvah River, which marked the territorial border between Jorjina and Caralya, everyone quieted so Tobi could concentrate on feeling the border spell.

“There are at least fifty active search spells. Criminals, missing people, objects.” Sweat formed on her forehead. “I never appreciated the complexity of the border before. Protections spells, counting spells, identification spells...” Tobi trailed off as the car crossed the bridge.

Phoenix held his breath, as if that would protect him if one of those spells was aimed at him. Had he been reported as a missing person of sufficient interest to have been added to a border search? If so, would the Scrambler work?

Tobi breathed an audible sigh once they were over the river and through the spell. She wiped her face. “All clear. Nothing noticed us. Pass me some water, please.”

Phoenix handed her a bottle as he started to breathe again.

Liam stopped the car at the park on the far side, so they could relax, stretch their legs, and take a quick break at the visitors’ center. Rio, of course, wandered to an overlook above the river. Phoenix followed him. Together they watched children running down the path to the river and a few fisherfolk along the banks. A small group of intrepid canoers, braving the autumn weather, waved at a group of watchers on the shore as the current carried them past.

Phoenix rested a hand on Rio’s back. “How does the river feel?”

Rio smiled. “Alive. Clean. Clear. When I reach out, I can sense where one of the tributaries is entering upstream, feel the water mingling. I think some water sprites live nearby, too. I can feel the subtle tingle of their magic, different than human magic. Someday we need to go closer to the headwaters. Or travel down it.”

Phoenix noticed Rio was talking as if they had a future beyond tomorrow or the next day. He hoped with everything in him that it would be true. “That could be fun. I’ve never been on a canoe or boat before.”

Rio turned and smiled, before giving Phoenix a quick kiss. They held hands as they walked back to the car.

By midday, when they stopped for a picnic beside a smaller stream, the road had wended higher into the foothills. They donned sweatshirts and light jackets. He hoped his companions had taken his advice and packed sufficiently warm clothes. Even in mid-autumn, the nighttime temperature at the higher elevations would be quite cold. Phoenix remembered winters in a mountain town very well. He had been quite happy to spend the previous winter in a warmer lowland town.

The forest in this region was awash with colors: the red and dark-orange leaves of the dominant chestnut oak, the yellow and gold leaves of tulip trees, and a scattering of solid green from the pines. Across the stream, he glimpsed a covey of bobwhite quail foraging above the banks. A trio of box turtles rested in a spot of sunlight, almost perfectly camouflaged against the dirt and leaves. “The trees prepare for winter,” he murmured. “Almost time to rest.”

“For them, perhaps, not for us.” Rio looked upstream. “I had a different dream the last couple of nights. I am walking up a stream, or a road. Or both.

The surface feels like a smooth road beneath my feet, but looks like a stream, because the moonlight is reflecting off the water, and I can sense the water. I keep walking up the stream through a night forest, toward a gigantic moon that is about to set just ahead of me. I know I need to get to the top before the moon sets, but I can never get any closer, although the moon never seems to get any lower, either. The water has a wrongness to it, and I need to fix it, but I can't until I can reach the giant moon."

Phoenix looked at his water mage. "I had the same dream, only I wasn't aware of the water. The trees and plants were screaming at me to help them. It seemed to be both night and twilight. The night was dark, but the moon and the pathway had a pinkish glow."

"Wrong little spells were everywhere, spells I couldn't recognize in the dream," Tobi offered. "I had to keep moving, though, and couldn't stop to unravel them. For me the path was more like a pathway of light."

Liam ran a hand over his head and tugged an ear. "I remember the moon, and the path, but not what it was made of. I feel sickness all around and an urge to heal, but I can't find anyone to help, nor am I familiar with the illness. Like Rio, I felt a sense of urgency."

Rio grabbed his hair with both hands and leaned forward. "Odd. We all shared the same dream, but our feelings and understanding were tied to our talents." He rocked slightly, obviously thinking. "I'll be honest, I never took a Dream Interpretation class. However—"

Liam mimed shock. "A subject you haven't studied! How remiss."

Rio released his grip on his hair and stuck his tongue out at the healer. "And you would have? As I was about to say, even though I never took a class on it, something about the shared dream sounds familiar in a historical context. The people were lost or in peril, they prayed to their gods, they all had the dream, whatever it was. Then they argued about its meaning, but once they understood it, they reached a place of safety."

Tobi frowned. "That seems kind of familiar to me, too."

"I think our message is clear enough," Phoenix said. "Something or someone, probably my uncle, has mucked about on the mountain, even though it is supposed to be preserved. Whatever has been done has damaged the water, the land, the plants, and the inhabitants."

"So are we expected to stop your uncle *and* fix all that?" Tobi looked alarmed. "We have to be back at work in four days."

The “if we survive” hung unspoken.

“Why don’t we worry about one crisis at a time?” Liam suggested. “Nothing we can do about either until we get there, anyway.”

After their meal, Rio took a turn driving, and Phoenix sat beside him. In the back, Tobi closed her eyes, either resting or scanning for spells. Liam read a book on the medicinal properties of the local vegetation. Occasionally he would pass the book to Phoenix and ask him if he recognized various shrubs and trees. Phoenix would not be surprised if he later found Liam asking to harvest or transplant a few of the smaller items.

Tobi opened her eyes and sat up abruptly. “The tracking device just turned on.” No one spoke for a few minutes. “And now it’s off again. Long enough to run a trace, I think.”

Phoenix wondered if it had been safe to trust a gift car from his cousin. “Let’s hope it’s the good guys keeping tabs on us.” Nevertheless, he pulled on one of his many hats and tugged the brim down.

“So should we still stop in Oak Haven?” Rio asked. “We’re only about four miles away.”

“Yeah. My cousin knew our approximate route. Liam has papers for the car if someone asks any questions, and I don’t think that my uncle could have learned about this car.” *Unless he has spies in the MTI.*

At the Energy Exchange, Phoenix and Tobi covertly assessed their surroundings as Liam swapped out the used batteries for charged ones. The attendant tested the energy levels in the trade-ins and Liam paid the required service and charging fees. Phoenix didn’t notice anyone giving them more than cursory glances, and after they got back in the car and were on their way once more, greatly relieved, Tobi said she hadn’t detected any hostile spells aimed at them.

“General anti-theft spells and alarms on the merchandise, nothing else.”

An hour after Oak Haven, Phoenix saw the sign for the road to Murrycombe. To his surprise, he felt an unwanted twinge of nostalgia. He has spent most of his life a few miles outside of the town, had attended school there. However unhappy he had been, this place had formed him, sheltered him, and was forever inside him. Given time, Jorjina would feel like home, and he would bond deeper with its plants, but at this moment, this part of the Pachialla Mountains warmed his magic with a familiar caress. **Welcome back.**

Twenty miles later, he directed Rio to take the road west toward Windy Rocks Pass. As the road twisted and climbed up the mountains, it traded the deciduous woodland for the spruce-pine forest. Traffic became lighter, although a few vehicles descended from either the mountain communities or from Altunusin on the other side of the pass. **Welcome back. Help us.** Was he hearing things? Phoenix shook off the strange feeling that the forest spoke to him inside his head.

The small town of Windy Rocks was a tourist mecca, especially in the summer. Year-round, it housed artists, a number of forest and mountain mages, and people who ran the restaurants and inns. The mages often worked as wardens or trail guides, or sometimes both.

At this time of year, however, they had no problem finding lodging for two nights, even though the town was having its own small eclipse ceremony the next night. After checking into a small two-bedroom guest cabin, they had just enough daylight left to walk over the famous rock formations near the ridgeline. They pulled on their jackets, gloves, and hats before setting their own wards inside the cabin and on the windows and door.

“Wow!” Tobi clambered up onto the largest rock overhang. “This view is amazing. You can see forever on both sides.”

“This would be a great spot for viewing the moon.” Rio looked up into the sky. “Don’t think I would want to be out here at night though. It’s a long way down if you fall.”

Liam stood tall, holding out his arms wide, letting the wind whip at him. “We can at least watch the sunset.”

Other people joined them, either tourists or locals, all watching as the sun set behind the Gruenberg Plateau range to the west. Afterwards the four walked to the nearest restaurant. Liam put one arm around Tobi, and Phoenix reached out to take Rio’s gloved hand in his. Inside the restaurant, they admired the pictures of the local wildlife—not just deer and black bears and cougars and bobcats and an array of birds, but also flying squirrels, pygmy salamanders, and even tiny spiders that lived in the moss growing on rocks beneath the forest canopy.

They sat at a table in a secluded corner and ordered the local specialty, fresh-caught lake trout. Keeping up their pretense of being vacationing tourists, they discussed various activities they could do the next day.

Phoenix almost jumped out of his seat when he heard, very distinctly, a voice in his head. **Do not turn around. They who call themselves Fox and Bear are about to enter.** He realized he had not imagined the earlier voices. They had been calling to him for the last hour, but he had not understood what he was experiencing. This time he sensed a feminine, yet inhuman, quality to the voice. Beneath the words he could feel the pulse of the forest and the familiar warmth of plant magic. Phoenix took a deep breath in an attempt to slow his suddenly elevated heart rate.

“No one move,” he whispered to the table. “And do not look around. Two of his men are coming in.”

The little plant in the center of table trembled. **Give it your power. Craft your spell.** Tentatively, Phoenix touched it with a tendril of his power and summoned his blocking spell. He felt his magic being subtly tweaked by someone else, sensed the pattern being rearranged. Tobi sucked in a breath and took a drink of water. Phoenix tried to memorize the feel of the shield, even as he forced himself to stay seated, to not turn around, to not run. Next to him, Rio stared hard at his plate, used his fork as if searching for any tiny scraps of food remaining. Liam seemed engrossed in a tourist brochure.

Out of the corner of his eye, Phoenix saw Garret and Bryce—Fox and Bear—walk within six feet of their table on their way across the room.

“I’d forgotten how much curvier the road is on the Altunusin side,” Garret said. “Glad we don’t have to make that trip too often.”

“Least we have everything for tomorrow. Now let’s eat. I’m starving.”

After the two men were shown to their table, Phoenix realized only a few patrons blocked him from Bryce’s direct view. When the people at the table next to them rose at the same time a server approached Bryce and Garret, Phoenix whispered, “Leave.” They mingled with the other group as they collected their outerwear. Phoenix pulled on a warm hat, his back to the dining area, as Rio quickly settled the bill. Tobi flipped up her hood to cover her distinctive hair. Liam had already slipped outside without putting his extra clothes on. Phoenix joined him as they waited for the others. He noticed a familiar brown NeoStorm parked outside the restaurant.

“That’s the same car they had in Ettix Springs when they grabbed me,” he told Liam. The healer took a careful look at the car. “I thought we would be far enough away here to be safe.”

“Safe enough. They weren’t looking for you, or us.”

“No. Still, with tomorrow being so important, you’d think he’d want everyone involved close at hand. Wonder what they had to go into another territory for.”

Tobi and Rio joined them.

Good. Meet me in the woods near your cabin. Bring your offerings. I will guide you.

Phoenix tried to focus his thoughts, but first he needed to come down from his shock. They were sitting with a *forest nymph!* He had sometimes sensed them as a child, once or twice caught a glimpse of them on school hiking trips, but he had never spoken to one before. She chose to appear as humans often depicted nymphs, as an ethereal creature, seemingly garbed in a dress of leaves. Closer inspection would likely reveal it to be much tougher than it looked, but Phoenix was not going to tempt her patience. Although many nymphs and other magical and elemental peoples and creatures lived in these mountains, they rarely showed themselves to humans.

She had led them along a well-hidden path to a clearing, which had obviously been used for rituals before. Seats carved from fallen logs surrounded a small stone circle, suitable for small fires or for anchoring spells. The trees growing between the clearing and the town eliminated any risk of being seen, and the nymph claimed they were far enough away to avoid being overheard.

Across the circle from Phoenix, his face and blond hair illuminated by the moonlight and the faint gold light of the orbs the nymph produced, Rio stood entranced by the flying squirrel clinging to his arm. He fed it several nuts from their offerings. “I hope the god doesn’t mind.” The little animal chattered and darted up the nearest tree, where it clung to a branch and watched them. Tobi and Liam seemed just as awed. Earlier they had all watched in fascination as the creatures glided overhead.

Finally Rio calmed down and cleared his throat. “I’ll, um, start, but the rest of you can add whatever you feel is appropriate.” He sat down, removed his gloves, and took out his focus stones, holding them in his bare hands. Seeing Tobi and Liam follow suit, Phoenix quickly did the same. He also opened himself up to the slow pulse of the forest, the almost-slumbering vegetation.

“Honored Gods and Goddesses, who have watched over us and brought us to this place and time, please hear our prayer and accept our gratitude. First, we

give thanks to our patrons, who have guided and protected us in our lives thus far.”

Phoenix didn't know who to pray to. Verdenia, the goddess of green mages? Pachialla, who may have protected him as a child, unbeknownst to him? Another of the Earth gods? His mind blanked for a minute. *Thank you to everyone who helped me survive my childhood, eased my mother in her final days, helped me escape, and led me to Rio. And also to Tobi and Liam, who have proved to be true friends, better friends than I probably deserve.* He concentrated on his thoughts, on his agate, on the forest.

After a few minutes to allow for private prayers, Rio spoke again. “Dasonin, thank you for your help in our journey thus far. I hope we have chosen all the correct paths at the crossroads and continue to do so. We pray this time of trial may lead us through to a new beginning. Nydaris, we know you speak to us in our dreams. Yara, thank you for your guidance. We hope we can interpret all your messages correctly.”

Rio paused, touched closed hands to his forehead in a gesture of apology, and then opened them on his lap in a supplication. “Pachialla, this honorable nymph tells us you want us to end Bolt's desecration and exploitation and despoilment of these mountains. We will do our best. Please give us guidance as we seek to aid in this endeavor.”

Some of the nymph's golden orbs changed color, one each changing to Earth green, Water blue, Fire orange-red, Air yellow, silver for spirit, and purple for music and artistry. They swirled around the circle, then stilled.

“Caibrus, the time draws near for you to wake, should you choose to. We had planned to make our offering tomorrow but have been told it is better to do it tonight. The moon, almost full, peeks through the trees. The Hunters Moon. There are those who seek to be hunters under the aegis of another god, and each already is a hunter in his own way. They may have been led astray in their quest. If we can free them from their path, we will.” Rio paused and took a sip from his water flask.

“But we seem to have become hunters of a sort as well. Phoenix hunts for the truth of what happened sixteen years ago. We all hunt for a way to break the bond between the storm mage and the lightning elemental. We will hunt for justice, and we will seek a way to restore the balance of nature and elements. If we cannot protect this land ourselves, we will hunt for those who can. For now, for this purpose, let us be your hunters.”

Phoenix wondered whether, and for how long, Rio had practiced this speech, or if it came naturally to him.

“We do not intend to enact the prophecy, exactly, but we do have four offerings for you. We have combined them with elemental offerings, and we seek to honor who you were, even as you decide who you will become, should you choose to come forth again and rejoin the Assembly of the Manifested.”

Suddenly the magnitude of what they were doing hit Phoenix hard. They were attempting to *manifest a god*. The four of them. By themselves. He shook off his doubts and concentrated on Rio’s words, adding his magic’s strength to the prayer.

“For the element of Water and the gems of the deep and the symbol of your owl, we offer you this jade goblet carved with owls.” Rio filled it with purified water. His hands trembled slightly as he placed it on the ground. Phoenix closed his eyes. The goblet had been a family gift to Rio after he graduated from his advanced studies and attained his mage license. Phoenix should have argued with Rio about making this sacrifice, should have found something else to use instead.

“For the element of Earth and the fruit of the harvest and the symbol of your cats, we offer you this woven fruit bowl decorated with cats. We bring with us fruit and nuts from our home in Jorjina, although we had planned to collect local fruit as well. But as you are not a god of these mountains, perhaps you will not take offense.” Overhead the squirrels chattered. “And if you have no immediate need for this food, perhaps the local denizens of this forest will appreciate it on your behalf.” Phoenix sensed approval radiating from the nymph. **Your lover is very thoughtful and very in tune with the harmony of the Earth and the elements. And I sense your magic in the basket and its contents. An appropriate gift.**

“For the element of Fire and the metal forged into a symbol of strength and a tribute to your terrier, we offer you these four unique metal luminaries, made to order by a craftsman of some renown. In addition to having a different small hunting dog on each, the marks above represent the word strength in four different cultures of this world, including the one used by your own Athyrians.” Rio had paid a lot to have those made, Phoenix thought guiltily, but his peaceful lover had been adamant about not wanting the symbols of strength to be weapons. Phoenix knew that his uncle had likely offered up a cache of metal weapons without a second thought.

“For the element of Air and a symbol of your kestrel, we offer you these wind chimes, with the image of a kestrel painted upon the weight, and this mobile crafted of feather and beads and bird bone.” Liam and Tobi had purchased the wind chimes, but they had designed and built the elegant yet sturdy mobile themselves.

After Tobi and Liam hung the wind chime and the mobile from branches of the trees, Phoenix lit the candles and placed the luminaries in the center of the circle. Rio passed around the goblet, and everyone took a drink. He refilled it and placed the goblet in the circle as well, running his hand slowly up the surface as he let it go. Phoenix promised himself that if they lived, once he earned more money, he would buy something similar for Rio as a present, to compensate his lover for its loss. Maybe he could even find one from the same artist.

Rio took out his wooden recorder. “Gods and Goddesses, friends, and creatures of the forest, tonight I play for your and our protection, for purification, and for inner strength and harmony. I will not play the binding song, as I do not want to accidentally bind anyone. And as I play, Caibrus, I pray wherever you are you can hear me. I know my friends pray, too. Please help us do what we need to tomorrow, to stop Sylvester from creating a demon out of the Zarasi. Help us save the Zarasi, save the land, and perhaps even save the Hunters. We offer our service to you. So let it be.”

Phoenix listened, enrapt, as Rio played. Perhaps the water mage would never be a great musician, but Phoenix could feel the music sweeping up their combined magic. He wondered what Tobi saw. A quick glance showed her face lifted to the sky, eyes shining in the lights, smiling. Liam had closed his eyes. Suddenly he began to sing, soft deep words, just a few short phrases that formed a counterpart to the earlier prayer.

Rio held the last note of his song as Liam sang his last word. As soon as it ended, the orbs returned to their original gold color and the lights in the candles flickered out. Rio cleaned his recorder and packed it, and then pulled on his gloves. He was shivering. Liam pulled a light blanket out of his pack and went to toss it over Rio’s shoulders. Phoenix rushed over to hold Rio. The nymph moved to the edge of the clearing. **Come, I will take you back to where I met you,** she said to Phoenix.

Chapter Eleven

Rio, Sixth Prayer

~In hiding atop the Pachialla Mountains~

Walking around the city for hours every day apparently did not prepare me for trekking up a mountain. I hurt in muscles I didn't know I had. Not that I mean to complain, respected Gods. At least not yet. Assuming I am alive tomorrow, please ignore me if I pray then to be put out of my misery.

We had a beautiful start to the day. Last night, we let Tobi and Liam prepare for bed first, since the cabin only has one washroom. Phoenix held me, rubbing my chilled hands to warm them. I am surprised I managed to play for so long in the cold. Then we showered together. Afterward, in our room, Phoenix did his best to make me forget the upcoming showdown and my fear and, well, anything but him. And I tried to help him forget as well. And, thank you, Nydaris, for your blessing, for we both finally managed to sleep peacefully with no dreams. In the morning, I woke snug and safe in Phoenix's arms, with no interruptions from armed men, or even our friends.

The four of us went back to the same restaurant, after making sure the NeoStorm was nowhere to be seen, and ordered both breakfast to eat on site and picnic lunches to go. Yes, I know we brought some food with us, but we decided to supplement it, and we are glad we did. The view from the mountaintop in the daylight, looking across the Long Valley, was breathtakingly beautiful. Liam made all of us, even Phoenix, take another dose of the medicine he had first foisted on us yesterday. He swore it would help our bodies cope more easily with the change in altitude between Ettix Springs and Windy Rocks, especially if we were going to be expending more energy walking. Since I was still feeling fatigued from a combination of traveling, hours spent outside in the cold, and staying up too late with Phoenix, I took mine without protest.

As we were finishing and getting ready to leave, two uniformed officers entered. Phoenix said he needed to wash his hands and disappeared. They first quietly spoke to the staff near the door, and then went around to each table. We heard their spiel as they approached. They were territorial officers, one from Murrycombe, one from Elk Valley in Altunusin. They were looking for a youth

who had disappeared from his home in Altunusin yesterday. They had reason to believe he might be in these mountains to watch the eclipse.

We looked at the picture, and Tobi volunteered, “Last night a couple of men came here, about an hour after sunset. They were complaining about the drive up the west side of the mountain and mentioned Altunusin. I didn’t see the boy with them, though.”

“Can you describe them?”

“One of the men was mid to late twenties, orange-red hair, not as dark as mine. Thin, wiry. The other was taller and more heavily built. Dark, bushy hair, maybe a beard, or at least sideburns. I didn’t pay as much attention to him, I only noticed them because the first man had red hair.”

“Did they seem nervous?”

Tobi shrugged. “Not really. Maybe they said something about now having everything they needed? I’m sorry, I don’t remember. Do either of you?” She turned to include Liam and me in the conversation as Phoenix left the washroom and slipped out the front door.

We both shook our heads.

After some more questions to Tobi, especially on trying to pin down the time and the men’s heights, they prepared to move on. Then Liam said, “I think most people who came into the restaurant walked from nearby lodgings. We did. There were only two cars in the parking lot when we left. A silver WindSmith, newish model, and an older brown NeoStorm. One of those cars might have belonged to them if they weren’t spending the night here, but just stopping for dinner.”

The police exchanged looks, thanked us, and then moved on. We waited a few minutes before collecting our packed lunches and paying.

Phoenix was already back in the cabin, reorganizing our stuff into our packs. He looked up as we entered. “Sorry to abandon you. I went to school with the younger sister of one of them. Wasn’t sure if he would recognize me or not. What did they want?”

“Missing Altunusin teen. I am not sure if this was a good idea or not, but we did mention those two men from last night.” Tobi described the conversation, adding, “We didn’t accuse them or anything, but if the police know who they are and go to make inquiries, the attention might distract them all and keep them off-balance.”

I watched in concern as Phoenix paled. He picked up his replacement phone and placed a call. "I hope it was you tracking our car yesterday and not someone else... Yeah... no we aren't in trouble yet, but... yeah, we just heard the territorial police were here looking for a missing Altunusin boy. I need you to find out who it is." He listened. "No, I don't want to get involved in that, unless the boy is my replacement sacrifice, in which case we need to be prepared. My uncle and my mom had some cousins on the Nimbus side. At least one or more settled in Altunusin and had kids... I think the oldest boy is a few years younger than me."

A longer pause followed. "I don't know, do your bosses take kidnapping a minor from another well-respected family for the purpose of involuntary blood magic more seriously than illegal mining and drug abuse? I'm not asking you to stage a rescue, I know you're too far away, only find out if the missing kid comes from one of the Stormchaser or other Air families. Then maybe you can figure out how to drop a hint in the appropriate ears."

He disconnected.

"You know who he is?"

"I don't know. I didn't see the picture, and I haven't see any of the Nimbus family since the memorial service for my grandfather. But Ranier Nimbus was born later in the summer, shortly after Dad and the others were killed. In fact, his impending birth was why his parents were not with the other Stormchasers. He'd be a second cousin or something to my uncle? Still blood kin. Probably actually better than me if he has the family storm magic." Phoenix shook his head. "Think on it. If my uncle was willing to offer my blood or body to this elemental, when I was raised in his household, he wouldn't hesitate to use one of his cousin's kids. Especially one possibly even better suited to his purpose."

None of us could argue with that.

After we packed, we loaded our gear in the SunSlider and headed back the way we had come the day before. Liam drove, turning off at Phoenix's direction onto an unpaved but somewhat maintained road. Well, to be honest, both "road" and "maintained" are a bit generous. But we needed to avoid the main road going into Murrycombe, in case Sylvester had put out search or locator spells for Phoenix. Or he might have a guard watching any arrivals; after all, his men had, perhaps, just kidnapped someone, and he might conceivably be worried about the law.

I wasn't sure if Phoenix actually knew the route, or if he was being given directions by the wood nymphs. He scrawled a note as we traveled, and did not

look up as he absentmindedly murmured “left” and “right”. We only passed a few isolated houses. Many bumps and potholes later, we reached the northern edge of Murrycombe, safely away from the main road passing through the southern half of town.

He asked Tobi to watch for any seeking spells focused on him, or us, and directed Liam to a residential street. The spacious lots held generous houses and beautiful yards. I didn’t recognize the flowery hedges surrounding the yard near where Phoenix told us to park. He folded his note and stuffed it in an already bulging envelope. Then he got out of the car, opened a map on the roof, and appeared to be studying it.

After a few minutes, the owner of the property emerged from behind the house. He was a middle-aged man with thick silver hair, dressed in worn clothes, with a pair of gardening gloves tucked in his belt. “You need some help, lad?”

“Perhaps. I’m in town with friends to take care of some unfinished family business. I think we’re heading up here.” He tapped the map on the car, indicating the spot. “I don’t think we’ll be getting there for a while though. Thought we’d take a scenic hike before I get involved in any family disputes. Are there any trouble spots we should know about? To either avoid or see.”

“Well, a person looking to avoid family should probably not go along this path. Now you ought to see this area. It may not be what it once was, but you might find it interesting. Also, last year, this spot was interesting in the evenings, good spot for moon viewing, but this year, I think this spot is the best place to be.” A few more taps suggested the man pointed some additional locations out to Phoenix.

“Now would you young people be wanting any company?”

“The lunar eclipse could be interesting, sir. Don’t know how safe it will be... higher up the mountain. We wouldn’t want anyone not involved to get hurt. But you would know better than I who might like to, uh, watch such things. And get there without running into... predators.”

“Perhaps, perhaps. Have a good walk, lad, you and your friends. And may the blessings of the gods go with you.”

“And with you and yours.”

I noticed that when Phoenix slid back into his seat, he no longer had his envelope. Tears glistened in his eyes and he blinked rapidly.

“Did you know him?” Tobi asked.

“Yeah,” he rasped. “School groundskeeper and gardener. I know I owe him a lot for what he did for me growing up, but I didn’t realize until now how much I missed him. He helped save me.” He paused. “I’ll tell you his name after this is all over.”

“Fair enough,” she replied. “I haven’t sensed any listening or scrying spells, but that doesn’t mean there isn’t something passive.”

“Did you tell him about the possible kidnapping in your note, or did you leave that to your cousin?” I asked.

“I mentioned it. The gods might have put the four of us at the center of this mess, but that doesn’t mean we can’t use all the help we can get. What I am hoping for, what we may need, are more people praying to Caibrus and the other gods at the right time. People can even stay in town for that. There won’t be hordes of them storming the party.”

“Pity,” Liam muttered.

After more bumping along the back roads and gradually wending our way uphill, along dirt roads of increasing age and declining quality, we came to a dead end somewhere in the middle of a bunch of trees that looked like all the other hundreds of trees we had seen. I had no idea where we were, but I was more than ready to get out of the car. I regretted, as I am sure did everyone else, that the only paved road up the section of mountain went right past Sylvester Bolt’s property. If Phoenix was correct, we were a few miles north of his uncle’s land, and higher in elevation, but we still had a long way to climb before nightfall.

Another nymph appeared. At least I assume it was a different one. Something about her shape looked different. Her skin was the color of pine bark and her hair a mossy green. She walked ahead of us, leading us along game trails we might otherwise have missed. I had no idea how we were ever going to find the car again, unless we had help returning. And we would definitely have to wait for daylight.

Ahead, I heard a faint trickle of water. I reached out with my magic. I felt a sharp tug. My vision blurred and I stumbled, crashing into a pine. My hands started tingling. I tried to hold onto the tree with a trembling hand as I covered my stomach with the other and struggled to prevent my breakfast from ending

up all over the forest floor. My head pounded. I was aware of Phoenix and Liam talking to me, but I couldn't make out their words because of the buzzing in my ears. Was this altitude sickness?

I felt Liam briefly touch me with his healing magic, just long enough to send a jolt that caused me to cry out, in surprise more than pain. For a second I was able to hear and interpret their sounds. "Rio! Stop using your magic. Stop. Let it go! Shield." *Stop. Using. Magic.* Sluggishly I obeyed, the task harder than it had even been before. I pulled the magic back to me, felt it resist. Tried harder. Yanked until something snapped. With great relief, I felt my magic flood me, although some of it felt stained. I needed to clean it. Soon.

"Now shield!" Shield. Shield. I knew how to do that. Um... shield. Fortunately, instinct and training kicked in, and my shields snapped up before the cognitive part of my brain could decide whether or not to cooperate. I slid to the ground, heart racing, gasping for air.

A few feet away, Phoenix seemed to be arguing with the nymph, although I only heard his side of the conversation. Tobi helped me slide the pack off my back. Liam passed me my water bottle and ordered me to drink slowly.

Dry twigs and needles crackled underfoot as Phoenix came to kneel beside me. "We are approaching an area where the water may be contaminated from mining. Most of the mining occurred over a century ago, but I believe more recently my uncle illegally reopened one or more of the old mines to get gems for his ceremony. And maybe gold for his pocket."

"An unregulated mine?" Illegal mines meant no regulation. No earth and water mages to keep the site clean, no air mages to keep the air safe for the miners to breathe.

"The nymph had a hard time explaining the next part in a way I could understand, but maybe Tobi can figure it out. The stream, or the area around it, contains or absorbed some sort of trap spell. A water sprite is imprisoned there, slowly being poisoned. When human mages have come by in the past, he was unable to speak to them. She thinks your magic connected to his, and to the trap, and that what you just experienced is your body's interpretation of his symptoms and illness."

"How long has he been there?" I struggled to my feet, accepting Phoenix's helping hand. I sipped some more water, swaying unsteadily for a few seconds. Liam held my pack for me to ease into, and Phoenix helped fasten the straps as if I were I child. We proceeded toward the stream at a slower pace than

previously. I kept a tight grip on my magic. Despite what had just happened, I found that task to be harder than expected. My magic wanted to reach out, like a moth to flame.

As we approached the small stream, the nymph disappeared into the trees.

“Another nymph will guide us after we cross,” Phoenix said.

Without thinking, I started walking up the bank of the stream, climbing over deadfall. The others scrambled after me as I walked up the mountainside. My energy seemed restored, for I suddenly moved with more haste than caution. The slope leveled out, and a small waterfall tumbled into a pool.

“Where are you?” I asked. “I know you’re there. Can you hear me? Can you understand me?”

I am here. The sprite rose from the water. I bit my tongue to keep from gasping. Compared to the beautiful, lithe creatures I had seen in the past, this one seemed a deformed wraith. Holes marked his body, and his “limbs” were misshapen and uneven. I guessed he was some sort of nyx, but he was currently too malformed for me to be certain.

“How can I help you? Tobi, can you see the nature of the spell that binds him?”

“I can see the spell. It once had another purpose, maybe to catch trespassers, but somehow it has been warped into a binding spell keyed to water. I can see how it binds the sprite, but I have no idea how to break it. And it is very tightly bound to his magic. Breaking it improperly might harm him.”

I fought the spell for years. The more I fought, the more it focused on me.

“I know a basic unbinding spell.” I tried my best to hum the spell without invoking the magic. “I am not sure if I can break a spell this complex though.”

To break this binding would take more energy than you can spare, and you would risk becoming trapped yourself. Attempting to free me might also draw the interest of your enemies and lead them to this spot and to you.

“They know you are here?”

**They suspect, but they do not know for certain. I came down this mountain thirteen winters ago, traveling overland with the spring floods and the melting snow. I sought a shortcut and have paid for my haste. The makers may have felt when the trap closed, but half a turn of the moon passed before anyone came to investigate. Hiding myself from them was not a problem. Their only water mage*

*was lazy and weak. The spell still appeared intact, to them. It is only over the last eight years that I have managed to drain much of its range and effect, limiting it to this water.**

Wow. Even poisoned and in pain, this sprite had sought to protect others, had fought to control the spell that trapped him.

“Are you damaged from the binding or the toxins in the water? Or both?”

My kind reflect the health of the water. To heal me, you must either cleanse my source, break the binding so I may travel to cleaner waters, or let me pass through the Veil. He sounded and felt weaker. I wanted to try to cleanse his pool, but I knew it would only refill with more water from the contaminated area upstream. **I don't want to cross the Veil if they open it. I don't remember what is on the other side. My first memory is of being reborn in a lake on this mountain, many centuries ago. Don't weep for me, mortal mage. Although I have been in this spot thirteen years, that is a short time for an elemental. Another day or two will not hurt me.**

I wondered if that were true, wondered if he could resist the pull from whatever lay on the other side of a weakened Veil that might call to a wounded creature of Water. I removed my pack and opened it. I had one small bottle left of the water I had purified with my magic and taken to the temple of Nerzu for his blessing. I beckoned him closer, and when he approached me, I showed it to him, let him dip a “finger” into its opening. “Will this help you hold on longer and ease your pain and your thirst? Can you drink it?”

He bent his rippled head. **Pour.** As I emptied the bottle, I could see the water entering him rather than running off him, filling some of the voids in his form. His mental voice seemed stronger when he next spoke. **Thank you, mortal water mage, blessed of the gods, for your gift this day. Now go. You still have a long walk ahead of you. You may easily cross the stream after the next rise.**

Liam squeezed my arm as we moved away. “I wanted to heal him, too. But I didn't know how.”

As we continued on our hike, I may have shed a few tears. The others pretended not to notice.

Several hours and three more nymph guides later, we came to the top of the ridge. Trees still covered much of the ridgeline, but a decent-sized open area

had been formed by clearing the trees around a large patch of rocky ground. A wooden platform with an octagonal altar stood in the center of the clearing. Tobi said it was guarded with intruder-detection and keep-away spells, so we did not creep out for a closer look. Besides, even if the current nymph said no other people were present, that did not mean there were no watchers. The nymph directed us to a place where the trees and a few bushes grew together in such a way that we could hide unseen. As soon as we were settled, Phoenix invoked his shielding spell.

After we wiped off some of our sweat, Phoenix, Tobi and I rubbed a darkener into our skin, to help us blend more with the surroundings. We massaged and stretched our muscles as much as we could in the cramped space. We fetched out our warmer gear, for our bodies were cooling down from the hike, and quietly ate some more of our food. Liam passed around another of his concoctions, which he said would help our muscles recover.

Now we are taking turns resting, using our packs as pillows, and keeping watch. Earlier I surprised myself by sleeping for an hour or so. My mind and power feel better, but my body aches despite the medicine. Phoenix sleeps beside me now. I want to hold him close but am afraid to wake him.

I am tired of waiting, but I am also terrified. I want this eclipse, this night, to be over, and yet I want it to never come.

Chapter Twelve

Phoenix Hunts

For eighteen months, or maybe most of his life, Phoenix had known this day was coming. The day of reckoning between him and his uncle. He had always expected to be alone. Being surrounded by friends was a blessing, a comfort, a worry, and a horrible responsibility. Yet he was unsure if he could have done this without them. Getting to this point had taken all four of them, and if any true premonition could be found in the words of Yara's seer and their dreams, all four of them would be needed to end this. And even without any assistance from a god, four against eight had a better chance than one against eight.

He had been worried that the protection spell would drain him, but it didn't. He cast it, created the framework, tried the tweaks he had learned last night from the nymph, and then the forest took it from him, disguising it in the essence of the ambient mountain magic. The intelligent denizens of this region wanted Uncle Sylvester off this mountain, and although most wouldn't or couldn't get rid of him themselves, they were willing to help and support those who would.

Dusk brought four of the self-styled Hunters up the path. Phoenix recognized Malak right away. He was breathing heavily. Otto and Shawn hustled him to a tree stump and pushed him down, giving Phoenix a glimpse of them. He didn't know Shawn well, as the man had not been part of his guard rotation, but the others had spoken of his proficiency with weapons. Probably not a man who needed inhuman enhancement. The fourth man occupied himself unloading packs and efficiently setting up lanterns around the platform. Only when the light from one struck his face did Phoenix identify Ralph. As a carpentry mage, Ralph had done a number of maintenance jobs around the compound, but he had also maintained some of the wards and taken his turn on security detail. Phoenix would bet he had been pressed into service building the platforms.

Malak stood, stretched, and began walking around the clearing.

"What are you doing, Eagle?" snapped Shawn.

"Please stop calling me Eagle, Shawn. Excuse me, *Shark*. I'm just walking a bit. I need to move a little to keep warm. Lost a lot of conditioning when I was in the hospital, you know."

“Well don’t wear yourself out. Tonight’s the big night!” Excitement oozed out of him.

Phoenix couldn’t resist rolling his eyes. Of course tonight was their big night. Idiot. The other men did not need him to point it out.

Malak walked slowly around the clearing, stopping occasionally to peer into the darkness. As he came to within a few feet of where they hid, Phoenix realized the wind had changed direction and was blowing across them toward where Malak had been seated. He froze, and started contemplating the best weapon to use against the man. *No way to take him out quietly. Maybe a freeze spell. Except Rio has those. Too late for a Suggestion Stone.*

Malak knelt down and began to toy with his bootlaces. He spoke to the ground.

“I know you’re there, Nickson. You and the others. My talent has worked since I woke up. I learned how to use it when I was asleep. But I found out stuff, bad stuff, about the Boss, you know. I don’t remember a lot about some things, but maybe I remember catching you before, by a lake or something. I’m sorry if I hurt you.”

He slowly unlaced and laced his boot. “Boss has something bad planned tonight. Not what he promised us. Do what you hafta do, okay? I think I am damaged inside, not sure how long I have. I might be able to help. And Nickson, I apologize now for whatever I did to you when you were a kid. Some of that’s kind of fuzzy, but I know we had some decent times, and your mom was always nice to me. Boss lied to us, but I reckon we were willing to be lied to. Didn’t waste time or brain power questioning.”

He switched to his other boot. “Garret, he goes by Fox now, is kinda crazy. Otto, he’s gone on those drugs, too, don’t know how much longer he’ll last, either. Bryce, he seems sane, but he’s losing it. And Carlo, the little air spirit girl says you would want to know he headed the mining operation. She says you are all mad about that, knowing an earth mage didn’t clean up after himself. Now Shawn the Shark—I don’t know why a mountain mage would want to be like a shark, hope he doesn’t get gills or something, although it would be kind of funny. He helped with the mining.” Phoenix made a note to mention that to Rio. His lover would be incensed that a fellow water mage could leave land and water polluted enough to contribute to a problem that affected the elementals and continued downstream to other waterways.

“Don’t trust any of those five. But Ralph, he’s supposed to be the Wolf, he is big on loyalty. I think he’s beginning to realize this is a bad idea. If he finds

out the Boss betrayed us, he'll be mad. He's not as bad as the rest of us, never did any of the, uh, questionable jobs. So I know I've made mistakes, but I'm not stupid, or not all the time. I'm not sure what's going down tonight, but from what I heard, I don't think any of us are expected to live, except the boss. I'm the only one who knows that. So, like I said before, stop him, whatever you gotta do." Malak finished with his boot, stood, and slapped the dirt from his knees. He leisurely continued on his way, eventually returning to the stump.

"Air spirit girl?" whispered Rio. "Some type of sylph?"

He sinned, he slept, he dreamed, he woke, he learned. Now he seeks to atone. She walks beside him for strength and courage, to help guide his new path. For many years he blocked her voice.

"As you and your sisters accompanied us these past two days?"

Not quite. You knew your path. You did not need us, we merely eased your way.

Phoenix contemplated her words. True the nymphs had aided them, both last night and in their journey. Their only failing was in not giving a warning about the trap and the water sprite, but to be honest, he had known or suspected about the mining before they started the hike, he had even asked for it to be pointed out on the map, and *he* had asked the nymphs to show them the area if they could stand to get near it. And the nymphs might not have known how the area would affect Rio. After all, Shawn had wondered there with no ill effects.

He heard voices in the distance.

"C'mon, kid, we're almost there. Just a few more steps." Carlo emerged from the trees first, followed by Sylvester. Bryce and Garret led a slimmer figure. The person between them stumbled when they came to a halt. When they released him, he swayed, as if drunk or drugged. Bryce pushed him onto a stump not far from Malak.

"Sit here."

"Kay." The voice sounded young. "I don't want to see the moon anymore, I want to go home."

"Who's that?" Ralph asked, sounding surprised.

"Never mind, Wolf," snapped Carlo.

"I'm Ranier Nimbus." The kid threw up on the ground. "I don't feel well."

Liam moved to Phoenix's left side and whispered, "He's drugged, but he's burning through it. Don't think he'll be completely recovered by the eclipse. Won't be able to fight back. Certainly not against possession."

Why the drugs? For the kid? Just to keep him knocked out since the kidnapping? Less resistance? Easier to kill? Or for the Zarasi? To offer one a talented body and then trap it inside a drugged one?

"Got anything to speed up the process?"

Liam nodded.

Put it in a bottle and roll it into the clearing, the nymph ordered. After both Liam and Rio passed the bottle back forth, adding medicine and magic, they obeyed.

After a few minutes, Malak walked around the clearing again, bending to pick up the bottle and clip it to his belt. He returned to his stump.

"Here, kid, wash out your mouth and drink some of this." Malak opened the bottle, took a couple of sips himself, and then passed it to Ranier.

Sylvester stood on the platform and turned in all directions, looking up at the sky, stopping for a minute to focus on where the moon must be clearing the tree line. He presented an extremely clear target. The cold, calculating, logical part of Phoenix told him it would be so easy just to pull out one of the guns and put a bullet through his uncle. Part of him even wanted to—the scared boy forced to hide his true talent for years, the mage angered at the abuse of the land, the man enraged at the callous treatment of his lover. But that was not the way this was meant to happen. Killing him quickly would solve nothing, would not correct the imbalances, and would cure no ills.

You are no longer the only watchers. Phoenix was not sure whether he felt relieved or not.

At a command from Sylvester, the Hunters walked up onto the platform, bringing a shivering Ranier with them. This time, Sylvester stood in the west, with the clearest view of the rising moon. Garret and Shawn forced Ranier to kneel between them. The Hunters stood at the other seven points.

"Tobi says there is still a ward around the platform," Liam whispered. "She has two ward-breaks ready, at least one of which should work."

The partial eclipse begins.

As the faint drumming began, Phoenix took slow, steady breaths, feeling the forest around him, the mature trees growing strong and sturdy after centuries,

the saplings and the seedlings, even the moss on the rocks. He could vaguely sense the presence of people when they leaned against trees or stepped on vegetation. With reluctance, Phoenix pulled himself back into his body. Still almost an hour before the full eclipse... lunar eclipses could be very slow. On the platform, the Hunters spoke about their animals—too quietly for Phoenix to make out all the words, especially since they were still drumming—and offered their blood. He did hear the name Zareeze several times.

Finally Sylvester made a gesture, and the drumming stopped.

The full eclipse begins.

Only the light of the lanterns on and near the platform lit the clearing. Otherwise darkness enveloped it. Phoenix could not even see Liam and Rio lying on either side of him. He reached out a hand to his right, found Rio's, held it and squeezed lightly, wishing they could be skin to skin and not separated by gloves.

“On this night, the last of the four eclipses, hear us. We have offered you the gems of the deep, the fruit of the harvest, the metals forged into symbols of strength. Now we offer you the body of the pure host, this untouched mage.”

“*What?*” yelled Ranier. “No way! Let me go!” Shawn and Garret grabbed him as he tried to leave. Shawn grabbed the knife and cut the boy's hand, and Garret held it over the bowl as the boy struggled.

“I don't think this is right...” Ralph began.

“Quiet!” ordered Sylvester. “Let the Veil between the Worlds part. I summon forth the Zarasi who stole from me! I summon the Zarasi.”

Some of the Hunters were yelling now. “Zareeze!”

Phoenix made sure he was grounded firmly in his body, in the present, as he removed his gloves and stepped into the clearing, his companions at his side. Earlier, the day had been sunny, not a cloud in sight, even at sunset. Now, as he walked forward, he took a quick glance up into the sky. Where moments before he had seen stars, now he saw only the opaqueness of thick clouds. But eerily, the area of sky around the eclipsing moon remained clear, as if a giant hand were sweeping a path to accommodate it.

“Wards are down!” Tobi told him. “Rio, the freeze spell.”

“Done!” Rio activated it and tossed the anchoring crystal onto the platform, where it landed right next to the offering bowl, in the center of all those gathered.

“Go, now!” Tobi ordered.

Phoenix leaped up on the platform, moving past his uncle and the Hunters, all momentarily stunned by the powerful short-range freeze spell. He spoke loudly, so his words rang out across the clearing and would reach any onlookers. “Greetings, Uncle. I thought I was supposed to be your blood sacrifice. Wasn’t that why you kept me in your house all those years? But I suppose kidnapping an underage pureblooded air mage with a storm talent was an even better choice. Or did you lie to him to get him here, the same way you lied to these seven men with false promises?” He dared a quick glance at his uncle and stared directly at him as he said, “I would hate to disappoint you.”

Phoenix pulled out the sharp knife he had brought with him, and made a cut along the outside of his finger quickly. He lifted it, letting his blood drop to join the rest in the bowl. *Ick.* Blood magic was not his thing. He was only vaguely aware of Rio and Liam lifting Ranier from the midst of the unmoving Hunters and carrying him from the platform. “Our offerings have been made, our prayers spoken. With my blood and with my true friends, I call forth Caibrus, faded God of Athyrian Hunters. Wake! Manifest! Become once more a Protector. I call forth Pachialla, patroness of these mountains! Manifest and aid those who seek to restore these lands and remove those who would leave it desecrated.” *And thank you, Rio, for helping me with that little speech.*

Flames flared in the bowl, just as his mother had described. *Interesting. Eerie. Move!* Even as he ran toward the edge of the platform, the freeze spell broke. One of his uncle’s kneeling Hunters recovered quickly enough to grab his ankle. Phoenix slammed his elbow into the side of the man’s face. The man bellowed in pain and let Phoenix go. He darted toward the edge of the platform and jumped off. He dropped his knife on the ground near his pack and pulled out his gun. From above, a bolt of lightning struck a tree at the edge of the clearing. In the dim glow that suddenly blanketed the area, he could see people, he wasn’t sure how many, running out of the surrounding forest, toward the platform. He wanted to yell at them to go back, to be careful.

“Stop! Police! Everyone drop your weapons!” came a shout. No one paid any attention.

Uncle Sylvester stood on the platform, cursing at everyone for trying to ruin his spell, and raising his hands toward the sky in supplication. Garret still knelt on the platform, little flames racing all over his body. Like an enraged bear, Bryce fought with Ralph and Malak. Tobi calmly pointed a weapon at Carlo,

her body between his and Rio's. Liam was supporting Ranier, trying to escort him to safety, even as Otto managed to grab one of the boy's arms.

Phoenix was turning, looking for the missing Hunter, even as Shawn slammed into him, snarling. Shawn tried to wrestle the gun from his grip. Phoenix held on tight, wishing for his vines that could so conveniently entangle an enemy. Then, although he still felt Shawn's hands upon him, he could suddenly see nothing but thick fog, as they were enveloped in clouds. Abruptly, Phoenix was free, so suddenly that he lost his balance and stumbled backward, tripping over someone or something. He landed on his back with jarring force, banging his shoulder and elbow, and dropped the gun. Fortunately, it didn't go off. He fumbled around for it, hoping no one would step on him.

Chapter Thirteen

Rio, Seventh Prayer

“Caibrus, are you here? Phoenix? *Phoenix!*”

I am here, water mage, favored of Nerzu. I am not yet strong enough to Manifest, but I am Awake.

“Thank you.”

Do not thank me yet. Much work remains, my Hunter, and you and your friends must bear the brunt of it, despite my aid.

“Whatever it takes, I promise.”

List the tasks.

“The Zarasi, the Hunters, Bolt, and if we can, free the sprite and clean up this area. And all of these people need to be made aware of Sylvester Bolt’s crimes, not just us.”

Your first task is to make peace with the Zarasi.

Chapter Fourteen

Phoenix Burns

The pain in his body ebbed somewhat as Phoenix found the gun. He put it away. Guns and zero visibility did not mix. He shoved himself to his feet, panting, trying to hear or see anything. Before he could do more than gasp in a breath or two, he was swept up into chaos.

He was Phoenix, plant mage, powers reaching out to the forest around him. He was Rio, water mage, talking to the god. He was Liam, healer, seeing through the clouds to the illness growing in some of the Hunters, seeing the madness in their leader. He was Tobi, spell-seer, sensing the ties between Sylvester Bolt and the cloud elementals, between the Hunters and Bolt, between her friends and the god. He was the dozens of Zarasi, impatient, enraged, confused, sad, waiting, seeking, lost. He was Caibrus, god reborn. He was himself and yet also all of them, swirled together, seeing simultaneously the eclipsing moon, the people fighting on and around the platform, the Zarasi mobilizing for attack. And in the distance, he—or Caibrus—could feel the other gods in the distance, watching, waiting, judging.

ENOUGH!

Then Phoenix found himself back in his body, trembling, alone. Despite the eclipse and the hour of the night, he could see as easily across the clearing as if it were only dusk. The clouds had lifted, hovering just above the heights of the tallest people in the clearing.

He sought out Rio and found him still standing next to Tobi. She had lowered her weapon, but she gripped it in her hand. Liam knelt on the ground next to Ranier, still shielding him, even as one of the policemen from this morning hurried over. All three of his friends were glowing, and he wondered if he was too. Gods-touched.

The reinforcements from Murrycombe seemed to have the Hunters and Sylvester under control, at least for the moment. Each was separated from the others, and most were on their knees.

“Is that it?” someone asked and then squeaked when a little sizzling energy bolt struck the rock nearest Sylvester. “Seemed pretty easy.”

“Don’t be silly. Look at the shiny, glowing people and the weird clouds and keep quiet.”

Unlike the nymphs and the sprites, which could take human-like forms if they chose, the Zarasi now appeared as amorphous clouds about the size of large sheep, with little bolts of energy sparkling around them and through them and occasionally between them. Several dozen of them hovered around. Even though they didn't have eyes, at least none that Phoenix could identify, he could feel them watching.

Rio stepped forward into the most exposed part of the clearing, where everyone could see him. He turned slowly in a complete circle, palms up, showing his focus stones wrapped about his left wrist. His hair and skin glowed gold, his eyes seemed an almost surreal deep blue. But when he spoke, he sounded the same, human, not as if he shared his body with a deity. Or two. Or more.

“Those seven of you who sought aid from the Hunt God formerly known as Zareeze, hear this. He cannot help you achieve your current desires for improvements in your hunting skills. However, because of your dedication in praying these many months, and even though he rarely turns his attention to this side of the ocean, under his new identity as Azare, God of Archery, he makes you this one offer and pledge: should any of you take up archery for either sport or hunt, he will help you advance as quickly as anyone of your age and physical condition can.”

Despite the solemnity and danger of the moment, Phoenix had to choke back a startled laugh at that qualified offer. Several would-be Hunters were glaring at Sylvester, muttering.

Rio clapped his hands together, once. His glow became more silvery than gold, and his voice softened yet deepened, taking on a cadence and speaking ritual words that Phoenix had never heard from his lover, but recognized from histories. He felt all his arm and neck hairs rising and goose bumps forming, and not because of the cold.

“Zarasi, creatures of air, spawn of storms, be at peace. You are safe here. No one will hurt you. Tell us your grievances. Share them, that all here may know what you have suffered.”

Wordlessly, the story seeped through him and everyone else on the mountain. The tale was much as his mother had told him, only entirely from the view of the Zarasi, with an added twist she had not seen, despite being a mother with a child. The elemental creatures needed the storm clouds and the building energy to play, to breed, to spawn. The human mages had been disturbing the

pattern of the storms, taking too much lightning, not leaving them enough, and upsetting the balance. One had lost its young. Saddened and enraged, it had tried to kill those it held responsible, to keep those it saw as thieves and murderers from the sky. A fight had broken out. Some of the humans had sought to protect and retreat. One human had seen the opportunity to ensnare. Then the unthinkable had happened. For a moment it had blended with the human. It had suffered ever since.

Rio held out his hands, palms up again. “Come. Share your burden, your pain.” Everyone was silent as one of the little cloud creatures drifted over to Rio. Sylvester took a step forward and tried to reach out to the cloud, but was held back by two of the townsfolk.

This Zarasi was unlike the others. Fewer sparks moved through it, and a darkish mass rested in its core, like a cancerous growth or indigestible food. The mass seemed to be absorbing some of the creature’s electricity, without giving anything in return.

“Child of Air and Energy, listen to me. That man tried to enslave you, to turn you into a demon. Instead, he lost part of himself within you. It poisons you, changes you, weakens you. Don’t let him win.”

Anger and hatred pulsed out of the creature.

“Don’t become a demon just because you are angry. That is what he is. That man risked the lives of all his fellow mages to try to capture you. Many of them died, although some were also at fault for what was happening to you. Then that man kept his blood-kin imprisoned, did not let them roam freely across the sky and earth, because he wanted to capture you again. He was willing to sacrifice both a child he raised and one he did not know. He gambled with the lives of these seven men who trusted him, lied to them repeatedly, drugged them, tricked them into participating and shedding their blood for this ceremony, all to attain his own ends. In addition to stealing from the Air, he stole from the Earth and poisoned the Water. You were one of the first to be wronged, but you are not the only one. As you have suffered, others have suffered.”

Then Phoenix felt his own pain pulled from him and broadcast to the crowd, felt the suffering of the sprite, saw anew the illness of the Hunters and felt their betrayal and shock, experienced some of the depredation the spell had wrought on their bodies, felt the despair of the mountainfolk who could do nothing against the son of a powerful and respected family, saw through the eyes of

many nymphs where areas of the forest were suffering because of his uncle's actions.

"I'm not a demon, curse you!" shouted Sylvester.

"Actions speak louder than words, Sylvester Bolt. You are insane with the lust for power, whether you have it or not, and you would use all within your control to attain it, without regard for their safety or true wishes. You have committed numerous crimes against your fellow men, including kidnapping, attempted murder, child neglect, accomplice to aggravated assault, and attempted blood sacrifice. A Territorial Court of Law can judge you for those at a minimum. For the rest, you must one day answer to the Assembly of the Gods."

Phoenix wondered when Rio had studied law on top of everything else, but then thought perhaps Rio or Caibrus was also channeling a little from a judge who stood in the crowd, looking stern.

Rio held out his hands and a perfect globe of water coalesced just above them. The sphere started spinning and expanding. "Rid yourself of your burden. Free yourself from the part of him that has bound you together all these years, the part he sought, the part he betrayed all his mage vows and morals for. Choose your own destiny, free of his influence."

The creature drifted closer, considering. Then in one swift move, it darted forward to envelop Rio's hands, head, and torso. The crowd gasped. Rio did not move. For several minutes they were entwined, until finally, the creature lifted up. The dark center was gone, trapped inside the globe. Soon the creature bounced amongst its brethren, and the others shot sparks to it, filling it, until it was indistinguishable from the others.

Rio's hair stood straight up from his head, silver and gold and light, like a bizarre metallic hedgehog. When he spoke, his voice suddenly carried a faint echo. The Voice of Judgment.

"Sylvester Bolt, this power once belonged to you. You lost it through your actions. You schemed for it for years. You sought it this night. For this, you would have risked the life, power, and sanity of your nephew, the man formerly known as Ash Cloudsmith and Nick Bolt. For this, you would have risked the life, power, and sanity of your minor blood kin, Ranier Nimbus. For this, you did repeatedly risk the lives, power, and sanity of the seven men who called themselves your Hunters."

Rio held the spinning ball up, and all could see it hovering above his hands, not quite touching. “Sylvester Bolt, former Stormchaser, you have abdicated your right to this power. I release this to the deity who should have been your true patron from the day you first felt your magic stir within you. If you or any of the others had kept faith with him, or any of the Storm or Air Gods, you would never have been able to do what you did sixteen summers ago. Lyaqi, Storm God, as you or your fellow Gods bestowed this power unto this man, let it be returned and cleansed, to be sent back to this realm as you or they see fit.”

“No!” Sylvester screamed again. “What gives you the right? Who are you?”

“At the moment I am a Hunter of Truth and a Voice of the Gods. You set this day in motion. Do not blame me, or the Gods, if it is your downfall and not your reward.”

The ball spun faster and collapsed in upon itself. A thin strand of power, which Phoenix had not even noticed connecting the ball to Sylvester, snapped.

Sylvester collapsed, sobbing hysterically.

The eclipse peaks, commented their helpful nymph.

Suddenly, with inhuman strength, Sylvester broke free of his captors. Or perhaps their grip on him had weakened as he wept. He ran toward Rio, a knife raised. Several of the Zarasi zapped him at the same time as the sound of two gunshots echoed through the night. Sylvester fell to the ground, twitched, and lay still.

Phoenix looked around. Malak lowered a gun. He stared at it for a moment and then handed it to the judge. He spoke to Sylvester’s body.

“That’s for lying to me and using me for twelve years, you bastard. I trusted you. We all trusted you. And we’ll spend the rest of our lives paying for it. And for the crimes we committed on your behalf.”

He knelt down on the ground, and crossed his hands behind his back. An officer came and cuffed his wrists.

Rio hadn’t even moved, and Phoenix wondered if he had been aided by Caibrus. Rio continued speaking to the Zarasi, the otherworldly echo gone from his voice. “I was going to ask your opinion about what should be done with him, but I guess it’s too late for that. Are the storm mages still being too greedy?”

Unlike with the nymph or Caibrus, Phoenix did not hear clear words from the Zarasi, but he felt their answer clearly: *yes, the human mages still*

sometimes take too much, but the problem is not as bad; some of the Zarasi had moved away to other breeding areas, but they all wanted that one back.

“Is it acceptable if the mages take some of the lightning, some of the time, as long as you have enough for your needs?”

The Zarasi hovered, some intermingling, some in small groups. Phoenix could almost imagine them engaged in discussions as they floated nearby. Or maybe he could *feel* their discussion through the weird bond currently connected many of the beings on the mountain, he just couldn't understand their conversation. After several minutes, despite the moisture in the air, he felt a surge of static electricity that caused his scalp to prickle. This time, he almost heard words even as the affirmative response resonated through his bones. Either he was getting better at understanding them, they were learning human speech, or the gods were enhancing elemental-to-human language translation. **Yes,** he felt/heard. **We will try.**

“How about if you, or the storm mages, or both, appoint liaisons or guardians. Let the mages know when to stop, let the mages know when to stay away because of your young. It may be too late for this year, but the matter can come before the next Assembly. And many of these people gathered here tonight will speak on your behalf. Including me. In fact, I will swear to it now. I, Riordan Lantos, called Rio, in the presence of the God Caibrus, whom I helped to invoke, and to any other deities present or concerned, and before all the people here tonight, swear upon my blood and power to speak for the right of the Zarasi to the first claim upon the lightning in the storm clouds over the Territories of the Midlands, and to urge it elsewhere if I can. This is my witnessed vow.”

Phoenix repeated the oath, using all his names, as he heard the massed murmurings around him, with some variations for chosen gods.

Then Ranier stood and stepped forward, coming to stand next to Rio. “Um, cloud people. Zarasi. My blood was also bound to this spell that summoned you, although that was not of my choosing. However, my kin were there that summer, that night. If not for my impending birth, my father and my mother would have been there. I am underage and considered too young to swear a blood oath upon my powers. I may have the storm power, but I never intended to use it to harvest lightning. My interest is in efficient distribution of rain and snow, when it will not upset the balance intended by the gods. However, I will volunteer to be one of your guardians until others are found. You have my blood already, so I hope you know I speak the truth.” Tears rolled down his

face then. “Perhaps it was Fate, and not my own stupidity, that brought me here tonight.” The young air mage bowed to the assembled Zarasi. They grouped together, circled around him, touching him, then flocked together into a larger cloud, merging, and lifted away.

Phoenix could once more see the eclipsed Hunters Moon, the Blood Moon, rising in the sky.

Now to clean, before the eclipse ends, urged several nymphs.

“What about us? He promised! He promised.” Garret Fox wailed almost as loudly as Sylvester had.

Suddenly Phoenix found himself back in the god-bond with the others, saw the madness spark in Garret, saw his mage energy flare red and hot. It shot from him in many directions, over and over. Some of the strikes hit people, others struck trees and ignited the litter on the forest floor. People screamed. Finally someone, he was never sure who, struck the fire mage across the head. The streams of fire energy stopped, but not in time.

The forest was already burning.

And so, Phoenix realized, was he.

Or part of him. Flames licked up his bark, danced along his branches, scorched his needles. He was the pine and the spruce, the mature trees and the saplings. His last fading recognition of self, of Phoenix, was the feel of Rio’s cold hand clasping his still blood-stained one and the touch of Tobi’s fingers in his other. Then he lost all sense of Phoenix-alone and was swept up once again in Them. Phoenix-Rio-Liam-Tobi all spun together by Caibrus, along with another touch—Pachialla?—helping to spread their awareness. They were burning trees. They were the sizzling moss and the scrambling spiders. They were the forest animals leaping for safety. Then They were beyond the fire, moving downslope, to where tunnels reached into the Earth. They were the mines. They were the groundwater and the springs and the streams.

The fire seemed a distant surficial itch. Here They had a deeper wound. Soils carelessly dumped outside the mine, some recently, some over a century ago, undisturbed and forgotten. Rain and snowmelt had redistributed some of it, other piles choked vegetation. Liquid metal, which did not belong, stained the soils, leached into the ground, percolated down with the water, and flowed back out. Little unnatural threads and flickers of colors and light danced around the wound.

The part of Them that was Tobi murmured, “Half-assed environmental containment spell. No cleaning component. Trap spell. Anti-trespassing spell. Concealment spell.”

Rio’s purifying magic and Liam’s healing magic wove together, attacking the areas of pollution. However, breaking it puzzled Them. They circled around it, assessing, as They saw it through Tobi’s talent. They prodded, unsure of what to do next. Blindly throwing power at it might not be effective, and They were tiring, energy levels ebbing. Wordlessly, They sent the problem echoing back across the mountain, seeking assistance. Somewhere miles away, where the fire still raged, more hands touched, more minds joined. More power, freely given, flowed into Them, as They expanded in numbers. Some people lent strength, others filled in gaps in knowledge and expertise. Now They knew what to try. They reconfigured the old containment spell into an invisible mesh to run through the area over and over, scooping up the contaminants, binding them together in mostly harmless piles that could be disposed of. They flagged the piles with mage beacons, so trackers could easily find them later.

The tangled mess of the binding spells could now be attacked, layer by layer exposed and unknotted. As the last one finally gave way, They felt joy and relief reverberate through Them.

I’m free! Thank you! Thank you!

They saw/felt the water sprite, finally released, slip from his pond, merging with the water, flowing downstream toward bigger, deeper, cleaner waters.

The part of Them still atop the mountain, tracking the paths of the fire, cried out in warning. They all raced back, growing larger. Yet, even though They were many, They were also weakening, as mortal bodies wearied, suffered in the cold, and inhaled smoke.

And then, farther away still, from down on the mountain, came the prayers of the people. Not just prayers from tonight, but also those gathered and stored for years awaiting this moment. Energy from the prayers of the mountain people over the last decades flowed into Them, filling Them. Including, the Phoenix-part noticed with awe and sorrow, the prayers of a dying woman for her son. They felt the reverence of all the visitors that had walked this mountain in awe. They felt the hope of the nymphs and the sprites and the sylphs and the gnomes and many other creatures of this mountain. They swelled and surged, stronger and renewed.

Parts of the fire must be allowed to burn—after all, fire was part of the cycle of regeneration and rebirth. But as for the rest, its effect could be dampened. Air mages brought fresh air down onto the mountaintop, allowing people to breathe. Air magic and water magic combined to create a waterspout to suck some water from the closest lake into the sky, feed it into the still-hovering clouds. The youngest mage, the one whose blood had been stolen that night, offered his talent, not to harness lightning, but to call forth the moisture in the storm clouds to help douse the inferno down below with rain. Earth and fire magic worked together to smother some of the fire. Plant magic soothed the burns of the vegetation when it could, even as healing magic swept over the people, searching for those in most desperate need. Not just humans, but animals and nymphs as well.

And through it all, They felt the hum of dozens of different focus stones. So many colors and types should have been discordant, jarring, but tonight, instead, they blended into a beautiful, harmonious whole.

A nymph called out, **The full eclipse ends. Thank you, all!**

The Veil closes. Caibrus slowly released the bond that held Them together, letting go of the massed people one at a time, until only the four remained. **Our work is done, for now. Until next time, my Hunters.**

And Phoenix was back in his own body, damp and shivering, coughing, smelling like wet ash, feeling the sting of healing burns. He collapsed back onto the hard ground, Rio at his side. He heard Tobi and Liam murmuring reassurances to each other. Overhead, a growing sliver of the moon began to shine again as the shadow of the Earth slowly pulled away. Rio turned just enough to curl closer to Phoenix. “Hope some of these people can get us off this mountain before we die of exposure.”

“Yeah, that’d be good.” As the local person in their group, he really should sit up and take charge, talk to the people he heard milling about, asking questions. And he would, in just a few minutes. Right after he closed his eyes.

Chapter Fifteen

Rio, Eighth Prayer

~In the gathering room of the Seven Spruce Inn, Murrycombe~

Beloved Gods and Goddesses, thank you all for your aid on our journey and last night during our Epic Battle. (Perhaps it doesn't really qualify as an epic battle, but it felt like one at the time. I am not ready for anything more epic.) Yeah. So how about we don't do that again anytime soon, okay?

Last night, or early this morning, we got a ride into Murrycombe, from people parked much closer to the ridge than we were. Lucky people. Someone took us to the hospital, where I have only vague memories of being made to breathe a "cleansing vapor" to clear any residual smoke from my lungs, and then doused with a horrid concoction. We were later deposited at this inn and given rooms without even registering or paying. We collapsed into bed, and I, at least, slept dreamlessly on a night I would have expected nightmares.

Tobi knocked on our door in the late afternoon, waking me up in just enough time to let my supervisor know I would probably not be making it into work the day after tomorrow. Or possibly the next day, either. I am not sure when we will be able to leave here, as various authorities seem to still have a lot of questions, but even if we left tomorrow, I may not be fit for work soon. I can barely sense the water in the mug I am holding. Unless the mirror in our room is tinted, Phoenix is correct when he says my hair has changed from blond to silver and dark gold, and my eyes have become a darker blue. That is my only outward sign of our battle, but I feel different inside, where my magic resides. I'm too tapped out now to know how my talents may have been affected.

By the time we stumbled downstairs in search of food, our borrowed car—which we left well-hidden up the mountainside—mysteriously sat in full view in the inn parking lot. Even though Liam still had the keys. We decided not to ask awkward questions.

We had no shortage of visitors this evening. The groundskeeper, Samuel Ivey, arrived with several of the teachers from Phoenix's school. Apparently they have all been concerned about Phoenix and questioned him at length about what he has been up to since he fled on the night of his mother's death.

The territorial police and someone from the regional MTI office, so not Phoenix's cousin, questioned us each separately about our involvement. Afterward, they asked us more questions as a group. I don't think they are done yet. Tobi seems to have bonded with them and certainly can answer more of their magical questions than the rest of us.

Some of the local priests came to meet with me, asking questions about Caibrus and about my experiences as a Voice. Why did we choose to wake him and not a different god? I received some strange looks when I mentioned the little hunting animals, but a few more understanding nods when I mentioned his original birth during an eclipse. Did I think he would stay awake? Did I know if he was planning to manifest? I told them the truth as far as I understood it. I explained Caibrus was awake, at the moment, but I had received the impression he would need more than just four followers to manifest. Or even four followers, plus the people on the mountain last night.

I was not sure what possessed me to say Caibrus thought the current Assembly had enough hunt deities, he knew his new followers were not hunters, and I believed he wouldn't manifest until the people decided what he should be a god of. At least until they started mumbling about the whole "Voice" thing again. While I sat silently, stressing out about the possibility that I might still be a Voice, that it had not just been a temporary deal last night, everyone else in the room—priests, teachers, law enforcement, inn employees and guests, my companions, and probably other people as well—began debating what sort of god they needed.

I was struggling not to fall asleep, so I hope, Caibrus, that you managed to follow the discussion. I think after an hour or two, most people had agreed they wanted some sort of god of balance, although no consensus had been formed on whether that was ecological balance (most of the locals wanted this), elemental balance (suggested by the elemental mages), emotional balance (Liam's suggestion), or spiritual balance (some of the priests). I finally told them I thought Caibrus needed as many followers as he could get, and perhaps he could do all of those. Then I suggested everyone go home to think about it, because nothing needed to be decided right away. Finally, they started leaving.

Tobi looked at me solemnly. "Some of those priests say you are now a priest of Caibrus?"

What? Alarm mixed with dismay had me bolting awake. "I can't be a priest. I mean, being a priest requires, you know, a vocation. And vows and stuff. Besides, Nerzu is my Patron and my elemental god."

She shrugged. “Just telling you what I heard. Besides, a lot of priests have other jobs. Think about Donna.”

I think I may have whimpered.

Phoenix kissed me lightly, reassuringly. “We will figure this all out. Someday. When the time is right. You’ve never limited yourself to just one god, so I don’t think either would begrudge you the other. Think about it. You did most of the talking when we made the offering. And the gods chose *you* to talk for them, even though I was the one offering my blood.”

A priest?

I took an overly large gulp of water. Liam thumped my back when I started to choke. I felt a faint trickle of his magic, not much, because he was tapped out also.

“Feeling better?” he asked.

I nodded. I leaned back in the couch and closed my eyes. “I know we probably need a God of Balance, or whatever, but do you know what I want? You know what attracted me to the previous incarnation of Caibrus? A feeling of whimsy. I think the world could really use that, too. Little unexpected touches of fun, of color, of humor, of joy. Sometimes we take the world too seriously.”

At that, they all hugged me. We had a long group hug in the inn’s main gathering room. Despite our fatigue, we decided to share one last pot of tea before bed. We had slept late, and, I think, perhaps are afraid of what dreams our sleep might bring. So, Nydaris, if you are listening, please be gentle with us again tonight. We are all still fragile.

Even so, we are not too tired to plan a little. Liam wants to meet with any of Bolt’s Hunters who are willing. He wants to know why, how, or if, the summoning spell affected them, especially since it seems the other former God, Zareeze, was not actually involved. Healers. I know I should probably be curious about this, too. Maybe later I will be, when I am not so exhausted.

I mean, Phoenix and I are even too tired for hey-we’re-still-alive celebratory sex. That’s just wrong. Maybe in a couple of days. But at least we are together, without the specter of the past. And no more lies. Soon we can go home, I hope. I want to go back to that hidden garden and healing temple I found, see if Phoenix and I can get in there together. I wonder how we figure out to whom it belongs.

We will need to file a formal complaint against the Stormchasers, on behalf of the Zarasi, to correct the official record of what occurred sixteen summers ago. Perhaps some of the families of the survivors might be interested in joining. We need to cleanse history of the lies that have been perpetuated. And to make sure this never happens again. Some of the Stormchasers are bound to be pissed, but who cares. The process will be aided by the support of Ranier's parents, whose names escape me at the moment. They arrived sometime early this morning and are standing by their son's decisions. Or so we were told. Unlike us, they are high enough in the ranks of the air mages to help this process along.

I am afraid next year's "vacation" will be a trip to give sworn testimony before the Midlands Interterritorial Mage Council. Please don't let this be the case.

Please?

Chapter Sixteen

Phoenix Reborn

~Spring Equinox~

Phoenix stirred, waking slowly, listening to the excited chatter of the birds in the garden outside. He opened his eyes and smiled. The sun shone brightly through the skylights and the stained glass below, painting the sheets and Rio's bare shoulder and arm in a harmonious array of color. Much as he wanted to admire the patterns and perhaps engage in a repeat of last night's passionate activities, unfortunately they had too much to do and too many guests arriving soon. Maybe one of these days they would be able to enjoy a leisurely day of rest, but not today.

At least he was waking in their own home. A new student lived in the little second-story room on Peach Lane and tended to the plots in the community gardens. Phoenix hoped she was getting along better with the vines, as they had teased her when she first arrived. He had offered the vines a place at his new home, but they had grumbled about being displaced and transported, although two had been willing to let him have cuttings. The girl and the vines would have to learn to get along. His new guardian vines were thriving outside on the wall by the residential gate.

Phoenix ran a slow, teasing hand down Rio's shoulder, tracing the outlines of the different colors.

"Time to get up. We've got a lot to do before everyone arrives."

"Mmh." Rio's breathing did not even quicken.

Perhaps he needed to be quietly assertive. Phoenix started running his hand gently through Rio's short gold and silver strands. He very lightly teased a finger backward up over Rio's ear. Rio twitched, reached up a hand to bat at Phoenix, and tried to roll away. Phoenix tackled him.

"I know you're awake."

"And I know you're annoying." Finally Rio rubbed his face and opened his eyes. "Whose idea was it to turn this into an *event*, anyway?"

"Um... our families, my teachers, and maybe the gods? So get your lazy ass out of bed if you want time for a dip before breakfast."

Rio pulled Phoenix down for a slow kiss, one that had Phoenix rethinking getting up, and then Rio rolled out of bed with a wink. “Later. After everyone has gone.”

A few minutes later, they were together in the pool room, one of their favorite areas in the former bathhouse/lodge that they had turned into their residence. Water now cascaded down the series of shallow pools and ledges into the rectangular pool. Aquatic plants floated in the upper pools, assisting in purification and adding splashes of color to the room. Other shade-tolerant plants thrived in pots throughout the room, filling it with character and life. Rio did his little water magic trick to check the water and slid into the deep end, quickly dunking his head under the waterfall.

“Have I mentioned that it’s nice to always have my own personal water cleaner?”

Rio splashed him and grinned. “Don’t be obnoxious, or I will explain in detail about the filtration and water-recycling system installed in this room sometime when you can’t politely escape. Both in its original and in its current form.”

Phoenix promptly put on his best-behavior face. He already knew more than he wanted to on the subject, and only truly cared about the water system when it came to making sure all the plants had the right amount of water at the optimal times during dry periods, especially outside in the gardens.

After dressing in work clothes, they prepared a quick breakfast and took it outside into the smaller garden to eat, despite the slight chill of the early morning. After several days of rain, a blue sky provided too good an opportunity to not enjoy. The addition of a table, chairs, and hammocks turned one corner of the garden into the perfect private space for the two of them. The smaller building Phoenix used for storage, assembly work, and cultivation of plants that liked warmer or darker areas for germination. He planned to build a small greenhouse, eventually, but other projects had priority.

As Rio looked over his morning task list, Phoenix looked around his “work garden.” Already, numerous plants grew in the refurbished beds, although others would need to wait another week or two before being planted. Most were medicinal plants he was growing for sale, along with a few exotics that always fetched a decent price. Although he planned to specialize in medicinal plants and extracts, he would also grow herbs and vegetables and fruit here, mostly for their personal use. He reached out with his power to touch the herbs, felt their progress, and smiled.

With breakfast finished, Rio retreated to the kitchen to start assembling food for all their expected guests. Fortunately, most of the prep work had already been done, and other than one beverage, they were not offering anything that couldn't be served and eaten cold. Phoenix did some minor chores in the gardens, and then helped Rio cart most of the food over to the former temple. The main building was the only one that would be open to the public.

As they moved through the gardens, Phoenix checked for anything out of place, enjoying the signs of spring. Although only the dogwoods and some early cherry trees currently blossomed, the hint of colors in the developing buds from some of the azalea bushes suggested they would be displaying their full glory any day now. Gravel and stone paths wended through flower beds. Benches rested by small shrines, altars, ponds, and fountains. In another month, the outer garden would look amazing, despite his short time with it. He still had years of work ahead to make the garden match his vision, to restore and repurpose it, to turn it into a place of beauty, meditation, and healing.

After their last trip back from the temple, Rio went to walk the labyrinth. Rio had surprised Phoenix by overseeing the restoration of the labyrinth personally, even helping to lay out the new path border stones and the contrasting gravel. He had added abstract all-weather versions of the Fountain, the Tree, the Flame, and the Wind, one in each corner outside the circle, so as people traversed the path, they would pass by each element.

Phoenix had been a little skeptical at first, but now he found that walking the labyrinth every few days did help him focus on finding solutions to a problem or calm him when he felt stressed. Most importantly, the labyrinth and other meditation techniques he had learned the last several months had helped him integrate the person he had been with the one he wanted to be. After so many years of hiding and lying, of plotting and preparing to stop his uncle, he still sometimes had difficulty believing it was over. But he was slowly embracing both the hiding child and the calculating potential killer, using and reshaping their experiences and strengths into what he would become. Living a life of trust and openness, and believing himself deserving of both his new life and Rio's love, had finally centered him.

Releasing his ties to the past had begun with Phoenix selling all of his uncle's properties and other assets, some of which had originally belonged to Phoenix's parents. He had inherited it all, as the only living descendant of his grandparents. A group interested in using the land for restorative mountain retreats and wilderness education had bought the mountain property. The local

nymphs and other elementals had approved of them. His uncle and grandfather would have hated the intended purpose, which made it seem all the more fitting.

Phoenix sat on a bench near the three markers he had placed near a not-yet-blooming Remembrance rose bush. “Dominic. Mom. Dad. Today’s the big day for us, opening the garden up. Even if I would rather have waited another month or two. Dad, I hope you don’t mind that I took the Hollis name. The Hollis family has done a lot for me and acknowledged me in front of a truth-speaker as part of their family. And it’s not as if I am running off to live with them, but it is nice to have more kin to visit. Dominic, I regret I never found out who had you killed. I mean, I have always thought it was probably Grandfather or Sylvester, but maybe Grandmother had a hand. Besides, everyone involved is dead. I may always wonder, a little, but I have to let it go. It’s time to move on. This is not the life I ever expected to lead, but it seems right. I hope you’d be proud of me. Of both of us.”

Phoenix sat on the bench, thinking, until he heard Rio approach. He looked up and smiled. “Let’s do this.”

Back in their house, they washed and dressed carefully in their new finery, befitting their status. Phoenix wore brown pants and a holly-green shirt, with his primary focus stones on an amber-and-gold chain around his neck, along with a small, intricately carved wooden plant mage emblem. Rio wore a multihued blue shirt—which reminded Phoenix of shimmering water—and black pants. He wrapped his focus stones around his wrist like a bracelet. Finally, hesitantly, Rio donned a silver pendant he had yet to wear.

Phoenix reached out to trace the symbols. *Water Mage. Priest. Voice.* “This still bothers you?” he asked.

Rio tilted his head. “I still find the reality... complicated. I do not feel like a priest. Despite everything. But I might learn to adjust to being a Voice. Once in a while.” Phoenix understood *complicated*. Rio was still considered by other people to be the first priest of the reawakened Caibrus, or as close to a priest as one could get without taking priestly vows. And many people treated him as such, much to his occasional consternation. Certainly, he was still recognized by other priests in two territories as a Voice of the Gods. Apparently, once a Voice, always a Voice, or something.

Phoenix hugged Rio tightly. “You earned it. Celebrate today, worry later. Now let’s go greet our guests.”

At the last second, Phoenix took his mother's necklace from his jewelry box and slipped it in his pocket. He wanted to carry a reminder of her with him on this special day, while he still could. Rio saw him and nodded in understanding, before reaching out to take Phoenix's hand. The previous month, Yara, speaking through Donna in her typically cryptic manner, had implied that one day Phoenix would part with the necklace, after he recognized the perfect person upon whom to bestow it. Then the Goddess of Seers had also told them to prepare their guest rooms, because "those in need" would pass through their house from time to time. Of course, she failed to say anything useful, such as who, when, and for how long. Phoenix smiled as he touched the gems with his free hand. At least they wouldn't have time to become complacent, not with the deities still taking an active interest in their lives.

A short time later, Phoenix and Rio opened the front doors of the temple and stood together in the entrance. At precisely halfway between sunrise and sunset, Phoenix activated the front gates. They swung open. People streamed in. Most were friends, family, and teachers, but he also saw many of their new neighbors and some strangers as well. They filled the space between the two splashing fountains. Rio's parents and sister stood with Phoenix's newfound Hollis relatives—his paternal grandparents, aunt, and some of the cousins he was finally getting to know. Almost everyone was smiling.

Phoenix spoke first. "Welcome, neighbors, friends and family to the All Gods Meditation and Memorial Garden. Although we are just starting, we envision a place where everyone is welcome to wander through our gardens, meditate in peace, and walk the labyrinth."

Rio took a turn. "We know not everyone can make it regularly to the Temple District. We also want a place where anyone may pray to any deity, either outside in a place of your choosing—we have several small shrines and altars and meditation spots—or inside the temple in one of the alcoves."

Phoenix glanced quickly at Liam and a small group of healers, then looked back at the rest of the group. "We want to also create a safe environment for people who may be suffering from injuries of the mind or soul, or people who are troubled for one reason or another. A place to relax. Experienced volunteers from a variety of healing and therapy specialties—not us—will be donating their time to talk privately with anyone who is interested. Classes will also be conducted in several meditation techniques."

Phoenix gestured to Lukas, and the elderly healer came to stand beside him. "In this way, we honor the healers who resided here before us and help carry on

part of their vision. This gentleman, Lukas Carlin, is a semi-retired physician and master healing mage. He graciously agreed to sell us this property.” *After we finally tracked him down.* “We will all benefit from his experience and expertise.”

Rio concluded, “And finally, throughout the property you will find several drinking fountains. All have purified water. Please, come quench your thirst at any time. Now, please feel free to explore, and mingle. And remember that it is still early spring. I hope many of you will return often to these gardens to enjoy them during all seasons. Food and beverages are available inside the temple.”

Applause followed. Lukas held up his hand. “I also wish to say a few words. Many decades ago, when this area was on the fringes of Ettix Springs, a small group of healers established this temple as a site of healing. With the slow expansion of the small city around it, the centralization of both the Temple District and the hospital, we felt we were no longer needed.”

Lukas didn’t mention that in order to protect the building and land after its abandonment, he and the other priests had arranged for a powerful spell to be cast to hide the property and for those who found it to forget they had seen it, while the healers decided how best to revive it or use it. Unfortunately, the spell worked too well. Perhaps one or more of the gods had given the spell a nudge. Everyone forgot, sometimes including the people who owned the land. Outsiders never thought to visit, even though it was clearly marked on city maps.

“I am the last surviving owner. When these two young men came to me and shared their vision for this land, I was happy to sell to them.”

Phoenix and Rio exchanged an ‘I don’t remember it being that easy’ glance. Lukas had been shocked that anyone had been able to breach the spell. He had grilled them for hours, especially Rio. Then he relented, correctly deciding it was a sign of the favor of the gods. Liam, standing with the group below, raised a hand to cover his mouth, probably hiding a laugh. He had talked to Lukas, healer to healer, to vouch for his friends.

A few more people felt obliged to make speeches, most mercifully brief, and then finally people entered the temple. He and Rio stood together, accepting the congratulations and praise of their guests.

Phoenix was surprised no one went out into the gardens, but the reason became clear when the Donato family stepped forward. The Donato family were the premier crafters of religious figurines in Ettix Springs. Different

family members specialized in stone, wood, metal, and ceramics. Even people from neighboring cities often bought from them. Lazaro spoke so everyone in the room could hear, and everyone quieted.

“Rio, you came and asked to purchase statuettes of the Gods, beginning with those worshipped here in Ettix Springs and gradually expanding to encompass the Midlands, and perhaps even the whole Assembly. I told you to wait until after you opened your gardens, but not to ask why. Today you will know. Your family and friends wanted to surprise you.”

Lizzet Donato whispered, “I have a list of who bought what for you, and I’ll keep watch and add any surprises.”

Rio’s family stepped up first, Neave offering both Nerzu and the local Sea Goddess, Emmet and Indigo each gifting them with one of the music deities. Phoenix’s grandparents presented them with Verdenia and the Goddess of Hearth and Home. His aunt Rosanna and his cousins had an eclectic mix, including the God of Secrets, which they claimed was from Thorn. Tobi, of course, brought him the God of Forensics. Liam and several of the healers who would be volunteering at the temple managed the whole gamut of healing deities.

Each deity was named by the giver. Lazaro and Lizzet Donato began placing them in rows on the shelves newly built along the wall for this purpose. Phoenix predicted he would find Rio here tomorrow, rearranging the figurines all in some order only he understood.

Donna Fierro, as colorful as ever, displayed a beautifully painted Yara. She hugged Phoenix, winked, and then said to Rio as they embraced, “Remember, if you ever want to talk, you know where I live.” She and Rio had grown surprisingly close over the past few months, even as the men had been preparing to move away from her complex. Phoenix had been grateful to her. As a more experienced Voice of the Gods, even if she only talked for Yara, she had been able to help Rio process the experience and cope with the idea that he would most likely have to repeat it. As Rio had once told Phoenix, “She has been a Voice for years. Not in the same way as I was. More frequently and for shorter durations. But she still understands being... bonded with a deity.”

More friends came forward, often offering the deities of most importance to them. Phoenix’s eyes burned, and he saw Rio blinking rapidly. The last gift was a statuette of Ettix, presented by someone on the Ettix Springs City Council, who was probably a friend of either his grandparents or one of Phoenix’s

teachers, Phoenix believed they had much for which to thank the God of Fortuity, perhaps even beginning with his first accidental collision with Rio all those months ago.

Rio looked at the rows of small figures of the gods and goddess. His voice rasped and broke slightly as he said, “Thank you all for this marvelous surprise. May the blessings of all these deities be bestowed upon us all. Now, friends, please, help yourselves to food and drink. Enjoy and explore the garden.”

People wandered, mingled, talked, and laughed. They ate and drank. They came in from the garden, full of praise and questions.

Phoenix’s four current teachers came up to him as a group. They had all seen the garden in various stages of recovery and regrowth over the past several months. Instead of having to do any more practical work elsewhere, his teachers had agreed that the work of planning the restoration and redesign of the two gardens here, creating both an artistic garden and maintaining a production garden, would satisfy the practical requirements needed for his degree and license, although he would still need to take some general classes and pass a few written exams.

“The garden is coming along nicely, lad. We know you’ll be wanting to sell plants at the market soon. We’ll take turns checking in, but in the meantime, here is a provisional license authorizing you to sell magic-enhanced extracts from the medicinal plants. However, you are on your oath only to sell those we’ve approved you to make. Continue progressing and you should be fully licensed by this time next year.”

Phoenix stared at the license. Below the symbols of plants and earth, and the glyph of the Ettix Springs Mage Council, his name was embossed in a firm script: *Phoenix Hollis*.

A new home, a new name, a new life... he had truly been reborn. Maybe he could finally put Ash Cloudsmith and Nick Bolt to rest. *I wonder what other surprises this day will bring.*

He had his answer just a few minutes later, when the Nimbus family came through the door. Ranier bounded over to Phoenix, as his parents followed at a more leisurely pace. “Sorry we’re late. We had to make an unexpected stop along the way.”

Phoenix smiled broadly. “We weren’t expecting you at all. Didn’t think we’d see you until summer. I’m glad you came.”

“I wanted to be here for you guys.” Ranier shrugged. “Also, I kind of brought you a present. But first, while Rio is distracting my parents, can you tell me about the seven men? Just want to be sure your version matches with what my parents told me. I know Bryce and Garret were convicted of kidnapping me, because I had to testify against them at the hearing. Did you know they used a suggestive drug to get me to go with them? At least I somehow managed to leave a note. I thought I went with them willingly until that was revealed. I still feel stupid, but not as stupid.”

Phoenix had already heard the details, so he nodded. “You know that Otto died from drug complications? His body had been abused for a long time. Shawn and Carlo were convicted of unregulated mining and unsafe disposal. My understanding is that they are each serving five years on environmental cleanup projects, during which time they are supposed to be able to retrain their gifts and be weaned from their drug use. The court found Malak acted in defense of Rio when he killed Sylvester. Plus, no one could swear with certainty that Malak’s bullets and not the Zarasi lightning bolts were the cause of the death. As far as I know, Malak and Ralph are wandering around the mountains setting up shrines to Pachialla and Caibrus and others.”

“Yeah, I saw them. Ralph is making intricate carvings from pieces of wood, big stuff like benches and little stuff, like figures of animals and nymphs and gnomes. He takes care of Malak. Ralph says Malak is still recovering from years of suppressing his magic and is more comfortable being away from large groups of people. Some of the local elementals have adopted them.”

Rio and the elder Nimbus couple approached.

“So I learned something from the Zarasi that might interest you both,” Ranier said. “All the gems and weapons and stuff that they gave as offerings. The Zarasi took it all and stashed it in another plane. After cleaning off the, uh, blood.”

“They can do that?” Rio sounded fascinated. “Did they say how? Or where?”

“I didn’t understand the explanation. You’ll have to talk to them again. I didn’t know what questions to ask. The point is, they are giving everything to me. They have no use for gems and weapons. We can sell it to help fund the legal battle with the storm mages. Would it be wrong to add the story of where they have been to raise the prices? Some people might enjoy the, uh...”

“Mystique?” Rio suggested.

“Yeah. That’s it.”

Phoenix surprised himself by laughing. “Go for it. Someone might as well get some use out of them.”

Ranier took two bags from his mother. “These are for you, personally, not for the temple. In the first bag are some wood carvings Ralph sent you, Phoenix. Mountain scenes and animals and such. And Rio, the air and earth elementals at Windy Rocks wanted me to bring these items back to you. They have served their purpose, and the gods wanted you have them back, for your house. As a thank you.”

Phoenix took his bag. He would look through the carvings later, when he had time to admire them slowly. Rio swallowed hard. He opened his bag and silently showed the contents to Phoenix. The four luminaries were there, along with a cloth-wrapped object just the right size to be Rio’s treasured jade owl goblet.

“Um, I’ll go put this somewhere safe. Thanks.” Rio quickly turned away and strode off with the bag. Phoenix saw him raise his free hand to his face, as if warding off or wiping away tears.

Ranier looked after him, a worried expression on his face. Phoenix explained what the goblet meant to Rio and how much thought and money he had put into the luminaries. “Thank you for bringing them back to him. I’ll have to thank the gods as well.”

“The mountain elementals wanted to keep the wind chimes. They have fun with those. And apparently, you left a basket as an offering as well? They told me it helped make many animal homes this last winter. Pieces of it will be part of the forest for years to come.”

Phoenix liked that. A fitting use. Rio would appreciate it as well.

Tobi and Liam joined them, and Ranier turned his teenage enthusiasm on them, while Phoenix spoke quietly with the elder Nimbus couple about which of the storm mages were most likely to be troublesome about the Zarasi and the proposed restrictions on lightning harvest. He was vaguely aware of Liam talking about his new interest in helping drug addicts to recover and Tobi describing the house they had bought, about a ten-minute walk away.

Rio came back to join them, face freshly washed, and was soon drawn into a debate with his mother and another water mage about a technical aspect of their elemental magic. Phoenix ignored them, content simply to see Rio animated and smiling, as he continued with his own discussion.

People wandered in and out of the garden. More guests arrived, and Rio and Phoenix repeated an abbreviated version of their welcome speeches. They did their best to try to talk to each person for a few minutes.

Finally, during a lull when most people seemed to be content to nibble on food and sip their drinks, Lazaro Donato approached them again, a wrapped object in his hands.

“I’ve been having a dream recently. About making this figure and giving it to you today. But it is not of a god I have ever seen before. Perhaps you can make sense of it.”

He unwrapped it and showed the painted metal figurine to Phoenix and Rio. The god held a balance in one hand. An indigo bunting, one of Rio’s favorite local songbirds, perched on his other hand. A few life-size red ladybugs marched up his leg and clung to his green robe. Phoenix bit his lip to keep from laughing. He had been thinking about ways to attract ladybugs to his garden just a few weeks ago. Some gods definitely understood humor.

Lazaro continued, “I also found myself making several more. All with the balance, but with different combinations of animals and symbols and colors on each. I know one of them is intended for Tobi and Liam. I can only assume the others will be claimed when the time is right.”

Rio smiled then, his hair taking on a subtle glow that Phoenix could not attribute to the light in the temple. The glow vanished as Rio, still smiling, took the figure and jumped up on a bench, holding it so all could see. “Friends! We hope that at the next Assembly, a formerly faded god will manifest and take his place once more. I present to you Caibrus, God of Balance and Whimsy!”

Phoenix wondered if every statuette of Caibrus ever made would end up being different, uniquely tailored to its holders. He hoped so. What better way to add whimsy into the world? He suddenly felt closer to Caibrus than he had since that night last autumn. Phoenix might feel reborn, but in a way, Caibrus had been reborn, too. And Rio. And this property. Even the former Hunters. He sometimes forgot that he was not alone in having his life changed.

Spring was here. The season of rebirth. A time for new beginnings. Joy and peace filled him. Today was a time for celebration, a time for renewal, a time to share with their family and friends. He climbed on the bench next to Rio, took the statuette from him, and held it high in one hand as he pulled Rio close with the other. Phoenix kissed his lover in front of everyone. The men broke apart, laughing, as their guests cheered.

And Phoenix hoped that if, somewhere beyond the Veil, the gods and goddesses of the world were watching, they were smiling and celebrating as well.

The End

Author Bio

By education, I am a scientist and a lawyer. But I have always yearned to write for fun, as well. This is my second year writing for the Don't Read in the Closet event, and this book is my second published story. My husband and I are slaves to two feline overlords. Fortunately they sometimes let us leave the house to earn money to buy them more cat food, and to use the computers while they are napping. Please don't tell them there are no cats in this story.

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